Improving the communication and transparency of stock assessment using interactive visualization tools

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# Introduction

In the age of data-intensive science and big data, scientists across many fields are faced with the challenge of synthesizing and communicating information from large and complex data sets. Scientific data are often presented as tabular summaries and static plots, however, seeing patterns in tables can be difficult and static plots preclude detailed explorations of the underlying data. New open source tools are bridging this gap by making it easier to build interactive figures (Perkel 2018). In particular, browser-based data visualizations have been playing an increasingly prominent role in communicating information on a wide range of topics. Interactive graphics are frequently utilized by media outlets, such as the FiveThirtyEight, and scientists from a wide range of disciplines are starting to apply interactive visualization tools to explore and communicate their results (Yeatman et al. 2018; Tushar and Reich 2017; Wick et al. 2015). This trend has been fueled by the development of JavaScript libraries (e.g. D3 (Bostock, Ogievetsky, and Heer 2011), plotly (Inc. 2015), leaflet (Leaflet 2015), highcharts (Highsoft 2015)) that enable the production of dynamic and interactive data visualizations in modern web-browsers. Interfaces to JavaScript libraries have also been developed to allow interactive plots to be coded using commonly used languages such as R (R Core Team 2017) or Python (Foundation 2010). By laying the technical infrastructure for creating interactive graphics, these new tools are ushering in a new era of big data by facilitating the exploration and communication of complex data and models.

The field of fisheries research has a long history of collecting and synthesizing a plethora of data using state-of-the-art computational technologies (Megrey and Moksness 2008). Fisheries science has evolved alongside the rise of the computing era, and as tools improve so does the management advice provided by fisheries scientists. This management advice generally culminates from a stock assessment process whereby various sources of data and statistical methods are used to model the history, current status and future status of one or more fish stocks (Hilborn and Walters 1992). Recent advances in computational technologies have streamlined the process of stock assessment by facilitating the development and application of integrated assessment models (Maunder and Punt 2013). This means that analyses that were once carried out independently on different data sets can now be integrated into one analysis by using statistical modeling tools such as JAGS (Plummer and others 2003), AD Model Builder (Fournier et al. 2012) and Template Model Builder (Kristensen et al. 2015). From a computational perspective, analyses of a variety of large data sets has never been easier. However, from a human perspective, contemporary stock assessment biologists are faced with the challenge of managing data from a variety of sources and also understanding the algorithms that convert these data to advice for fisheries managers. Here we aim to demonstrate how interactive visualization tools provide an efficient and effective means of exploring and communicating the ever expanding array of data inputs and model outputs. First, we focus on data that are commonly used in stock assessment and provide one example where interactive maps were used to simplify the detailed exploration of data from a long-term tagging program. Second, we focus on the modeling aspect of stock assessment and, again, we use an example to demonstrate how dynamic and interactive data visualizations can be used to explore, diagnose and communicate results from an integrated assessment model. This structure corresponds to the two general steps in the stock assessment process: 1) knowing the data, and 2) data modeling.

## Knowing the data

The data sets used in stock assessments are constantly growing. This growth in data either stems from the continuation of long-term monitoring efforts or from the addition of new monitoring programs. As such, stock assessment biologists often have to manage large volumes of data from a variety of sources. For instance, time series of reported landings and catch-at-age are “fishery-dependent” data that are frequently used in stock assessments. These data are often analyzed in conjunction with data from “fishery-independent” surveys that track changes in abundance and, in many cases, also monitor trends in biological factors such as age composition, growth rates, sex ratios and maturation stages. For some data-rich stocks, mark and recapture studies are also carried out to estimate movement, migration, growth rate, natural mortality, and discard mortality. All of the above-mentioned data sets are multidimensional and as the volume and variety of these data increases, it becomes more difficult to be aware of the details of each data set and discover key patterns within each. This challenge can be mediated, to a degree, by the application of interactive visualization tools as that they allow detailed exploration of the data behind the plot. For instance, the ability to zoom in on features or areas of interest and hover over specific points to reveal more information creates an interactive user-driven experience that expedites explorations of the data. This is exemplified by an interactive mapping tool developed for the exploration of a long-term tagging study.

* *Greg, can you introduce this tool, providing some info on the tagging database and the tools used to make the tool (Shiny, leaflet)?*
* *TODO: the intro paragraph to this section could use some references if it is necessary*

## Data modeling

Synthesizing data from multiple sources presents a key challenge to stock assessment. Analyses of different data sources were traditionally carried out independently and the summaries or parameters from these analyses were used in the assessment model. This approach, however, is less than ideal because information may be lost and uncertainty may be unaccounted for when we “do statistics on the statistics” (Link 1999; Maunder and Punt 2013). Such issues have largely been curtailed in contemporary stock assessments thanks to advances in software that have facilitated the analysis of all available data, in as raw a form as appropriate, in a single integrated analysis (Maunder and Punt 2013). Specifically, statistical modeling tools such as JAGS (Plummer and others 2003), AD Model Builder (Fournier et al. 2012) and Template Model Builder (Kristensen et al. 2015) allow the construction of a joint likelihood for an array of observations to, in theory, extract as much information as possible about the biological and fishery processes. However, integrated analyses are not a panacea because model misspecifications and data conflicts are an inevitable consequence of simplifying reality to a small series of equations (Maunder and Piner 2017). A potential solution to this quandary to use a superensemble model, whereby multiple models with different structures are run and their predictions are supplied as covariates to an additional superensemble model (Anderson et al. 2017). Ensemble approaches reduce the risk of picking the “wrong” model and also expands the range of hypotheses explored (Dietterich 2000). These advances greatly improve our ability to assess the status and trends of fish populations, however, modern stock assessment biologists are now faced with the overwhelming task of understanding an ever expanding array of data inputs, model structures and outputs. This challenge is compounded by the ever increasing demand for rapid and sound fisheries advice. Here we argue that the process of providing fisheries advice can be further streamlined by utilizing dynamic and interactive visualization tools to explore, diagnose and communicate stock assessment models. We hope to demonstrate this using a recently developed interactive tool for exploring an integrated assessment model for Northern cod.

The Northern cod stock off southern Labrador and eastern Newfoundland is one of the most well studied stocks in eastern Canada, perhaps by virtue of its history. As such, there are multiple monitoring programs that help inform the status of the stock and data from most of these programs have been integrated into a state-space stock assessment model, called NCAM (Cadigan 2016). The “base case” model includes information from research vessel autumn trawl surveys (1983-present), Sentinel fishery surveys (1995-present), inshore acoustic surveys (1995-2009), fishery catch-at-age compositions and partial fishery landings (1983-present), and tagging (1983-present). Using a series of observation equations, this TMB based model reduces thousands of historical data points from these monitoring programs into quantities such as recruitment, spawning stock biomass, fishing mortality and natural mortality. Once the model is fit to the data, the next step is to produce visual representations of the data and model. An interactive and self-contained “dashboard” was developed for this purpose for the last assessment of Northern cod (Dwyer et al., n.d.). The concept of using a dashboard was burrowed from the business community where dashboards are frequently used to group a series of interactive visuals and tables to provide at-a-glance views of key performance indicators. Many tools have been developed to facilitate the development of data dashboards and we leveraged R-based tools to construct a tool for exploring the input and output of NCAM. Specifically we utilized the flexdashboard (Allaire 2017) package to group interactive plotly-based (Inc. 2015) visuals into a dynamic document. We also used the crosstalk (Cheng 2016) package to link the data displayed across multiple plots in the “Tagging” tab.

The NCAM dashboard contains a series of tabs, the first of which provides a series of tarse point-form background on the model (Figure 1).

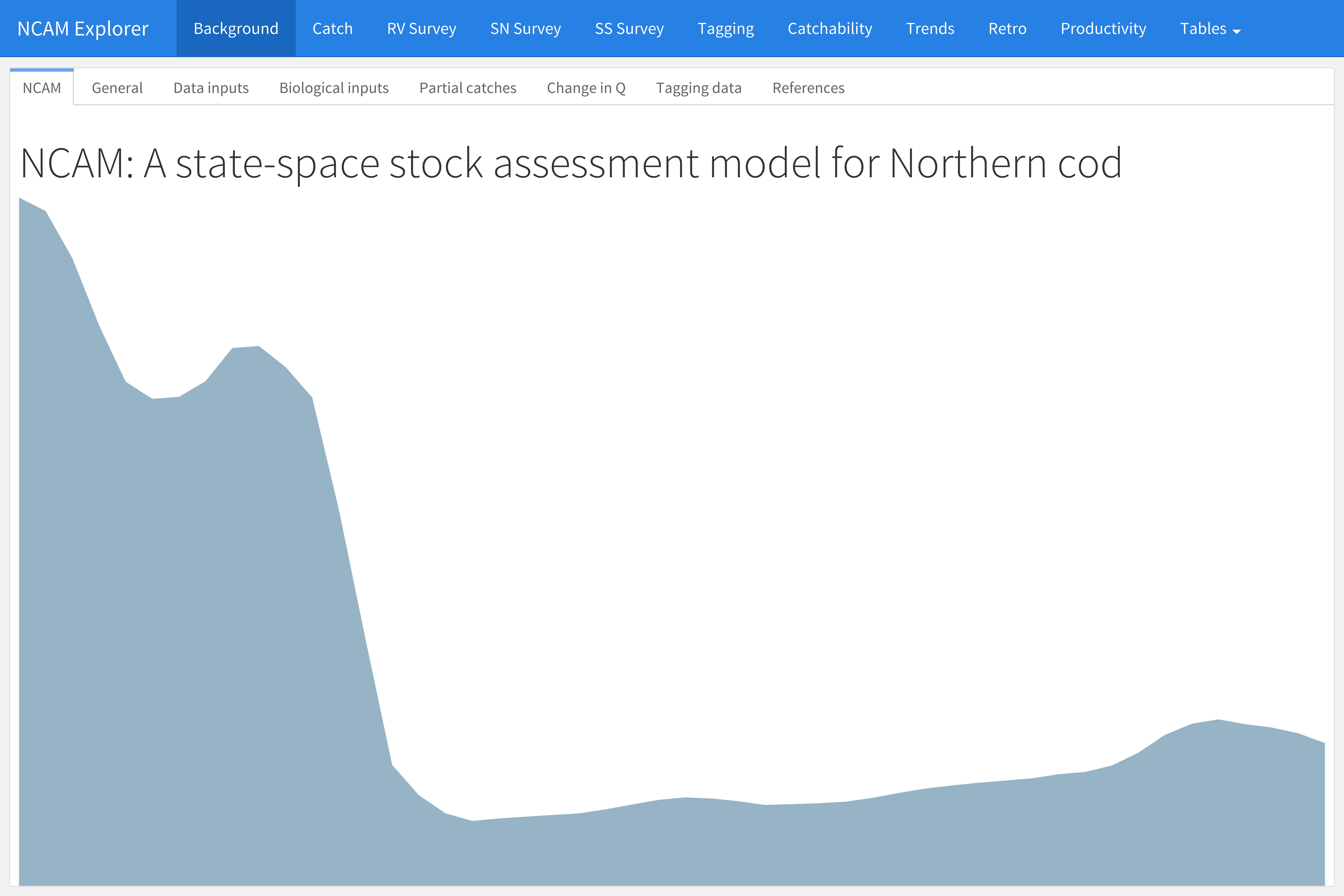


Figure 1 - Cover tab for the NCAM dashboard.

…useful format for meetings because a self-contained html can be produced for participants to independently scrutinize. This html has been included as a supplement (Supplement 2)…

# Notes

* Note that these tools facilitate the peer-review process and also improves the transparency and reproducibility of assessment models
* Dynamic document can be self contained
* Northern cod stock is on an annual assessment schedule, therefore it makes sense to automate visuals

# Other draft text

A wide array data may be collected for an assessment and, formally, the process often reduces to algorithms that convert these data to advice for fisheries managers. In some cases, particularly for commercially valuable species, this means that hundreds or thousands of historical data points from the monitoring program of a stock gets reduced into a single policy value, such as a recommended catch quota (Maunder, Schnute, and Ianelli 2009). Sound management advice therefore hinges on the ability of stock assessment biologists to manage, interpret and communicate large volumes of data from a variety of sources.

In this data-intensive era of stock assessment, one of the difficulties becomes visualizing the inputs and outputs to integrated stock assessment models. The standard approach has been to create a series of tables and static plots to help assess the inputs and model fits. Data presented in tables is incredibly valuable, but as human beings, seeing patterns can be challenging. Static figures, in contrast, help reveal patterns but they are divorced from the underlying data and, as such, limit detailed explorations. New tools are bridging this gap by making it easier to build interactive figures (Perkel 2018).

Interactive visuals…visual representation of the data and model that help us interpret complex data at a glance <https://campus.sagepub.com/blog/3-benefits-of-interactive-visualization>

<https://centricdigital.com/blog/digital-trends/the-value-of-interactive-data-visualization-and-why-it-matters-to-business/>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-03297-7>

<https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1890/120103>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-01322-9>

“The ultimate objective of Fisheries Science is to inform management” (<http://www.fao.org/tempref/docrep/fao/008/a0212e/a0212E02.pdf>)

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