Reviewer #1: In this paper the authors present a method to detect a shift in governing parameters in a time series. I have not seen such method for finding a shift in parameters and this method could be interesting for biologists. Being not a statistician I cannot fully judge if the method of selecting the optimal parameter shift is novel enough for PLOS Comp Biol.  
  
My main concern with the paper is that the authors suggest that the method is suitable for testing shifts to alternative stable states, while they do not test that. Only in the abstract and introduction this is suggested, after that they call it a test for parameter shifts (I agree with that term). Although the term “regime shift” is not so well defined, it often refers to a shift between alternative attractors. (see for instance Anderson et al. 2009 (Trends in Ecology & Evolution, 24:1 49-57)). When a system shifts between alternative attractors there is not a clear shift in external conditions needed, but just a small external change may make the system cross a tipping point. That is clearly not what this method is testing for as the authors test for a clear shift in the parameters of a model. From the title I expected that this paper was about detecting such tipping points. To avoid such confusion I think the title can better be changed and the authors should explicitly define “regime shift” and state that the method is not for detecting tipping points. There is an extensive literature on detecting tipping points (see some examples below) and I think the authors should discuss the difference between those methods and their parameter shift detection method.  
  
For detecting tipping points there are many more methods and literature that was not cited in this paper. Only the 2000 paper of Hare and Mantua was cited and not the papers by Rodionov (among others “A sequential algorithm for testing climate regime shifts”) and the review of Anderson et al. 2009 (see above) and various marine regime shifts (among others: Weijerman et al., 2005. Regime shifts in marine ecosystems of the North Sea and Wadden Sea. Mar. Ecol. Prog. Ser. 298, 21–39; Beaugrand 2004. The North Sea regime shift: Evidence, causes, mechanisms and consequences, Progress in Oceanography, 60, Rocha et al. 2015 Marine regime shifts: drivers and impacts on ecosystems services).  
  
I don’t get why the authors only use the Ricker model. I don’t understand the argument that “these methods [breakpoint analysis] do not work on data with internal, density dependent structure“. Any system can have transient dynamics, what is so special about populations? Why is the Ricker model so generic, while other methods are ad hoc? In populations there is not a single “true” model. The Ricker model for example does not account for any interactions between populations.  
On the other hand, the method can easily be generalized to any population model. Especially in situations where there are clear interactions between populations I think it would be better to model them too. I would be nice if the R package could be used for other models too.  
  
A known issue with the Akaike Information Criterion is that some authors think that it is too liberal in accepting extra parameters and that there is a risk of overfitting. The authors acknowledge this risk and use the Akaike weights (a measure of the relative improvement compared to the optimal model) to deal with that. As these are not so well-known for biologists, I think this should be explained in the methods (also the AICc).  
  
Reviewer #2

My recommendation

*Major revision. The study fails to fully address how the findings relate to previous research in this area. The authors should rewrite specifically their Introduction and Discussion to reference the related literature (see above). Moreover, the authors should clarify the aspects criticised above to avoid confusion. And the technical details should be expanded and clarified to ensure that readers understand exactly what the researchers studied.*

1. Summary of the research

*The article "The Regime Shift Detector: an algorithm to identify changes in dynamic rules governing populations" by Christie A. Bahlai1 and Elise F. Zipkin (PCOMPBIOL-D-19-00395) deals with the detection of regime shifts using a regime shift detector model to identify break points, which is based on the non-linear Ricker curve/function using Akaike’s Information Criterion corrected for small samples (AICc). Beside several other functions (such as the Beverton/Holt model or the segmented regression) the Ricker model originates from fisheries sciences and is used there to relate the advent of recruits to the previous year’s spawning stock biomass (SSB, lagged by one year), among others of cannibalistic fish populations with a negative stock density effect (such as cod or pikeperch). Hence in fishery sciences two different life stages of fish are related by these models: Recruits (juvenile fish, larvae, eggs) usually in numbers and SSB usually in terms of biomass. However, the validation of the detector model has been performed and illustrated here using two terrestrial examples plus numerical simulations. Based on the results the conclusion of the two authors is stating a good performance of their detector model based on a detection rate of around 70%.*

*In the light of global and climate-change the topic of detecting regime shifts is a rather important and quite popular one with many articles being published so far. Some of these publications deal with the definition of regime shifts alone by presenting lots of examples in various fields and areas (terrestrial and marine), others offer and provide shift detection methods (partly independent of the nature of regime shifts), while other publications are dealing with a combination of the two.*

*However, this complex topic is of high interest not only in biology but preferably in economics why a vast number of methods have been developed and derived in the field of econometrics dealing with interrupted time series, break point analysis, intervention models etc. to identify single or combined events (for instance, impulses based on oil crises, economic crises, financial crashes, earthquakes and other hazards, etc.) by incorporating them into a single time series model, sometime with multiple factors (transfer and intervention functions, vector autoregressive models, etc.). In fact, the evolutionary history of these type of methods show that most of them originate from economics and econometrics, respectively. Other areas where those methods have been developed are atmospheric physics and meteorology. Compared with these two fields (i.e. economics and meteorology) the use of high sophisticated methods in biology became popular rather late, not least because a professional training in statistics, informatics and numerical mathematics played only a little role in biology in the past (and even today).*

*My overall impression of this article is that the authors do not address, illustrate and discuss the complexity as well as several aspects of their topic sufficiently and thoroughly enough. This holds for the definition of a regime shift in principle (in contrast to the definition of a “normal” shift or change) and the context of their method which has not been contrasted well enough with other alternative and competing methods,*

*respectively.*

2. Examples and evidence

Major issues

*In the light of this, my impression of this paper is that the two authors are not aware of the many different methods and related vast literature and projects dealing with shift detection topics as they do not cite any fundamental articles from these scientific areas, including no econometric textbooks. Hence, the authors need to include / cite much more relevant literature and discuss their results in the light of these. Some examples that deal with shift detection in physics and biology that relate to econometrical or physical high-performance methods are for instance*

*1. Rodionov, S. (2004) A sequential algorithm for testing climate regime shifts, Geophys. Res. Lett., 31, L09204, doi:10.1029/2004GL019448.*

*2. Rodionov, S. N. (1994) Global and Regional Climate Interactions: The Caspian Sea Experience, Kluwer Academic Pub., Dordrecht, The Netherlands.*

*3. G. Beaugrand , A. Conversi , S. Chiba , M. Edwards , S. Fonda-Umani , C. Greene , N. Mantua , S. A. Otto , P. C. Reid , M. M. Stachura , L. Stemmann and H. Sugisaki (2015). Synchronous marine pelagic regime shifts in the Northern Hemisphere. https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2013.0272*

*4. R. P. Harris and J. H. Steele (2004) Regime shifts in the ocean. Reconciling observations and theory Volume 60, Issues 2–4, Pages 133-402*

*5. Gröger, J.P, Missong, M., Rountree, R. A. (2011) Analyses of interventions and structural breaks in marine and fisheries time series: Detection of shifts using iterative methods. Ecological Indicators 11 (2011) 1084–1092. doi:10.1016/j.ecolind.2010.12.008*

*6. Arula T, Gröger J, Ojaveer H, Simm M (2014) Shifts in the Spring Herring (Clupea harengus membras) Larvae and Related Environment in the Eastern Baltic Sea over the Past 50 Years. PLoS ONE 9(3): e91304. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0091304*

*7. Beyraghdar Kashkooli O, Gröger J, Nuñez-Riboni I (2017) Qualitative assessment of climate-driven ecological shifts in the Caspian Sea. PLoS ONE 12(5): e0176892. https://doi.org/ 10.1371/journal.pone.0176892*

*8. Lindegren M, Dakos V, Gröger JP, Gardmark A, Kornilovs G, et al. (2012) Early Detection of Ecosystem Regime Shifts: A Multiple Method Evaluation for Management Application. PLoS ONE 7(7): e38410. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0038410*

*9. Other authors and articles are related to the working group and publications of Jürgen Alheit.*

*10. The GLOBEC project: http://www.globec.org/*

*Apart from this, given a lot of existing competing methods, it is not clear to me*

• *What is the novelty of the study here?*

• *What is the added value/merit of this paper in the light of the many other sophisticated methods presented in the past so far? What is the difference to other existing methods?*

• *What are the advantages, what the dis-advantages when contrasting this work with that of other authors in this field?*

*From this article it is even not clear how the authors define a regime shift in contrast to a significant shift or change in a time series? To my mind a definition of a regime shift has a philosophical and conceptual dimension and requires more features to explain than that of a “simple” (but significant) shift in a time series?*

*It is also not clear to me how the authors deal with the multiple (statistical) characteristics of a shift and the various types of shifts in time series data. Studying a single statistical property combined with a rather specific functional form (AICc, Ricker) is not sufficient to declare a change to be a significant (regime) shift, as a shift and specifically a regime shift has several properties (dimensions and shapes) and hence needs to be characterized by more than one (statistical) measure or quantity (see the above papers for this).*

*The Ricker curve is a simple model used in fisheries to illustrate the S/R relationship (S = stock, R = recruits) as described above. Beside Ricker different other S/R relationships of other shapes and parameterization do exist ((1) initial phase at small stock sizes – (2) intermediate phase at medium stock sizes – (3) final phase at large stock sizes):*

• *Ricker curve shape: (1) positive stock density dependence – (2) maximum/small plateau – (3) negative density dependence*

• *Beverton/Holt curve shape: (1) positive stock density dependence – (2,3) long plateau*

• *Segmented regression shape: (1) positive stock density dependence – (2,3) long plateau.*

*In fisheries sciences the latter is commonly used for break point detection because the two other methods are not suitable for this (given their parameter setup and their shape); apart from this the segmented regression also allows adding further variables quite easily. However, usually applying one of these models to real data in most cases results in a low degree of explanation (poor fits between 10 to 30% only). Hence, 70 to 90% of the variance remains unexplained which makes it difficult to use it for an explicit detection of shifts at small estimation errors (compare also the graphs in the paper which show a huge variation in the data). This leads to high uncertainties in the estimated parameters and consequently huge confidence intervals around them. This clearly hinders the unambiguous or correct recognition of shifts. Moreover, the segmentation as done here does not only reduce the degrees of freedom dramatically (which is a serious*

*constraint for statistical methods because the overall S/R sample sizes are normally relatively small), but also requires to know the number of segments and their size a priori (at least one of these). Furthermore, the Ricker curve is rather specific in its shape and parameter setup with focus on negatively dependent S/R relationships (for instance, cannibalistic or space limited species); it thus hampers a generalization towards other species plus towards all the various other types or forms of shifts (for potential types of shifts see for instance Gröger et al. above). Finally, in contrast to the common procedure, the authors here add the error term additively, something what is normally done multiplicatively in this context; this leads to a different residual pattern and diagnostics based on a normal instead of a log-normal error distribution. (see for instance,*

*https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4800783/, https://academic.oup.com/icesjms/article/71/8/2307/2804451# , etc.). This clearly affects using the appropriate estimation method (Maximum Likelihood etc.) and its correct application.*

*Simulation and performing scenarios, respectively is usually based on applying specific computational simulation methods (and models). It is not clear to me how the authors did this and whether their simulation method is not in tautological contradiction to their shift detection method (i.e. whether their simulation method and their shift detection method are not of the same computational type or methodological family*