

1 Data Rich but Model Resistant: An Evaluation of
2 Data-Limited Methods to Manage Fisheries with Failed
3 Age-based Stock Assessments

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Abstract

Age-based stock assessments are sometimes rejected by review panels due to large retrospective patterns. When this occurs, data-limited approaches that rely almost exclusively on index observations are often used to set catch advice, under the assumption that these simpler methods will not be impacted by the problems causing retrospective patterns in the age-based assessment. This assumption has never been formally evaluated. Closed-loop simulations were conducted under a range of situations where a known source of error caused a retrospective pattern in an age-based assessment and so catch was specified using an index-based method. Twelve index-based methods, an ensemble of a subset of these methods, and a statistical catch-at-age model with retrospective adjustment were all evaluated to examine their ability to prevent overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks. Overall, none of the methods evaluated performed best across the scenarios exploring the different sources of the retrospective pattern (unreported catch or increasing natural mortality) and different levels of historical fishing intensity. A number of methods performed consistently poorly, resulting in frequent and intense overfishing and low stock sizes. Some methods did perform well in many cases, especially methods that adjusted recent average catches based on trends in the survey index of abundance. The retrospective adjusted statistical catch-at-age assessment performed better than a number of the alternatives explored under certain circumstances. Thus, using a data-limited approach to set catch advice will not necessarily result in better performance than relying on the age-based assessment with a retrospective adjustment.

27 Introduction

28 In the U.S., integrated fisheries stock assessment models that are most frequently age-
29 structured are used to estimate annual stock abundance (biomass), fishing mortality rates,
30 and management reference points (Maunder and Punt 2013). These models must undergo
31 peer review, where an independent panel of experts determines whether or not results from
32 the model are suitable as the basis for determining stock status and for setting catch ad-
33 vice. There are a number of model diagnostics that are used to evaluate uncertainty and
34 stability of assessment model results, but one that is commonly used and carries substantial
35 weight during review is the retrospective pattern. A retrospective pattern is a systematic
36 inconsistency among a series of sequential assessment estimates of population size (or other
37 related assessment variables), based on increasing time periods of data used in the model
38 fitting (Mohn 1999). These inconsistencies in assessment estimates are indicative of one or
39 more mismatches between model assumptions and patterns in the data used to fit the model.
40 Large or persistent retrospective patterns indicate an instability in model results, and may
41 therefore be the basis for a peer review panel to determine that model results are not suitable
42 for management purposes (Punt et al. 2020).

43 Many stock assessments in the Northeast U.S. have a history of strong retrospective pat-
44 terns, whereby estimates of biomass are typically revised downward and estimates of fishing
45 mortality rate are revised upward as new data are added to the model. NOAA Fisheries, the
46 New England Fishery Management Council, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council,
47 and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission manage these stocks, and retrospec-
48 tive issues remain a challenge for managers when setting catch advice and tracking stock
49 status. This problem has been particularly acute for, but not limited to, stocks in the New
50 England groundfish complex (NEFSC 2002, 2005, 2008, 2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2019; Deroba
51 et al. 2010), managed under NOAA Fisheries and the New England Council’s Northeast
52 Multispecies (Groundfish) fishery management plan.

The magnitude of the retrospective pattern is typically measured with a statistic called Mohn’s rho (Mohn 1999). Mohn’s rho can be used to adjust terminal year estimates of biomass in anticipation that the retrospective pattern will persist, and so some accounting for the pattern will provide a more accurate estimate. Stock assessments where the so-called rho-adjusted value is outside the 90% confidence interval of the terminal year estimate of spawning stock biomass (SSB) or fishing mortality rate are classified as strong retrospective patterns. In these cases, the rho-adjusted values are used for status determination and to modify the starting population for projections used to provide catch advice (Brooks and Legault 2016).

There is no formal criteria in the region for rejecting an assessment based on Mohn’s rho, but large, positive values of rho (especially those persisting) have played an important role in the rejection of recent age-based assessments, including Atlantic mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*), Georges Bank Atlantic cod (*Gadus morhua*), Georges Bank yellowtail flounder (*Limanda ferruginea*), and witch flounder (*Glyptocephalus cynoglossus*) (Deroba et al. 2010; Legault et al. 2014; NEFSC 2015a, 2015b). In each of these cases, and another where the assessment rejection was not based on the retrospective pattern (black sea bass, *Centropristis striatus*, NEFSC 2012), the Councils have relied on a variety of data-limited approaches for setting catch advice for these stocks (McNamee et al. 2015; NEFSC 2015a, 2015b; Wiedenmann 2015). These approaches have all been ad-hoc, and a recent analysis suggested that some of the data-limited approaches may not be suitable for stocks in the Northeast U.S. with a history of high exploitation rates (Wiedenmann et al. 2019). In addition, large, positive retrospective patterns persist for a number of other stocks in the region (NEFSC 2019), raising concerns that additional stocks may rely on data-limited approaches in the future. Therefore, there is an immediate need to identify suitable data-limited approaches for setting catch advice and for stocks with age-based assessments that did not pass review.

We developed a management strategy evaluation (MSE; e.g., Punt et al. 2016) to evaluate the suitability of alternative data-limited methods for setting target catches when age-based

stock assessments fail. In particular, focus was placed on methods that use survey indices of abundance, or more generally, index based methods (IBMs).

Methods

Overview

The MSE used here attempted to approximate a process where an age-based assessment was rejected due to a retrospective pattern, requiring catch advice to be determined using an IBM. As such, the operating model (OM) used to define the “true” underlying biological and fishery dynamics was also age-based. The OM was run for an initial 50 year period of time (called the base period) that controls the historical population dynamics and fishing pressure, and allows for sufficient data to be simulated in the observation model to be used in the different IBMs. After the base period, a given management approach (i.e., IBM) was applied to set the target catch for the stock, which is then removed from the population. This process is repeated at a fixed interval for 40 years in what is called the feedback period. Multiple OM s were developed so that the performance of the IBMs could be compared among several sources of uncertainty that are especially common in the northeast US, but relevant more broadly. The set of OM s included two versions with time varying dynamics in the last 20 years of the base period, that if left misspecified as time invariant, would be sufficient to generate retrospective patterns resulting in the rejection of an age-based stock assessment, requiring transition to an IBM. The details of each of these components are described in sections below.

Operating and Observation Models

The Woods Hole Assessment Model (WHAM, Miller and Stock 2020; Stock and Miller 2021) was used as the basis for the OM in the MSE. WHAM is an R package and the general model is built using the Template Model Builder package (Kristensen et al. 2016). While WHAM can serve as a stock assessment model used to estimate parameters, it can also

simulate the data needed for age-based stock assessments and IBMs given a range of input parameters. WHAM was used to simulate data with known properties during the base and feedback periods. Catch and index observations upon which the IBMs largely relied were simulated according to user supplied biological and fishery parameters for each scenario (see below). Catches during the feedback period were iteratively updated based on an IBM and harvest control rule that used the simulated observations to make catch advice. Catch advice from a given combination of IBM and control rule was specified in two year blocks, a typical catch specification timeframe for New England and Mid-Atlantic Council managed fisheries. WHAM used these catches, along with the user supplied biological and fishery data, to have the simulated population respond to the IBM, thereby completing the closed-loop simulation aspect of an MSE.

The age-structured OM had ten ages, with the oldest age being a plus group. Maturity- and weight-at-age were time and simulation invariant and equaled values intended to be groundfish-like for the region (Table 1??). The OM simulated catch and age composition data for a single fishery with logistic selectivity (Table 1 ??; see below). Annual, total catch observations (metric tons) were simulated as lognormal deviations from the underlying “true” catches with a coefficient of variation (CV) equal to 0.1. Fishery age composition data was assumed to follow a multinomial distribution with an effective sample size (ESS) equal to 200. Two fishery independent surveys were simulated and were intended to represent the spring and fall, coastwide bottom trawl surveys conducted in the region. Both surveys were assumed to have time invariant logistic selectivity and constant catchability. Annual survey observations were simulated as lognormal deviations from the underlying “true” survey catches with a CV of 0.3 in the spring survey and 0.4 in the fall. Survey age composition data were assumed to follow a multinomial distribution with an ESS equal to 100 in both seasons.

Annual recruitment was simulated as autoregressive, lag-1 (AR-1) deviations from an underlying Beverton-Holt stock-recruitment relationship with steepness equal to 0.74. The degree

of correlation in the AR-1 process equaled 0.4 with a conditional standard deviation about this relationship equal to 0.5. Unfished recruitment was time- and simulation invariant and equaled 10-million age-1 fish. All these stock-recruitment values were based on an average of groundfish parameters estimated for the region.

Index Based Methods Explored

The range of IBMs evaluated was generally constrained to those that have been used or were considered plausible (e.g., based on data requirements) for the Northeast Shelf. Ultimately, thirteen IBMs were selected for evaluation. Although catch-curve analyses are not currently applied in the region, they were included here since age information is available for most of the stocks, and because Wiedenmann et al. (2019) showed they performed well in application to groundfish stocks. Two additional IBMs (Islope and Itarget) not currently used in the region were also evaluated, as these have been tested in other applications and shown promise (Geromont and Butterworth 2015a, 2015b; Carruthers et al. 2016; Wiedenmann et al. 2019). An ensemble of models was also considered based on recent findings that improved performance can result from combining the results from multiple models (Anderson et al. 2017; Rosenberg et al. 2018; Spence et al. 2018; Stewart and Hicks 2018). The catch advice from the ensemble approach equaled the median of the catch advice from a range of other methods (Table 2). The DLM approach was excluded from the ensemble due to the relatively long computing time required. Other methods were excluded (CC-FM, ES-FM, ES-Fstable) because they were slight variations of a more generic IBM (i.e., CC- and ES-) and including them all may have unduly overweighted the performance of the ensemble towards these methods. In these cases, the methods retained in the ensemble had superior performance than the alternatives based on preliminary results, or had already been considered for application in the region. The full range of methods included in this analysis were detailed below with equations (Table 2). The performance of each method was compared using a range of metrics with data that would lead to retrospective patterns in an age-based stock assessment (see below).

Other data-limited methods exist for setting catch advice that were not included in this evaluation, and they vary widely in complexity, data inputs, and assumptions required (e.g., Carruthers and Hordyk 2018). Length based methods were not evaluated to keep the overall number of methods tractable, and due to the availability of age based information in the region. Methods that require only catch data or snap shots of survey data were not considered due to the availability of the relatively long and contiguous Northeast Fisheries Science Center’s spring and fall, coastwide bottom trawl surveys. Complete catch histories are not available for stocks in the region (i.e., from the inception of fishing). Furthermore, assumptions of surplus production models are likely violated due to time varying productivity (e.g., in recruitment or natural mortality), and surplus production model fits resulted in different estimates of biomass over time compared to age-based assessments for many stocks (Wiedenmann et al. 2019). Consequently, methods that required complete catch histories, assumed underlying surplus production population dynamics, or required assumptions about relative depletion (e.g., DCAC in MacCall 2009; DB-SRA in Dick and MacCall 2011) were also omitted from consideration.

Each of the methods evaluated produces a single target catch value that was fixed over a two year interval. If the methods were being applied in year y , then target catches are set for years $y + 1$ and $y + 2$ (denoted $C_{targ,y+1:y+2}$). In practice, the timing of setting target catches in the region generally occurs in late summer or early fall in between the spring and fall surveys, and before complete catch data are available. Therefore, in year y complete catch data are available through year $y - 1$, and survey data are available for the spring survey through year y and for the fall survey through year $y - 1$. In practice, the data-limited methods that have been applied used an average of the spring and fall index, and that approach was followed here. If a method for setting catches uses an average of spring and fall, the average index in year y included the spring data in year y and the fall data in year $y - 1$:

$$\bar{I}_y = \frac{I_{fall,y-1} + I_{spr,y}}{2}.$$

Control Rules

Most IBMs do not have the ability to estimate a biomass reference point (e.g., B_{MSY}), which made consideration of so called biomass-based harvest control rules that reduce F or catch in response to estimated changes in relative stock status impossible. Lack of clarity exists, however, on whether the catch advice from IBMs should be treated as an overfishing limit (OFL) or an acceptable biological catch (ABC). OFLs are equated to the catch that would result from applying F_{MSY} , whereas an ABC is a catch reduced from the OFL to account for scientific uncertainty. Each IBM was evaluated using two “harvest control rules”: 1) the catch advice from a given IBM was applied directly and assumed to serve as a proxy for the catch associated with F_{MSY} , thereby being equated to an OFL (catch multiplier = 1), and 2) the catch advice from a given IBM was reduced by 25% to account for unspecified scientific uncertainty, thereby being equated to an ABC (catch multiplier = 0.75). Catches were reduced by 25% to approximate an ABC because using the catch associated with 0.75 F_{MSY} is a common default ABC control rule in the region.

Application of a Statistical Catch-at-Age Assessment (SCAA)

A SCAA model was also applied to all scenarios to generate catch advice for comparison with the IBMs. Although virtual population analysis (VPA) are also used for some age-based assessments in the region, SCAA models are more widely used. Applications of the SCAA model assumed that the assessment had the correct underlying structure for selectivity, and CVs and ESS were specified at their true underlying values. The SCAA model estimated annual recruitment deviations assuming no underlying stock-recruit relationship, annual fully-selected fishing mortality rates, fishery and survey selectivity parameters (logistic), abundance-at-age in year one of the period being assessed, and survey catchabilities. Mohn’s rho was calculated (7 year peels) for abundance at age for all model fits during the feedback period and used to retro-adjust abundance at age for projections (divided by one plus Mohn’s rho). Catch advice was determined by specifying fully-selected $F = 0.75F_{40\%}$,

always assuming $M=0.2$.

Study Design

In addition to the two control rules applied for each IBM described above, three aspects of the OM were varied in a full factorial study design: fishing history, fishery selectivity, and cause of the retrospective pattern (Table 3). Two variants of fishing history were considered, with fully selected fishing mortality during the base period either constant at a level equal to $2.5F_{MSY}$ (always overfishing) or equaling $2.5F_{MSY}$ in the first half of the base period then a knife-edged decline to F_{MSY} for the second half of the base period. These patterns in fishing mortality rate were based on observed patterns for Northeast groundfish (Wiedenmann et al. 2019). These two different fishing intensities during the latter half of the base period led to different starting conditions for the feedback period.

Two variations of the OM were considered with either time invariant, asymptotic, fishery selectivity in the base and feedback periods, or a change in selectivity after the first half of the base period so that the age at 50% selectivity increased from approximately 3.7 to 5 (Table 1). The asymptotic selectivity pattern was based on Northeast groundfish fishery selectivity patterns. The change in the selectivity pattern when selectivity varied through time approximated an increase in mesh size in the fishery to avoid younger fish.

Two different sources of stock assessment misspecification leading to retrospective patterns were considered, temporal changes in natural mortality and misreported catch. The degree to which natural mortality and unreported catch changed through time was determined by attempting to achieve an average Mohn's rho of approximately 0.5 for SSB when an SCAA model (i.e., configured using WHAM) was used to fit the simulated data. We also fit the same SCAA configuration to data without misspecified M or catch to verify that retrospective patterns were not present on average (Figure 1.2). A third source of misspecification was also attempted, time varying survey catchability, but this source of misspecification was unable to produce severe enough retrospective patterns and was abandoned.

For the natural mortality misspecification, the true natural mortality changed from 0.2 to 0.32 in scenarios where the fishing history was always overfishing or to 0.36 when the fishing history included a reduction to F_{MSY} , with the differences between fishing histories necessary to produce the desired retrospective pattern severity. In each case, natural mortality trended linearly from 0.2 to the higher value between years 31 and 40 of the base period. Natural mortality remained constant at the higher level throughout the feedback period. Those IBMs that required a natural mortality rate used the value from before any change in natural mortality (0.2) because the change in natural mortality is meant to be unknown.

For catch misspecification, a scalar multiple of the true catch observation is provided as the observed catch to the IBMs. The scalar is 0.2 when fishing intensity was always overfishing and for both selectivity patterns, 0.44 when the fishing history included a reduction to F_{MSY} and with time variant selectivity, or 0.40 when the fishing history included a reduction to F_{MSY} and selectivity was time invariant. The shift in scalar trended linearly from 1 to the lower value between years 31 and 40 of the base period. These scalars were applied only to the aggregate catch so that they affect all catches at age equally. When catch misspecification was applied in conjunction with an IBM during the feedback period, the true catch in the OM equaled the catch advice provided by the IBM multiplied by the inverse of the scalar multipliers (i.e., the true catches were higher than the IBM catch advice). Thus, when the scalar multipliers were applied to the true catch from the OM in order to provide observed catches at the next application of the IBM, the observed catch equaled the catch advice from the previous application of the IBM, on average. In other words, managers and analysts would be given the perception that the IBM catch advice was being caught by the fishery, when in fact the true catches were always higher.

Fourteen methods for setting catches were explored (13 IBMs and the SCAA) and were applied to all 16 scenarios, which created 224 factorial combinations in the study design. For each element of the full factorial combinations, 1,000 simulations were conducted. Two IBMs (AIM and ES-Fstable) had two failed simulations each, which were caused by relatively high

catch advice (i.e., requiring relatively high F) that triggered errors in the Newton-Raphson iterations used to determine that F that would produce the desired catch. This small number of failures was unlikely to effect results and conclusions, and so were not considered further.

Performance Metrics

A total of 50 performance metrics were recorded during the simulations, but many were redundant and displayed similar tradeoffs among the IBMs and SCAA model. So six metrics thought to be of broad interest were reported here, each calculated and reported separately for a short-term (i.e., first six years of the feedback period) and long-term (i.e., last 20 years of the feedback period) period. These metrics were selected to represent the tradeoffs in terms of benefits to the fishery and risks to the stock. The specific metrics reported were: mean catch relative to MSY , mean interannual variation in catch (A’mar et al. 2010), mean $\frac{SSB}{SSB_{MSY}}$, mean number of years among simulation with SSB less than half SSB_{MSY} , mean number of years among realizations that fully-selected fishing mortality was greater than the F_{MSY} , and mean $\frac{F}{F_{MSY}}$.

Results

Overall performance varied widely across methods, and the individual performance of a method was sensitive to the different scenarios explored. Performance for each method was sensitive to the source of the retrospective pattern (missing catch or M), the exploitation history, the time period the method was applied (short- or long-term), and whether or not a 25% buffer was applied when setting the catch advice from a given method. Overall, similar results occurred for the scenarios with one or two selectivity blocks, so the impact of the selectivity scenarios was not discussed further.

Aggregate performance

In Figure 1, median performance measures are shown, calculated across all scenarios combined. In general, methods that resulted in high mean F/F_{MSY} (Figure 1B) resulted in lower

stock biomass (Figure 1A), higher risks of overfishing (Figure 1E) and of being overfished (Figure 1F), and vice-versa. Higher F values were also associated with higher catches (Figure 1C), on average, and a greater variability in catch, but there were some methods that produced lower F values that also resulted in high catch variability (CC-FM, CC-FSPR; Figure 1D).

A number of methods performed poorly overall, resulting in high exploitation rates and low stock size, on average (Figure 1). These methods include AIM, three of the four expanded survey biomass methods (ES-FM, ES-FSP, and ES-Fstable), and the skate method. The Itarget and ensemble methods also resulted in $SSB < SSB_{MSY}$ and $F > F_{MSY}$, on average, though departures from the MSY levels were not as severe as the other methods (Figure 1). The remaining methods (CC-FM, CC-FSPR, DLM, ES-Frecent, Islope, Ismooth, and SCAA) were able to limit overfishing and keep biomass above SSB_{MSY} , on average, although for four of these methods (CC-FM, CC-FSPR, DLM, and Ismooth) biomass was more than 50% higher than SSB_{MSY} (Figure 1).

Scenario-dependent performance

The source of the retrospective pattern had a large impact on results for a given method. The relationship between SSB/SSB_{MSY} and C/MSY is shown across scenarios for the different sources of retrospective error. Stock size and catch (relative to MSY levels) are clustered for many of the methods with no overlap between M and unreported catch sources (AIM, ES-FM, ES-FSPR, ES-Fstable, Itarget, Skate, Ensemble, and SCAA). For all of these methods, SSB/SSB_{MSY} was lower when unreported catch was the source of the retrospective pattern, and C/MSY was also lower except for the Itarget and the SCAA methods (Figure 2). The source of the retrospective pattern also had a large impact on the other performance measures (Figure 3). In general, when unreported catch was the source of the retrospective pattern interannual variability in catch was higher, overfishing was more frequent and with a larger F/F_{MSY} , and the stock had a higher risk of being overfished (Figure 3). Six methods (AIM,

ES-FM, ES-FSPR, ES-Fstable, Itarget, Skate, Ensemble) resulted in overfishing in nearly every year of the feedback period (often with very high F/F_{MSY}) when missing catch was the source of the retrospective pattern (Figure 3B, 3E). The SCAA method also resulted in frequent overfishing under the missing catch scenario, but less so when the stock was more depleted at the start of the feedback period (Figure 1E).

Exploitation history also impacted the performance of many of the other methods. For four methods (Islope, Ismooth, DLM and ES-Frecent), exploitation rates were higher when the stock experienced overfishing for the entire base period, but the impact was more dramatic in the short-term. Over time as these methods were used, F declined and remained below F_{MSY} in the long-term (Figure 4A), allowing stock recovery. The majority of the other methods also resulted in greater exploitation rates in the short-term, though some methods kept $F/F_{MSY} < 1$ regardless of the time-period (CC-FM, CC-FSPR, and SCAA), while others (AIM, ES-Fstable, Skate, Ensemble) kept $F/F_{MSY} > 1$ over the short- and long-term (Figure 4A). For the ES-FM and ES-FSPR methods, there was not a consistent pattern in exploitation rates when comparing the short- and long-term periods (Figure 4A).

As expected, application of a buffer to the catch advice resulted in lower exploitation rates compared to no buffer across all methods, but the magnitude of the impact differed by method (Figure 4B). Use of the buffer tended to result in greater reductions in F for the poor-performing methods that resulted in $F/F_{MSY} \gg 1$. Methods like AIM, ES-FM, ES-FSPR, ES-Fstable and Skate all had large reductions in F when the buffer was applied, but the reduction was insufficient to reduce $F/F_{MSY} < 1$ (Figure 4B). For some methods (CC-FM, CC-FSPR, SCAA), the median F/F_{MSY} was always below 1 with or without the buffer, whereas for other methods (DLM, ES-Frecent, Islope, Ismooth, Itarget, and Ensemble) there were instances where using a buffer pushed F/F_{MSY} below 1 (though it depended on the exploitation history; Figure 4B).

The median performance measures reported thus far do not express the full range of results

across individual runs, however. When all the simulations are plotted, there is clearly a wide range of possible outcomes for the population, indicating that performance for a particular series of environmental conditions, expressed through recruitment deviations, can vary widely. For example, Figure 5 shows the long-term average SSB/SSB_{MSY} and C/MSY relationship across runs for a single scenario. Different patterns in the relationship between the SSB and catch ratios resulted, with methods falling into two groups. In the first group, there is a near linear relationship between SSB/SSB_{MSY} and C/MSY (AIM, ES-Fstable, ES-FSPR, ES-M, Itarget, Skate, Ensemble, and SCAA; Figure 5). In the second group (CC-FSPR, CC-FM, DLM, ES-Frecent, Ismooth, and Islope) the relationship is more diffuse, with a wide range of C/MSY for a given SSB/SSB_{MSY} . The linear or diffuse relationships persisted across scenarios, although the upper limit of C/MSY was greatly reduced for the diffuse methods when the buffer was applied to the catch advice.

Discussion

A range of a data-limited methods for setting catch advice were evaluated for stocks where assessment models may be rejected due to strong, positive retrospective patterns. A method was considered to perform well if it limited overfishing without resulting in light exploitation rates ($F \ll F_{MSY}$), thereby allowing depleted stocks to recover to SSB_{MSY} (or for healthy stocks to remain there), and for high and stable catches (close to MSY). Overall, none of the methods evaluated performed best across the scenarios exploring the different sources of the retrospective pattern (unreported catch or increasing M) and different levels of historical fishing intensity. A number of methods did perform well in many cases, however, while others performed consistently poorly, resulting in frequent and intense overfishing ($F \gg F_{MSY}$). Currently, in the Northeast U.S., if an assessment model is rejected due to a large rho value, the catch advice from that model is ignored and some data-limited approach is used. However, the rho-adjusted SCAA model performed better than a number of the alternatives

explored here. Therefore, there should not necessarily be an expectation that a data-limited method will perform better than the rejected assessment model. The SCAA only resulted in high exploitation rates ($F \gg F_{MSY}$) when unreported catch was the source of the retrospective pattern and the stock was in good condition ($SSB \sim SSB_{MSY}$). In contrast, this method was particularly effective when the stock was depleted and there was unreported catch. When M was the source of the retrospective pattern, the rho-adjusted SCAA method typically resulted in light exploitation rates, on average. The light exploitation rates in these cases were likely driven by the combination of using a rho-adjustment, but also using the lower M from the beginning of the base period than the higher M that occurred during the feedback period. Using an M value that is too low in a stock assessment will typically bias estimates of biomass and reference points too low, resulting in catch advice that is below target levels (Johnson et al. 2014; Punt et al. 2021). The consequences of using a value for M that is too low versus too high is also asymmetrical (Johnson et al. 2014), with negative consequences being more severe when M is assumed too high than low, and the results here are consistent with these previous conclusions.

The methods that adjusted recent average catches based on trends in the survey (I_{smooth} and I_{slope}) performed well overall in terms of catch, stock status, and variation in catch. The method using the expanded survey biomass with the recent exploitation rate ($ES - Frecent$) also performed well and similarly to I_{smooth} . The performance of these methods was also generally robust among scenarios, with the exception of when there were unreported catches and the stock was depleted (see below). The generally positive performance of these methods was consistent with Hilborn et al. (2002) and Cox and Kronlund (2008), both of which evaluated a variant of a “hold-steady” IBM. In the case of Hilborn et al. (2002), the “hold-steady” IBM policy was designed to adjust catches in order to keep rockfish (*Sebastes spp.*) populations at recently observed index levels, and did so by functioning as a constant escapement harvest control rule where target catches were set to zero below some pre-specified index level. In the variant used by Cox and Kronlund (2008), catches were

394 adjusted to maintain a sablefish (*Anoplopoma fimbria*) population at a pre-specified index
 395 level thought to be sustainable and desirable in terms of meeting fishery objectives (e.g., high
 396 catch), but never permitted target catches of zero and so functioned as a constant exploitation
 397 rate control rule. The “hold-steady” IBM of Cox and Kronlund (2008) performed similarly in
 398 terms of catch, stock depletion, and variation in catch, as a constant exploitation rate policy
 399 where target catch was specified as the product of desired exploitation rate and an estimate
 400 of biomass from a SCAA model. This result was robust to uncertainty in initial stock status
 401 and steepness (Cox and Kronlund 2008). The SCAA model was always correctly specified
 402 (i.e., expected to produce unbiased estimates on average), however, and so no comparison
 403 to the results of this research in the presence of retrospective patterns is possible (Cox and
 404 Kronlund 2008). The “hold-steady” policy of Hilborn et al. (2002) performed similarly to
 405 or better in terms of catch and stock status than other harvest control rules that relied
 406 on assessment estimates of biomass (i.e., 40:10 and constant F). The performance of the
 407 “hold-steady” IBM was also more robust to uncertainty in steepness and to the presence
 408 of unreported catch (Hilborn et al. 2002). The performance of the two harvest policies
 409 that relied on assessment estimates of biomass also degraded when the estimates of biomass
 410 were biased, which is an issue that does not effect the “hold-steady” IBM (Hilborn et al.
 411 2002). The bias in the assessment estimates considered in Hilborn et al. (2002) were not
 412 necessarily induced by a retrospective pattern, however, and no consideration of making
 413 a rho-adjustment was possible in that study. The I_{smooth} method is currently used to set
 414 catches for Georges Bank cod (NEFSC 2019) and red hake (*Urophycis chuss*; NEFSC (2020)).
 415 Variations of the $ES - Frecent$ have been used for witch flounder and GB yellowtail flounder.
 416 While the findings here generally support the continued use of the I_{smooth} and $ES - Frecent$
 417 methods, they may not be well suited for depleted stocks where unreported catches are
 418 believed to be an issue. The I_{smooth} , I_{slope} , and $ES - Frecent$ IBMs produced high F s and
 419 limited stock recovery with unreported catches and when the stock was depleted. While
 420 Hilborn et al. (2002) and Cox and Kronlund (2008) did not reach the same conclusion about

421 the “hold-steady” IBM, those studies did not consider initial levels of depletion as low as in
422 this study. These results highlight the importance of accurate catch reporting, as unreported
423 catch can create a negative feedback loop with perpetually high F s being produced by a
424 management system that seemingly should result in sustainable catch advice.

425 Three methods were consistently risk-averse across scenarios, limiting the frequency and
426 magnitude of overfishing and resulting in high stock biomass. These methods were the two
427 catch curve options ($CC - FM$ and $CC - FSPR$) and DLM . The catch curve methods
428 produced a wider range of average catches across scenarios, and also had greater interannual
429 variability in catches compared to DLM . While the lower exploitation rates from these
430 approaches may be undesirable due to foregone yield, there may be circumstances where
431 they are preferred. For example, for stocks that are believed to be heavily depleted, low
432 exploitation rates would allow for a more rapid recovery.

433 A number of methods performed poorly, particularly when catches were unreported. These
434 methods include three of the expanded survey biomass approaches ($ES - Fstable$, $ES - FM$,
435 $ES - FSPR$), AIM , and $Skate$. The AIM model has been widely used across stocks in
436 the region (NEFSC 2002, 2005, 2008), although there is a decreasing trend in its use across
437 model resistant stocks (NEFSC 2019). The findings here suggest that alternative approaches
438 should be considered in cases where AIM is still used and there is concern over unreported
439 catches. The $Skate$ method is used to manage the skate complex in the Northeast U.S. (a
440 group of seven co-managed species). Interestingly, six of the seven species are considered
441 in good condition with high survey biomass indices in recent years (NEFMC (2020)). That
442 the $Skate$ method performed poorly in our analysis but performs well for the skate complex
443 illustrates how the performance of methods in this analysis may be sensitive to the scenarios
444 and species life history considered. Therefore, care is needed when trying to generalize these
445 results across stocks that may have different life histories, exploitation histories, and without
446 unreported catches or increases in M .

An interesting finding of this study is the linear versus diffuse patterns between SSB and catch across methods. These patterns have implications for the trade-offs among methods, with linear relationships resulting in more consistent exploitation rates across stock sizes. Therefore, these methods have higher certainty of a given catch at a given stock size. However, they also tended to result in lower stock sizes, on average, across methods. The more diffuse relationships resulted in more variable exploitation rates across stock sizes, with some situations where the population biomass was quite high but the catch was low (relative to MSY), resulting in a very low F . The reasons behind these different patterns remains unclear, and future work to explore these patterns is warranted.

Paragraph on the overall difference between catch and M ? Not sure if we want to get into this because we'll have to raise the issue of the different reference points. JJD thinks we don't need to raise this issue explicitly, as it seems evident from the text above; then we can dodge the reference point bullet... then again the reference point bullet might be interesting discussion fodder in it's own right.

One of the reasons for the difference in performance between the catch and natural mortality retrospective sources was how the reference points were calculated. In all cases, the initial conditions, including the natural mortality rate, were used to compute the reference points. This decision was made based on the fact that the increase in natural mortality was assumed to be unknown in the simulations. If the increase in natural mortality was known, the assessments would have accounted for it, different reference points might be computed (Legault and Palmer 2016) and there may not have been a retrospective pattern at all (Legault 2020). The reference points would have been different if they were computed using the final year values, but the overall conclusions regarding the different IBMs did not change as this just results in a rescaling of the axis. These results are not shown to reduce confusion regarding the simulations.

The above paragraph is Chris' attempt to address the reference point issue. Please feel free

to edit or delete.

This study is a first attempt to identify suitable methods for setting catch advice when stock assessment models are rejected due to large, positive retrospective patterns. Although no single method performed best across scenarios, a number of generally suitable and unsuitable methods were identified under specific conditions. The results of this work can help scientists and managers select a subset of possible options for consideration to set catch advice when assessment models are rejected. The approach developed here can, and should be expanded to consider other cases not explored here, as performance of individual methods is very likely case-dependent.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Index-Based Methods and Control Rules Research Track review panel of Paul Rago (chair), Yong Chen, Robin Cook, and Paul Medley for feedback on preliminary results, and . . . for reviewing an earlier version of this work. *Generic statement about views expressed not reflecting NOAA. . .*

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634 Table 1. Maturity-, weight-, and selectivity-at-age of the simulated fish population.

Age	Maturity	Weight (kg)	Fishery	Fishery
			Selectivity (before change if applicable)	Selectivity (after change if applicable)
1	0.04	0.15	0.07	0.02
2	0.25	0.5	0.17	0.05
3	0.6	0.9	0.36	0.12
4	0.77	1.4	0.61	0.27
5	0.85	2.0	0.81	0.50
6	0.92	2.6	0.92	0.74
7	1.0	3.2	0.97	0.89
8	1.0	4.1	0.99	0.96
9	1.0	5.9	1.0	0.99
10+	1.0	9.0	1.0	1.0

635 Table 2. Naming convention and details of the index based methods evaluated.

Method	Details
Ismooth	$C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = \bar{C}_{3,y}(e^\lambda)$ where $\bar{C}_{3,y}$ is the most recent three year average $\bar{C}_{3,y} = \frac{1}{3} \sum_{t=1}^{t=3} C_{y-t}$ and λ is the slope of a log linear regression of a LOESS-smoothed average index of abundance (spring and fall) with span = 0.3: $\hat{I}_y = loess(\hat{I}_y)$ and $LN(\hat{I}_y) = b + \lambda y$
Islope	$C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = 0.8\bar{C}_{5,y}(1 + 0.4e^\lambda)$ where $\bar{C}_{5,y}$ is the most recent five-year average catch through year $y - 1$: $\bar{C}_{5,y} = \frac{1}{5} \sum_{t=1}^{t=5} C_{y-t}$ and λ is the slope of a log-linear regression of the most recent five years of the averaged index.
Itarget	$C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = \left[0.5C_{ref} \left(\frac{\bar{I}_{5,y} - I_{thresh}}{\bar{I}_{target} - I_{thresh}} \right) \right] \bar{I}_{5,y} \geq I_{thresh}$ $C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = \left[0.5C_{ref} \left(\frac{\bar{I}_{5,y}}{I_{thresh}} \right)^2 \right] \bar{I}_{5,y} < I_{thresh}$ <p>C_{ref} is the average catch over the reference period (years 26 through 50): $C_{ref} = \frac{1}{25} \sum_{y=26}^{y=50} C_y$ I_{target} is 1.5 times the average index over the reference period:</p> $I_{target} = \frac{1}{25} \sum_{y=26}^{y=50} \bar{I}_y \quad I_{thresh} = 0.8 I_{target}, \text{ and is the most recent five year average of the combined spring and fall index: } \bar{I}_{5,y} = \frac{1}{5} \sum_{t=1}^{t=5} \bar{I}_{y-t+1}$
skate	$C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = F_{rel} \bar{I}_{3,y}$ where $F_{rel} = median \left(\frac{\bar{C}_{3,\mathbf{Y}}}{\bar{I}_{3,\mathbf{Y}}} \right)$ is the median relative fishing mortality rate calculated using a 3 year moving average of the catch and average survey index across all available years (\mathbf{Y}): $\bar{C}_{3,y} = \frac{1}{3} \sum_{t=1}^{t=3} C_{y-t}$ and $\bar{I}_{3,y} = \frac{1}{3} \sum_{t=1}^{t=3} I_{y-t+1}$

Method	Details
An Index Method (AIM)	<p>AIM first calculates the annual relative F:</p> $F_{rel,y} = \frac{C_y}{\frac{1}{3} \sum_{t=1}^{t=3} \bar{I}_{y-t+1}}$ <p>and the annual replacement ratio:</p> $\Psi_y = \frac{\bar{I}_y}{\frac{1}{5} \sum_{t=1}^{t=5} \bar{I}_{y-t}}.$ <p>These values are used in a regression:</p> $LN(\Psi_y) = b + \lambda LN(F_{rel,y})$ <p>to determine $F_{rel,*}$, which is the value of $F_{rel,y}$ where the predicted $\Psi = 1$ or $LN(\Psi) = 0$. $F_{rel,*}$ is called either the “stable” or “replacement” F, and is used to calculate the target catch: $C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = \bar{I}_y F_{rel,*}$.</p>
Dynamic Linear Model (DLM)	Langan (2021).
Expanded survey biomass method 1 $F_{40\%}$ (ES-FSPR)	<p>$C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = B_{\bar{I},y} \mu_{targ}$ where $B_{\bar{I}}$ is the average of estimated fully-selected biomass from each survey:</p> $B_{\bar{I},y} = \frac{1}{2} \left(\frac{I_{spr,y}}{q_{spr}} + \frac{I_{fall,y-1}}{q_{fall}} \right)$ <p>and target exploitation fraction, μ_{targ} is calculated as:</p> $\mu_{targ} = \frac{F_{targ}}{Z_{targ}} \left(1 - e^{-Z_{targ}} \right) \quad F_{targ} = F_{40\%} \quad \text{and}$ $Z_{targ} = F_{targ} + M$
Expanded survey biomass method 2 $F = \text{AIM}$ replacement (ES-Fstable)	<p>Same as the above expanded survey method, but with μ_{targ} equal to the stable exploitation fraction $F_{rel,*}$ calculated using the AIM approach (see above).</p>
Expanded survey biomass method 3 $F = M$ (ES-FM)	<p>Same as the above expanded survey methods, but with the target exploitation rate set to the assumed M: $F_{targ} = M$.</p>
Expanded survey biomass method 4 $F = \text{recent average}$ (ES-Frecent)	<p>Same as the above expanded survey methods, but with the target exploitation fraction set to the most recent three year average exploitation fraction:</p> $\mu_{targ} = \frac{\sum_{y-2}^y \mu_y}{3} \quad \mu_y = \frac{C_{y-1}}{B_{\bar{I},y}}$

Method	Details
Catch curve Method 1 $F_{40\%}$ (CC-FSPR)	$C_{targ,y+1:y+2} = \frac{F_{targ}}{Z_{avg,y}} B_{cc,y} (1 - e^{-Z_{avg,y}})$ where B_{cc} is the estimated biomass: $B_{cc,y} = \frac{C_{y-1}}{\frac{F_{avg,y}}{Z_{avg,y}}(1 - e^{-Z_{avg,y}})}$ with $Z_{avg,y} = \frac{Z_{spring,y} + Z_{fall,y-1}}{2}$ $F_{avg,y-1} = Z_{avg,y-1} - M$ and, $F_{targ} = F_{40\%}$.
Catch curve Method 2 M (CC-FM)	Same as catch curve method 1 above, but with $F_{targ} = M$.
Ensemble	Median of catch advice provided by AIM, CCFSPR, ES-Frecent, ES-FSPR, Islope, Itarget, Ismooth, and Skate methods.

636 Table 3. Summary of the scenarios evaluated within the study design.

Factors	Variants
retrospective source	catch natural mortality none
fishing history	Fmsy in second half of base period overfishing throughout base period (2.5xFmsy)
fishery selectivity blocks	constant selectivity selectivity changes in second half of base period
catch advice multiplier	applied as is from IBM (1) reduced from IBM (0.75)

637 Figures

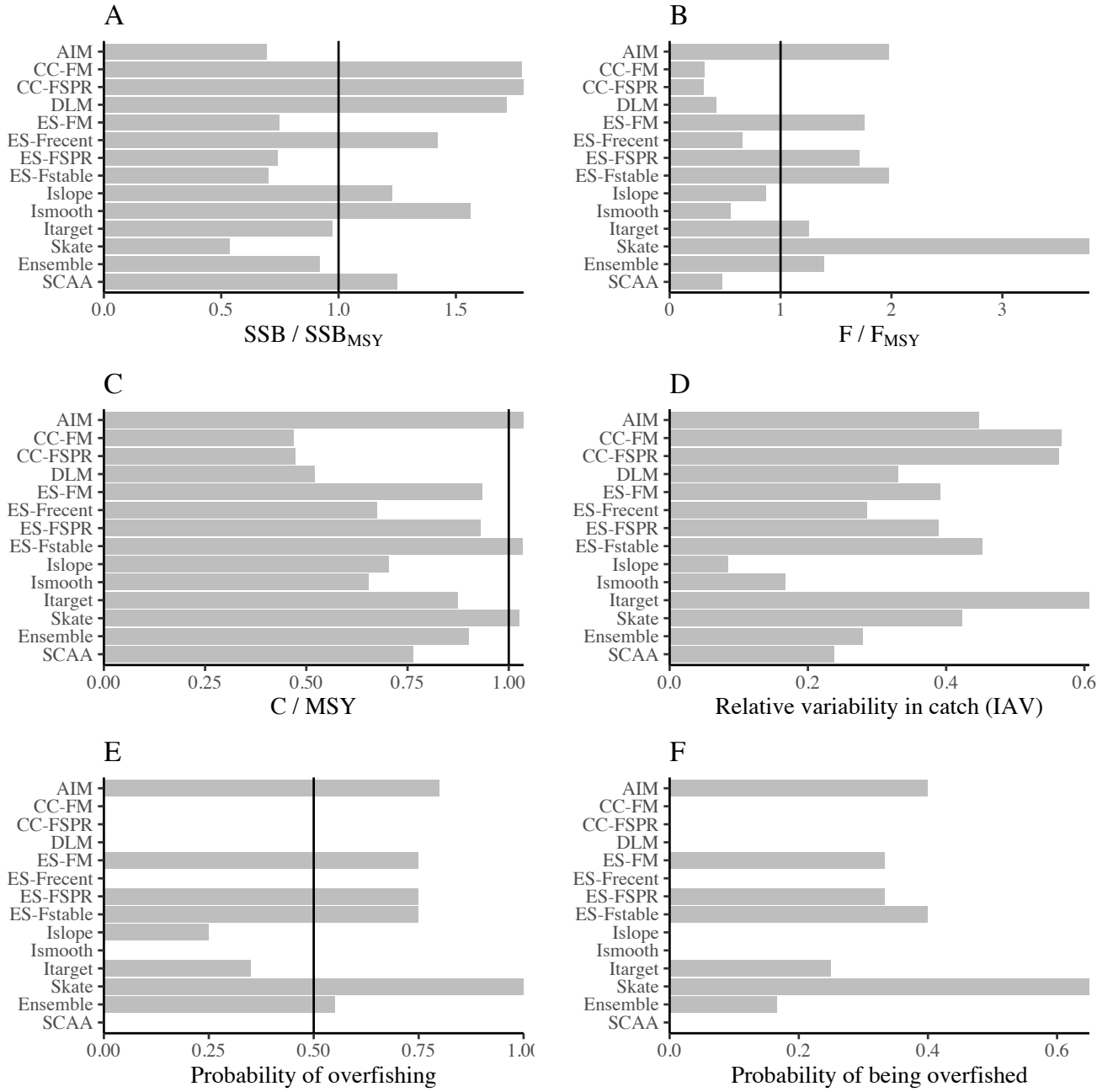


Figure 1: Median performance measures across all scenarios and runs for each method. Vertical lines are shown at a value of 1 for the performance measures that are relative to the MSY reference points (A,B,C), and at a value of 0.5 for the probability of overfishing (E).

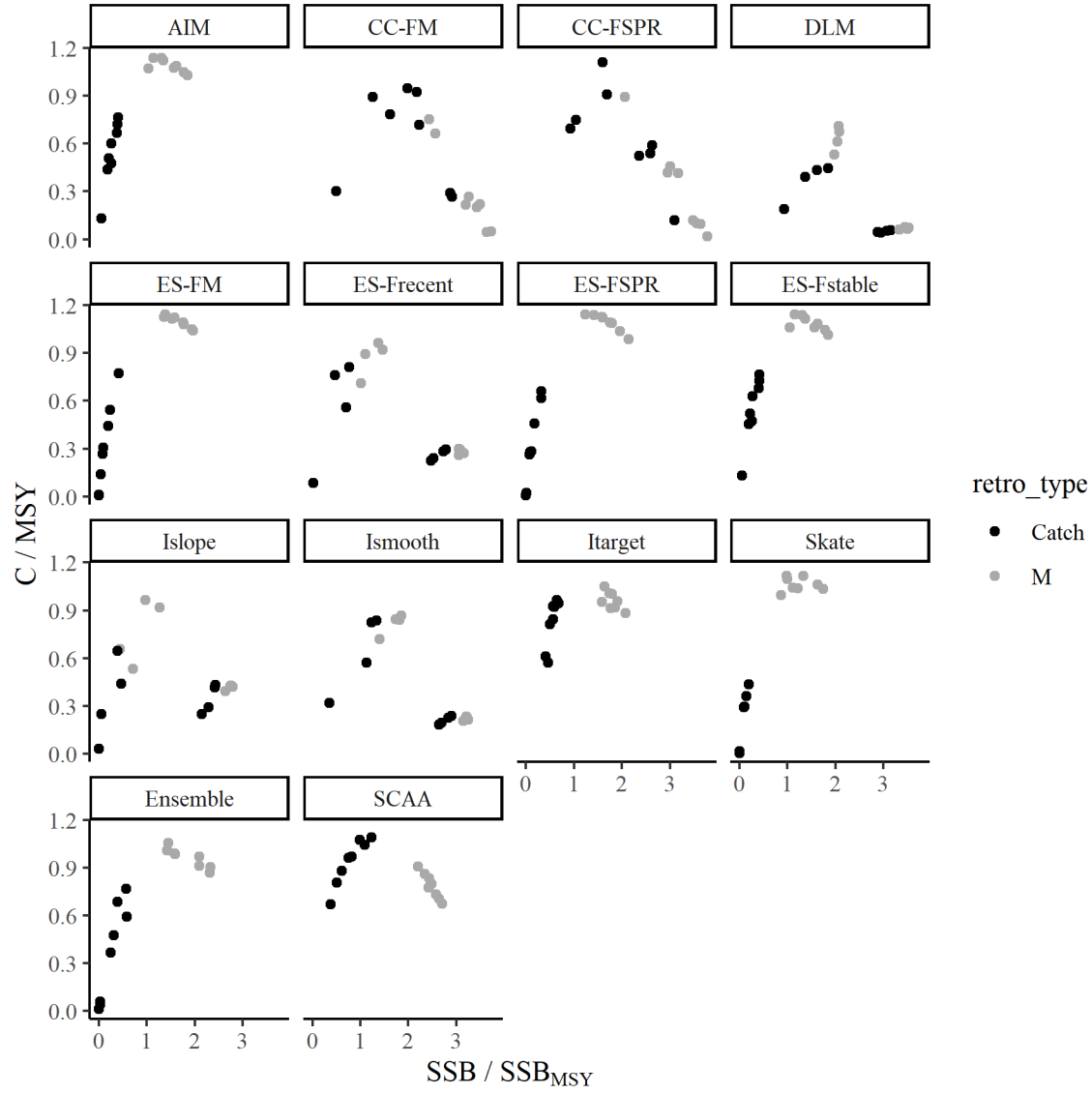


Figure 2: Relationship between long-term average spawning biomass and average catch (relative to MSY levels) for each method. Each point represents the median for a given scenario, separated by the source of the retrospective pattern (catch or M).

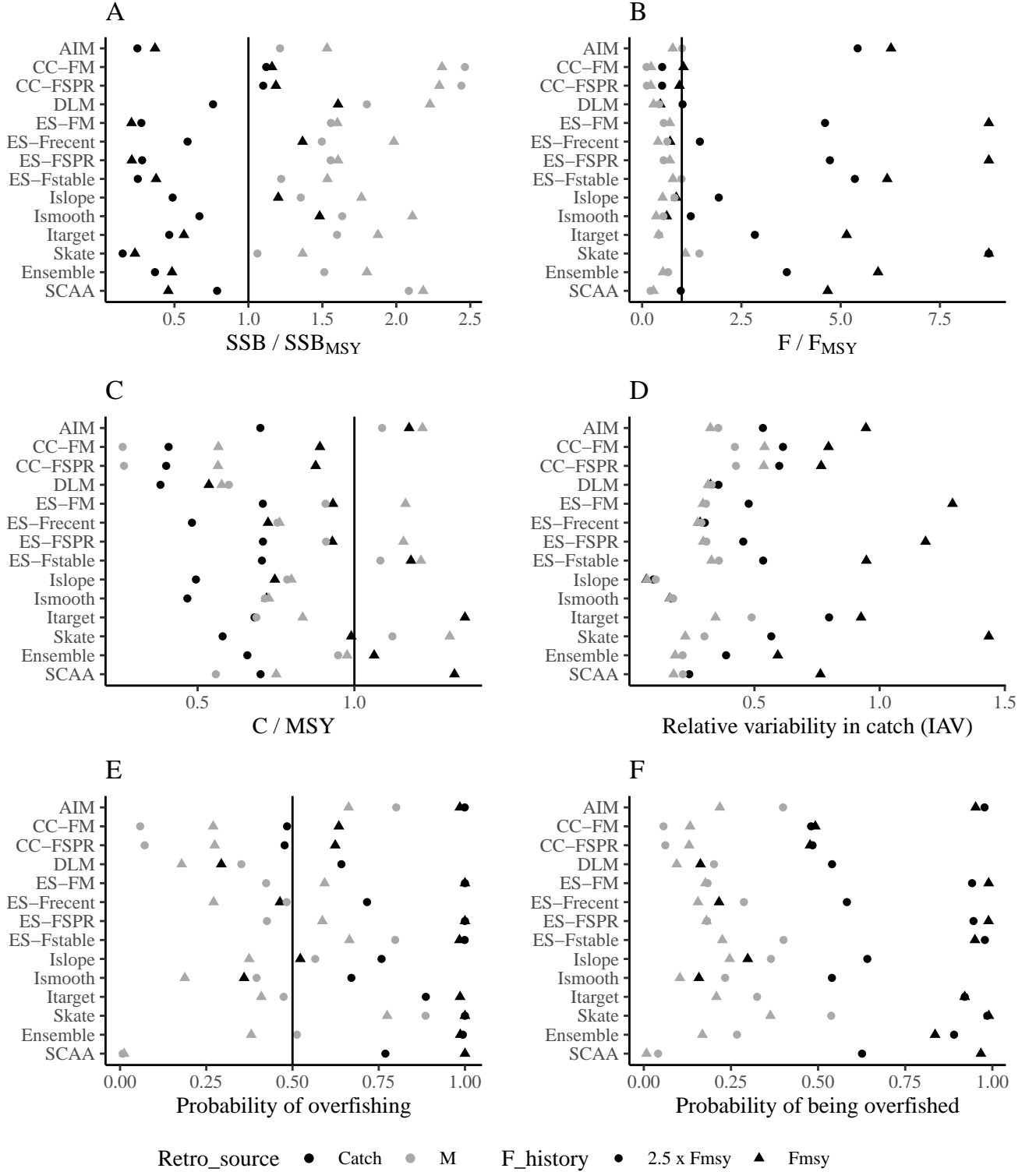


Figure 3: Median performance measures for each method, with separated out by the source of the retrospective error (catch = black, M = gray) and the exploitation history in the base period (always overfishing at $2.5x F_{MSY}$ (circle), or F reduced to F_{MSY} during base period (triangle)). Vertical lines are shown at a value of 1 for the performance measures that are relative to the MSY reference points (A,B,C), and at a value of 0.5 for the probability of overfishing (E).

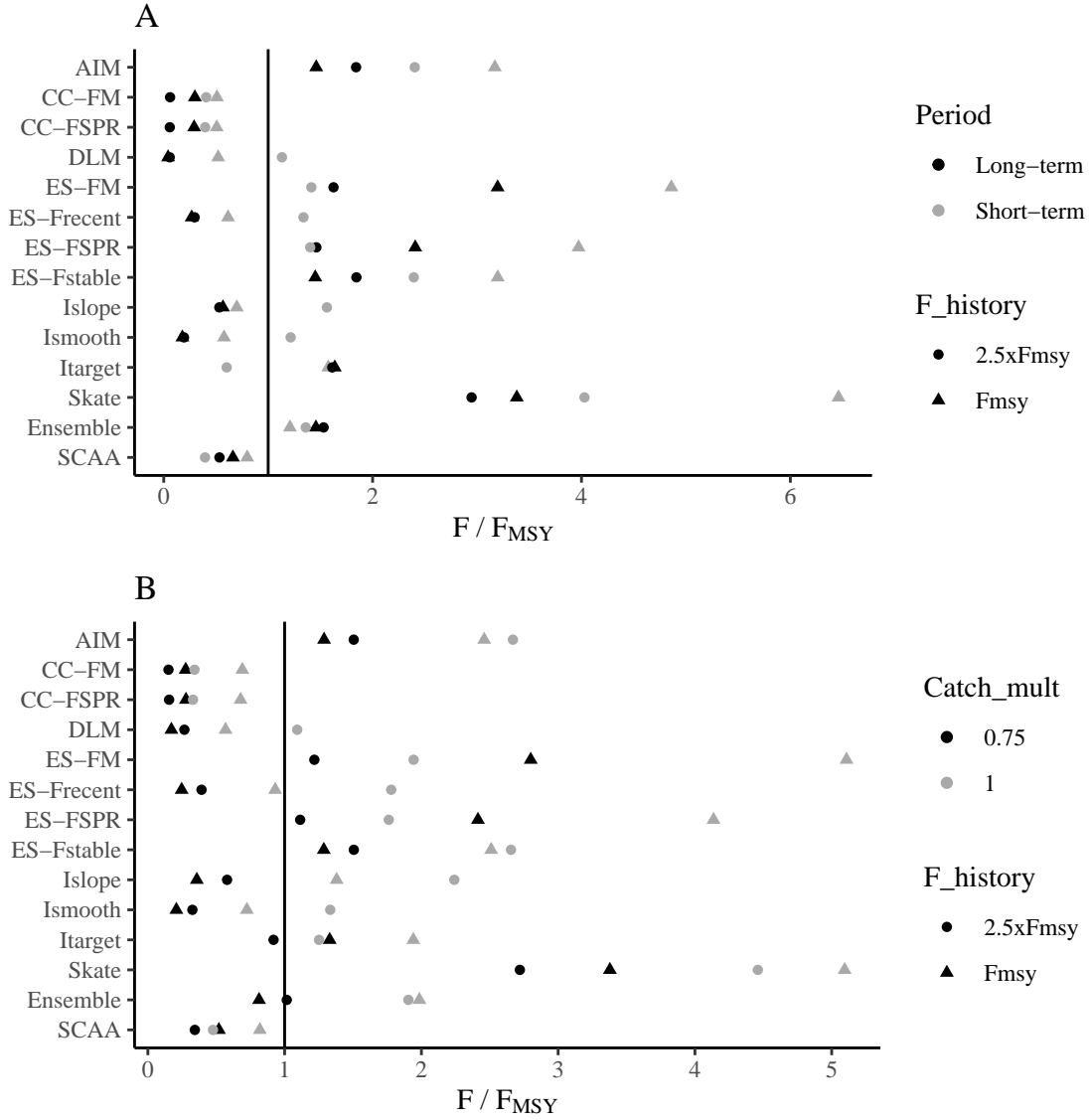


Figure 4: Median F/F_{MSY} for each method, with results separated by the exploitation history in the base period (always overfishing at $2.5x F_{MSY}$ (circle), or F reduced to F_{MSY} during base period (triangle)) showing A) short- (gray) versus long-term (black) values, and B) with (black) or without (gray) a buffer applied when setting the catch (catchmult = 0.75 or 1).

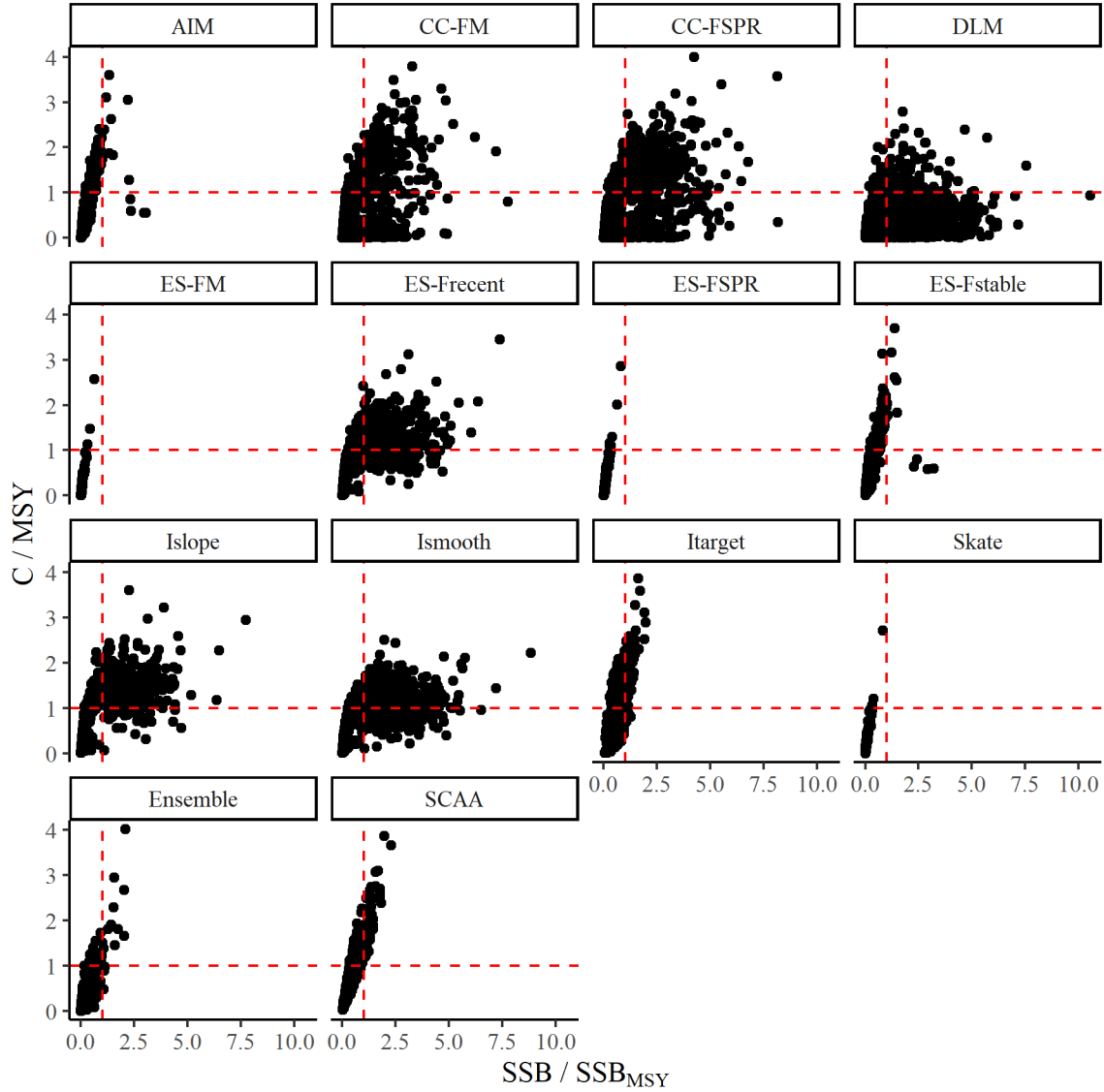


Figure 5: Relationship between long-term average catch / MSY and average SSB / SSB_{MSY} by method. Each point represents the average for a single iteration for the scenario where catch was the source of the retrospective pattern with F reduced to F_{MSY} in the second half of the base period, there was a single selectivity block, and where no buffer was applied to the catch advice (catch multiplier = 1).