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# Spatio-temporal fishing risk of large pelagic fish in the Mediterranean Sea

**Master Thesis**

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*'No data can be taken out of this work without prior approval of the thesis main supervisor(\*)'*

# **Executive Summary**

The executive summary goes here.

# **Abstract**

Abstract goes here.

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# 1 Introduction

Large pelagic fishes (LPF) including tunas, swordfish, and pelagic sharks, hold profound ecological and economic importance globally. They are characterized by their highly migratory nature, and their roles as apex predators. Their large-scale migrations are driven by the fact that food resources and suitable breeding grounds are far apart from each other (Fromentin and Powers, 2005; Tracey et al., 2023; Relano and Pauly, 2022a). Through these migrations, LPF form an important biological link between distant areas (trans-ocean migrations), and between coastal and pelagic production (Beamish et al., 2005). As apex predators, they also strongly influence the structure and function of ecosystems and intensive fishing can lead to cascading top-down effects (Baum and Worm, 2009; Young et al., 2015). They also have a high social and global importance for food security. Global catches of LPF, i.e., tuna and tuna-like species (mainly Thunnini, Xiphidae, and Istiophoridae), amounted to a record 8.3 million t reported landings in 2022, and tuna fisheries alone are worth 40 billion dollars annually (FAO, 2024; McKinney et al., 2020).

In the Mediterranean Sea (Fig. 1), bluefin tuna (BFT; *Thunnus thynnus*), albacore tuna (*Thunnus alalunga*), and swordfish (SWO; *Xiphias gladius*) are the most important LPF (Papaconstantinou and Farrugio, 2000). In 2023, these species alone accounted for approximately 63% of reported catches for all tuna and tuna-like species (in total around 60 thousand tonnes; ICCAT, 2025). Apart from their economic importance, these three species also form an important part of the culture and identity of numerous coastal communities in the Mediterranean, as they have been exploited there since ancient times (Addis et al., 2012; Usai, 2022; Di Natale et al., 2005; Andrews et al., 2022). The bluefin tuna fishery for example, is the oldest known industrial fishery in the world (Di Natale, 2012).

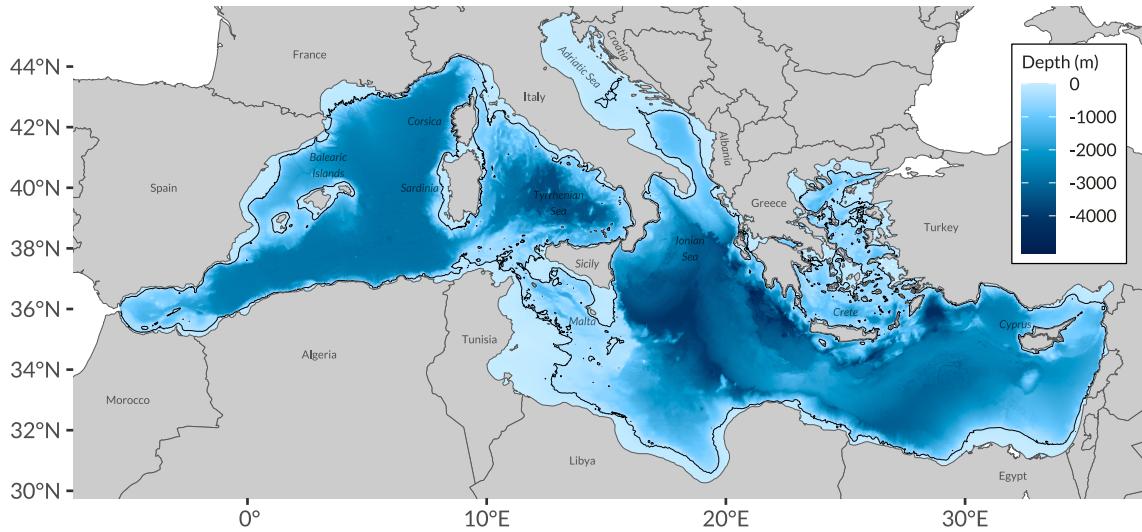


Figure 1: The Mediterranean Sea, study area for this analysis. The black line indicates the 200m isobar.

To sustainably manage these fish stocks and the ecosystems they occur in, it is essential to accurately estimate the location and intensity of fishing pressure (Piet et al., 2006; Russo et al., 2013; Maina et al., 2016). This information is increasingly needed for marine spatial planning, marine protected area designation, conservation of target and non-target species, and ecosystem-based fisheries management (Vespe et al., 2016; Sales Henriques et al., 2024; Tidd et al., 2015; Gerritsen and Lordan, 2010; James et al., 2018; Shea et al., 2023; Bell et al., 2025). Most fisheries management systems for example aim to regulate one or more of the following: catches, gear type, fishing location, seasonality, and effort. To achieve this, information on who, when, where and how much fishing is occurring is necessary (Orofino et al., 2023).

Traditionally, mostly logbooks are used to monitor where and when a vessel is fishing (Hintzen et al., 2012). Compiling logbook data is the responsibility of each skipper and is mandatory for vessels fishing in EU waters (European Commission, 1993). Information of catches is recorded daily at a spatial resolution of  $1^\circ$  longitude and  $0.5^\circ$  latitude (size of ICES areas). Since the 2000s however, there

has been an increase in the usage of automatic monitoring tools. Since 2005, Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) are mandatory for fishing vessels >15 m in the EU, to meet the increasing need for fine-scale spatial and temporal information from commercial fleets for compliance with the ecosystem approach to fisheries management (European Commission, 2003; Gerritsen and Lordan, 2010). In the EU, VMS usually have a ping rate between 1-2 hours, aiming at a compromise between appropriate resolution and costs (Shepperson et al., 2017). This data has however traditionally been confined to government regulators and other fisheries authorities, limiting its usage, particularly in the case of migratory species that travel between different countries' jurisdictions (Orofino et al., 2023; Hinz et al., 2013). More recently, the usage of Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) has emerged as a promising tool to monitor the spatio-temporal extent of fisheries and for fisheries Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS; Zhang et al., 2022). Globally, AIS is compulsory for large vessels (over 300 tons), while in the EU it is mandatory for fishing vessels  $\geq$ 15m in length (European Commission, 2011). Originally designed as a collision avoidance tool, it allows analysis at higher spatial and temporal resolution due to the high ping rate of up to 2 seconds (Taconet et al., 2019; Kontas, n.d.). There are however some handicaps that can limit the coverage of this technology. This includes for example intentional turning-off, reception quality, and difficulty of discerning individual messages in areas with very high vessel density (Taconet et al., 2019). The increasing coverage and data availability however, enable the analysis of more complex fisheries behaviours (Natale et al., 2015) and AIS data is also publicly accessible, allowing for a fine-scale spatio-temporal assessment of fisheries between different countries' jurisdictions.

Most studies investigating fishing effort in the Mediterranean Sea have looked at the spatial footprint of bottom trawlers as shown by Ferrà et al. (2018) and Marsaglia et al. (2024). However, monitoring the fisheries on LPF in this area will also provide important information for their management. The International

Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) is responsible for the sustainable management of LPF in the Mediterranean. Spatio-temporal data on fishing effort are incorporated into stock assessments for bluefin tuna, swordfish, and albacore tuna (ICCAT, 2024b,c,a). However, the data reported by contracting parties are often coarse in resolution (aggregated at  $5^\circ \times 5^\circ$  or more rarely  $1^\circ \times 1^\circ$ ) which limits the capacity to detect fine-scale fishing patterns. Incorporating fishing pressure derived from AIS, could provide an alternative for cross-validation of reported effort data and analysis on a finer spatial scale.

Monitoring fisheries of LPF is also highly relevant in terms of climate change, of which the effects have recently been proposed to be integrated in the species' management (ICCAT, 2022). For this, members of the ICCAT '*Subcommittee of Ecosystems and Bycatch*' have created the '*TunaMed Observatory*' with the aim to '*identify and monitor the variability of environmental processes in the Mediterranean Sea that affects the ecology of large pelagic fishes - with special attention on tunas-, and to investigate the potential role of climate change on this variability*' (ICCAT, 2023). As the spatial footprint of fishing is closely linked to the distribution of target species, changes in the distribution of fishing could thus be indicators of habitat change and climate-driven shifts in species range (Ojea et al., 2020).

One of the most important gear types used in the Mediterranean for the capture of LPF are drifting longlines (FAO, 2025; ICCAT, 2024a,b,c). This gear type is however also associated with high levels of bycatch which includes species of sea turtles, pelagic sharks, and seabirds (Carpentieri et al., 2021). Thus, demonstrating the utility of fine scale fishing data for the conservation of non-target species for example through combining both species distribution models with this data (Welch et al., 2024). Apart from longlines, purse seine nets are used in the Mediterranean mainly for the capture of BFT, targetting schools of these fish during spawning. In the Mediterranean, this method is not associated to large amounts of bycatch but can have big impacts on the targetted fish as it is extracting whole schools (Car-

pentieri et al., 2021; ICCAT, 2024b)

To address current gaps in the monitoring of large pelagic fisheries in the Mediterranean, this thesis uses fine-scale data on fishing activities derived from AIS and provided by Global Fishing Watch (GFW) to examine spatio-temporal patterns in fishing over the past decade (2015-2024). This approach enables analysis of the whole Mediterranean Sea area, that would not be possible when relying on other effort estimates like VMS and logbooks. The study focuses on the two main gear types targeting LPF, namely drifting longlines and tuna purse seines, to determine '*hotspots*' of fishing activity corresponding to high risk areas for LPF, analyse temporal trends, and the relationship of fishing with depth and distance to port. More specifically, we aim to answer:

1. Where and when is fishing activity for large pelagic species most intense and have spatial patterns shifted between 2015 and 2024?
2. What are the seasonal patterns of fishing activity by gear type and do temporal patterns differ interannually?
3. To what extent does AIS capture the full scope of fishing activity in the Mediterranean?
4. What is the spatial relationship between fishing hours and environmental features and how could we use these as indicators of habitat changes?

## 2 Material and Methods

### 2.1 Data sources

#### 2.1.1 Fishing hours

Data on fishing hours was obtained from Global Fishing Watch (GFW). This non-profit organization provides a global dataset of estimated fishing activity derived from AIS data (Global Fishing Watch, 2025). They process data from over 190,000 unique AIS transmitters, each assigned a unique Maritime Mobile Service Identity (MMSI). These AIS devices broadcast a vessel's location as frequently as every 2 seconds (Kontas, n.d.; Taconet et al., 2019). Along with the exact location, each AIS transmission includes a timestamp, speed, and heading of the vessel. GFW then analyses these positional data points, to infer fishing activity, via two different Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN's), which are described in detail in Kroodsma et al. (2018).

A first CNN classifies fishing vessels into one of sixteen fishing gear categories (Fig. 2) and predicts vessel characteristics such as length, tonnage, and engine power. This deep-learning model is trained on a dataset of vessels matched to official vessel registries which are *known* fishing vessels. Vessels without gear information in the registries used are assigned a gear if their movement patterns resemble those of a known vessel class. A second CNN classifies every obtained AIS position as either fishing or non-fishing based on characteristic fishing movement (Kroodsma et al., 2018; Fig. 3). These individual fishing events are then aggregated into grid cells spanning either  $0.1^\circ$  or  $0.01^\circ$  on a side. For the present analysis,  $0.1^\circ$  resolution was chosen, covering the study area (Mediterranean Sea; Fig 1) in sufficient detail.

Unique vessels are identified based on their MMSI number and the dataset con-

tains information on the vessel's registration and flag country. The gear class estimated by the CNN is also compared with the information from different vessel registries, such as the EU fleet register or the ICCAT record of vessels. In case the derived vessel class does not match to the one in the registry, GFW assigns the broadest gear type that allows for agreement. If for example, a vessel is registered as a purse seiner but is inferred to be a tuna purse seiner, it would ultimately be assigned to the purse seiner class (Fig. 2).

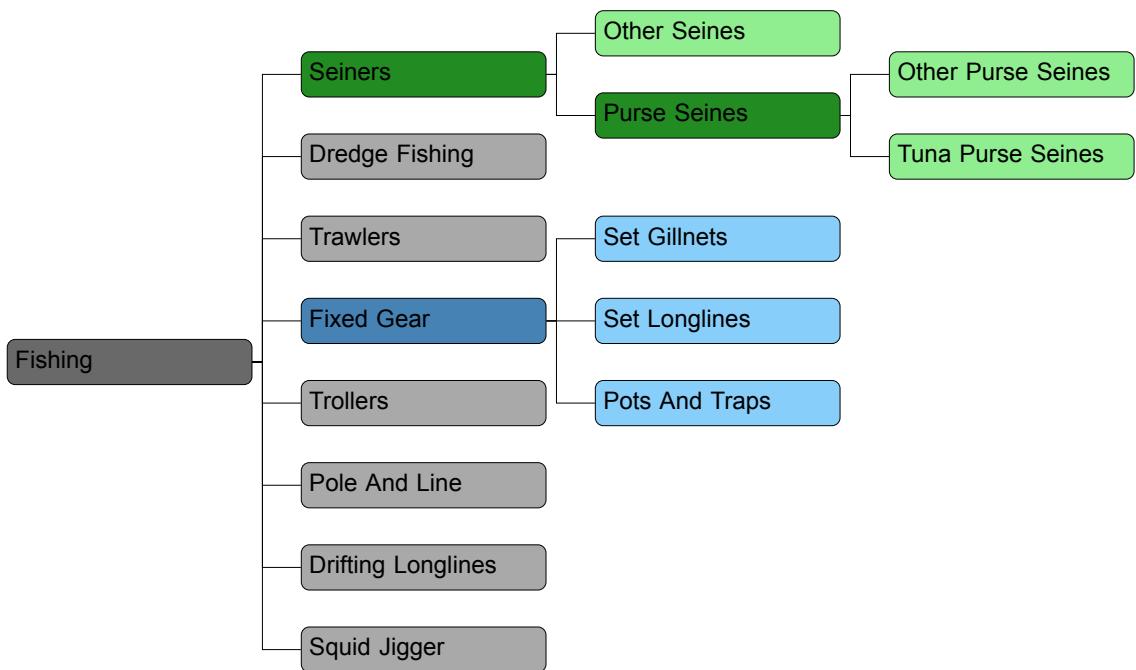


Figure 2: Hierarchy of fishing gears recognised by GFW

### 2.1.2 ICCAT catch data

Data on catches of large-pelagic species in the Mediterranean is openly available from the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). [Nominal catch data](#) was obtained for the period 2015-2023 and filtered for the major large pelagic species like tunas and billfishes (ICCAT, 2025).

### **2.1.3 Bluefin Tuna vessels**

Individual purse seine vessels that were assigned a bluefin tuna quota for 2024 were obtained from the corresponding national notices. In France, quotas are allocated and published by the *Ministère de la Transition écologique et de la Cohésion des territoires* (2024). In Spain, by the *Secretaría General de Pesca* (2024) and in Italy by the *Ministero dell'agricoltura, della sovranità alimentare e delle foreste* (2024). These countries were chosen exemplary because in the period from 2015 to 2023, they made up more than half of the total landings of BFT for all contracting parties to ICCAT, of which close to 90% are fished with purse seine nets (ICCAT, 2024b). Since the national notices did not contain the vessels MMSI number (which is the identifier used by GFW), the vessel names and registration numbers were cross-referenced with the European Fleet Register to obtain it (European Commission, Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, 2025).

## **2.2 Data filtering**

All data filtering was conducted using R (v4.4.1; R Core Team, 2024) within the RStudio environment (Posit team, 2024). The GFW dataset was first cropped and adjusted to a shapefile of the Mediterranean Sea (Fig. 1), obtained from the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM). Subsequent filtering was based on the assigned gear type and GFW registry information. Only entries with the gear type drifting longlines or tuna purse seines, and that were registered with ICCAT were retained (Fig. 3). These gear types were chosen as they are the main *metiers* involved in the exploitation of large-pelagic species in the Mediterranean. Since 2015, on average, 95% of BFT's, and 99% of albacore tunas are caught using either longlines or purse seine nets and close to 100% of swordfish catches use longlines (ICCAT, 2024b,a,c) The GFW dataset is available from the year 2012 until 2024. However, only entries from 2015 were retained, in order to

avoid masking *real* fishing dynamics with the increase in adoption of AIS devices, which only became mandatory in the EU in 2014 for all vessels > 15 m in length (European Commission, 2011). It is estimated however, that in the Mediterranean the EU fishing fleet >15 m is 100% equipped with AIS since 2018 (Taconet et al., 2019).

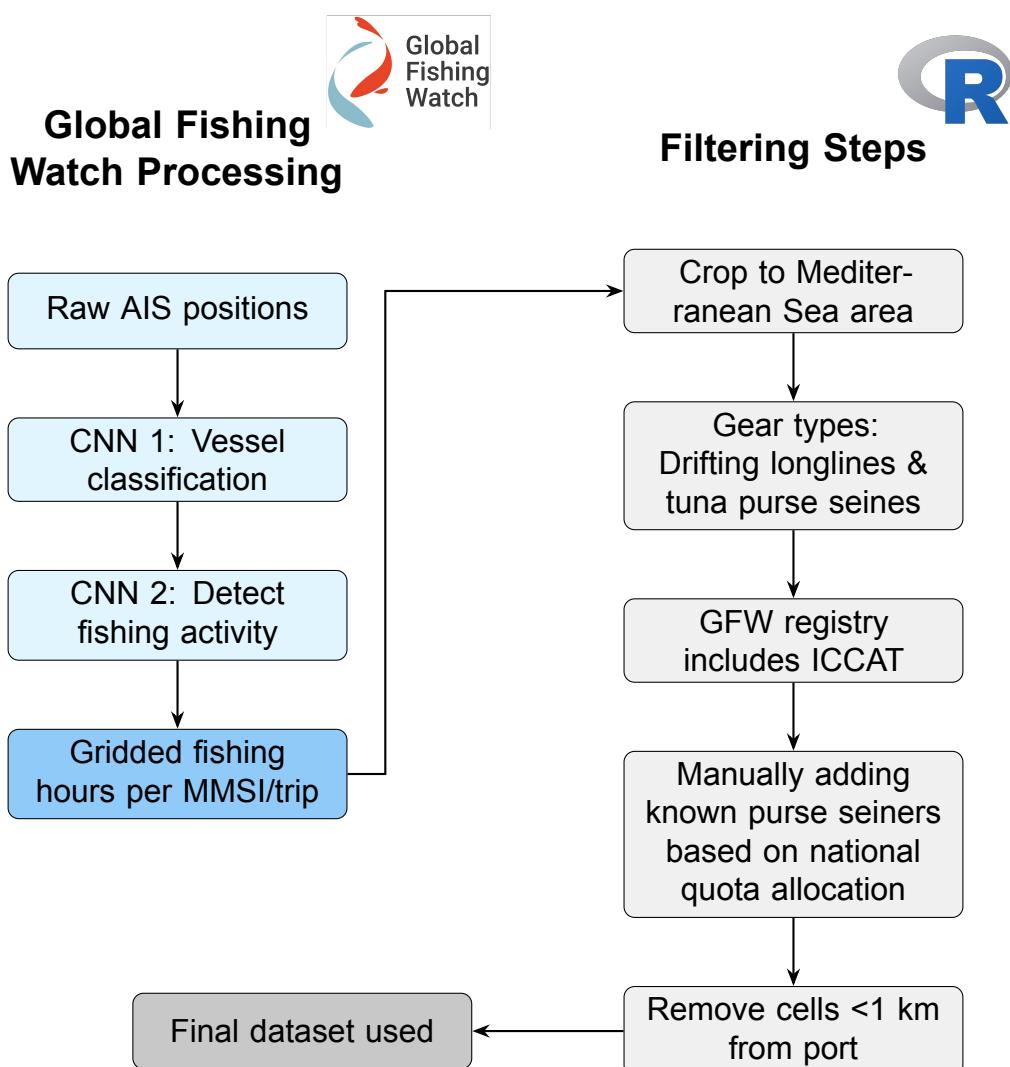


Figure 3: Global Fishing Watch data processing pipeline and filtering steps to obtain the final dataset used in this study. CNN = Convolutional Neural Network

In case of the tuna purse seiners, these filtering steps also removed some vessels which are known to be fishing for bluefin tuna based on national quota allocations

(obtained for Spain, France, and Italy). These vessels were removed by the filtering steps either because GFW assigns them a different gear type, or they are not present in the registry information from ICCAT that GFW uses. For the present analysis, these vessels were thus, manually included after comparison with the information from the national vessel registries.

Irregular vessel movement patterns occurring in or near ports can falsely resemble fishing activity and should therefore be excluded when estimating fishing effort. These movements include cruising towards the harbour to land catches or vessel maintenance (de Souza et al., 2016). Thus, to remove these areas from the analysis, the points inside the 1 km boundary around ports were removed. Distance from port was determined based on a dataset from GFW, which contains anchorages that are either known ports, or that contained at least 20 unique stationary vessels since 2012 (Fig. S1; Global Fishing Watch, 2020).

To enable seasonal analysis, each date was assigned to a season. These were defined as winter (Dec. 21 - Mar. 19), spring (Mar. 20 - Jun. 20), summer (Jun. 21 - Sep. 21), and fall (Sep. 22 - Dec. 20) based on the approximate timing of solstices and equinoxes following common definitions.

### 2.3 Data analysis

To identify persistent hotspot areas throughout the one decade study time and analyse spatio-temporal trends, the Emerging Hotspot Analysis (EHA) tool was used in ArcGIS Pro (Esri Inc., 2024). For this, multidimensional netCDF (network common data form) files of the fishing hours data were generated after curation and filtering in R, using the *terra* package (v1.8.18; Hijmans, 2025). Subsequently, this data was read in as multidimensional raster files in ArcGIS Pro, with the dimensions corresponding to longitude, latitude and time. Data was aggregated annually, using the sum of fishing hours per year for each cell. From this, a space-time

cube, which is the input required for the EHA tool, was created (Fig. 4A).

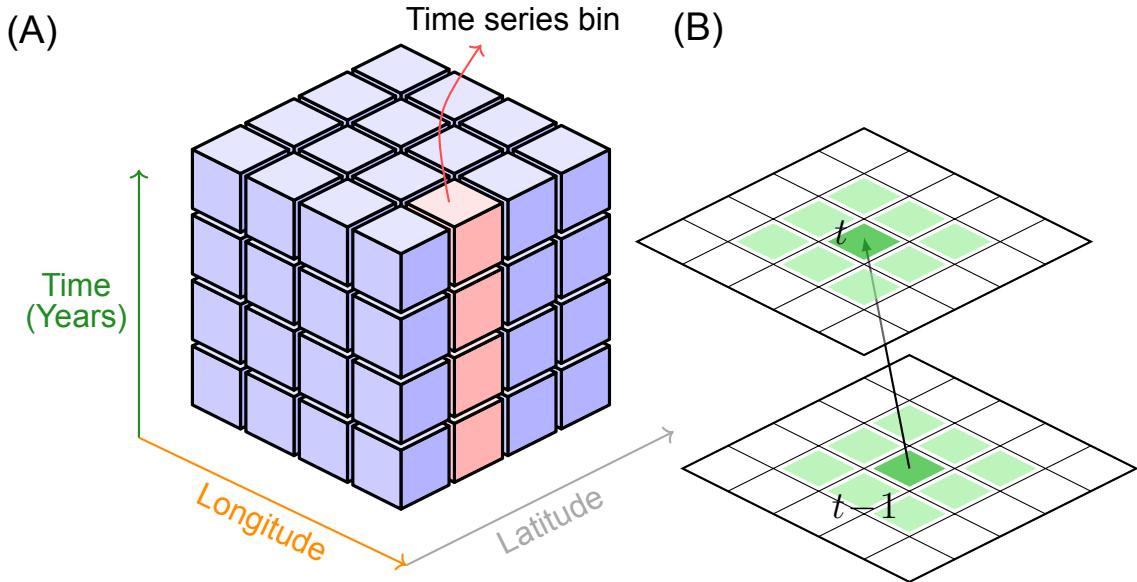


Figure 4: A) Structure of the space-time cube in ArcGIS. Each individual cube corresponds to one *neighbourhood bin*, which is the sum of all coloured cells in B. One *time series bin* corresponds to the same location over time (red). B) Conceptualization of space-time dependency as implemented in the Emerging Hotspot Analysis tool. One *neighbourhood bin* is defined as the cell itself (darkgreen) plus the cells surrounding it (lightgreen), as well as those cells in the previous time step ( $t - 1$ ).

EHA uses a combination of two statistical methods. First, the Getis-Ord  $G_i^*$  statistic to identify areas where low/high values are spatially clustered (Getis and Ord, 1992). The null hypothesis states that the sum of values of location  $i$  and its neighbours, is not significantly different from what would be expected by chance, based on all observations (neighbours are defined as shown in Fig. 4B). Thus, each *neighbourhood* contains the cell itself, plus all cells contiguous with it via edges and corners at time  $t$  and  $t - 1$ . Each neighbourhood is compared to all global observations at the current and preceding time step. Based on the neighbourhood definition, a binary spatial weight matrix is constructed, where each entry  $w_{i,j}$ , is either 1 (if features  $i$  and  $j$  are neighbours) or 0 otherwise. The  $G_i^*$  statistic is then calculated as:

$$G_i^* = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^n w_{i,j}x_j - \bar{X} \sum_{j=1}^n w_{i,j}}{S \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{j=1}^n w_{i,j}^2 - \left(\sum_{j=1}^n w_{i,j}\right)^2}{n-1}}} \quad (1)$$

where  $x_j$  is the value for feature  $j$ ,  $w_{i,j}$  is the spatial weight between feature  $i$  and  $j$ , and  $n$  is the total number of features. The terms  $\bar{X}$  and  $S$  represent the global mean and standard deviation of the attribute values, respectively, and are given by:

$$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^n x_j}{n} \quad (2)$$

$$S = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{j=1}^n x_j^2}{n} - (\bar{X})^2} \quad (3)$$

The implementation of  $G_i^*$  in the EHA tool also applies a False Discovery Rate (FDR) correction to account for multiple testing and spatial dependency in the data. This approach is preferred over methods like Bonferroni correction, which only accounts for multiple testing, as FDR is less conservative and less likely to miss true positives (Caldas de Castro and Singer, 2006). EHA is thus, a spatio-temporal extension of the  $G_i^*$  statistic, as it extends each cell not only to its spatial but also to the temporal neighbours.

Second, EHA applies the Mann-Kendall trend test to evaluate whether there is a monotonic upward or downward trend in each time series bin (Mann, 1945; Kendall and Gibbons, 1990). The non-parametric Mann-Kendall statistic  $S$  analy-

ses each time series bin. It ranks and compares each point  $x_i$  (for  $i = 1, 2, \dots, n - 1$ ) to all subsequent points  $x_j$  (for  $j = i + 1, i + 2, \dots, n$ ) and is given by (Kendall and Gibbons, 1990, Section 1.9)

$$S = \sum_{i=1}^{n-1} \sum_{j=i+1}^n \text{sign}(x_j - x_i) \quad (4)$$

Where the sign function is defined as:

$$\text{sign}(x_j - x_i) = \text{sign}(R_j - R_i) \begin{cases} 1 & x_i < x_j \\ 0 & x_i = x_j \\ -1 & x_i > x_j \end{cases} \quad (5)$$

and  $R_i$  and  $R_j$  are the ranks of observations  $x_i$  and  $x_j$  of each time series. Thus, for every time point, it assigns a 1 if the value is higher than the previous one, a 0 if the value is the same, and a -1 if the value is lower. These scores are then summed for each time series bin and under the null hypothesis of no trend, the value of  $S$  is zero. To assess the significance of  $S$ , the variance  $V_0^*$  can be calculated as (Kendall and Gibbons, 1990, Section 4.9)

$$V_0^*(S) = n(n - 1)(2n + 5)/18 - \sum_{j=1}^m t_j(t_j - 1)(2t_j + 5)/18 \quad (6)$$

where  $n$  is the total number of observations, and  $m$  the number of groups with tied ranks, each with  $t_j$  tied observations.

# **3 Results**

## **3.1 Cumulative apparent fishing hours**

A total of 213 unique longliners and purse seiners were recorded for 2015-2024. These vessels together accounted for an average of 122 760 hours per year, with an average of 576 hours per vessel per year. Areas that show the highest effort throughout the study time include the Mediterranean coast of Spain, around Sardinia and Sicily, south of Malta, the Adriatic, and south of Cyprus (Fig. 5A). Areas with high effort generally also show the lowest coefficient of variation (Fig. 5B). There does not appear to be any fishing activity based on AIS around the African Mediterranean coast (Fig. 5).

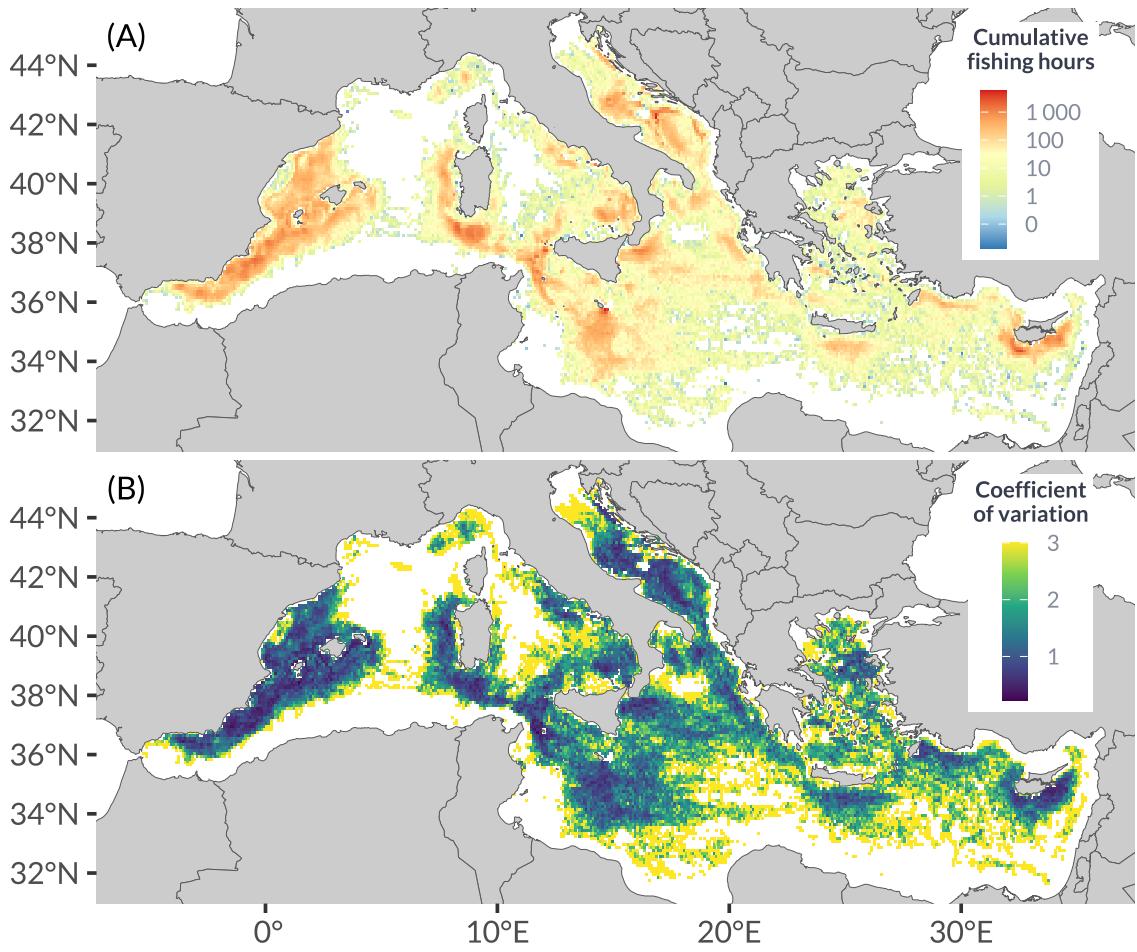


Figure 5: Summary statistics for both longliners and purse-seiners. A) Cumulative fishing hours in the Mediterranean (2015-2024). Colors are on a log-scale. B) Coefficient of variation between years (standard deviation divided by mean) for each cell.

### 3.2 Fishing hotspots and high risk areas

Numerous persistent longline hotspot areas were identified throughout the Mediterranean including the southern coast of Spain, south of Sardinia, around Sicily and Malta, as well as south of Cyprus (Fig. 6A). These hotspots show however, differing trends. Fishing hours in the south of Malta appear to be increasing throughout, with a similar trend of increase in the Adriatic Sea. Other areas that appear to be consistent hotspots, like the east of Sicily, show a decreasing trend (Fig. 6B).

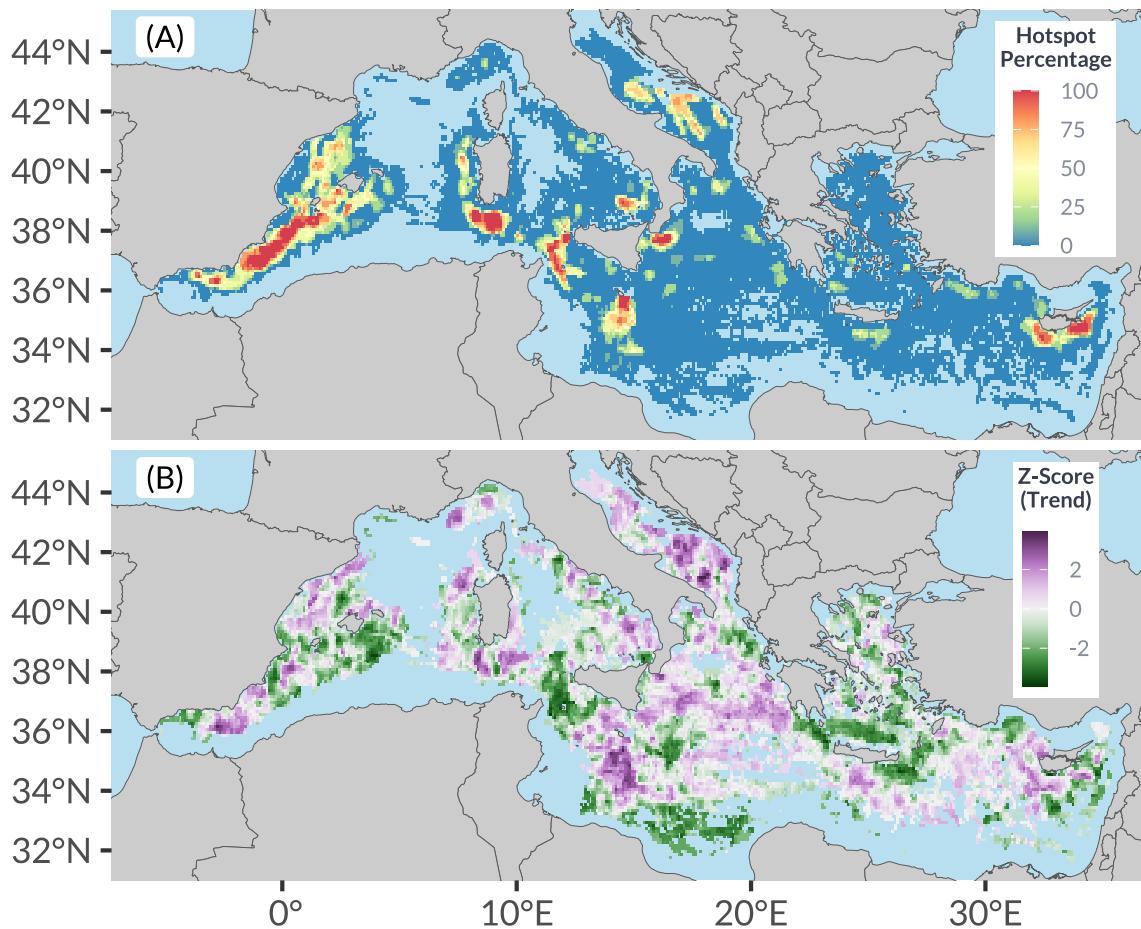


Figure 6: Hotspot percentage and trend scores for longliners in the Mediterranean. The percentage reflects the years in which a given cell was a hotspot based on the Getis-Ord  $Gi^*$  statistic. The Z-score is derived from the Mann-Kendall statistic.

Purse seine hotspots appear persistent around the Balearic Islands, in the Adriatic Sea, and along the Calabrian coast in Italy (Fig. 7A). Trends in these areas show a clear increase around Ibiza and in the central Adriatic, while areas around the coast in the Adriatic show a decrease (Fig. 7B). The hotspot area along Calabria shows no clear trend.

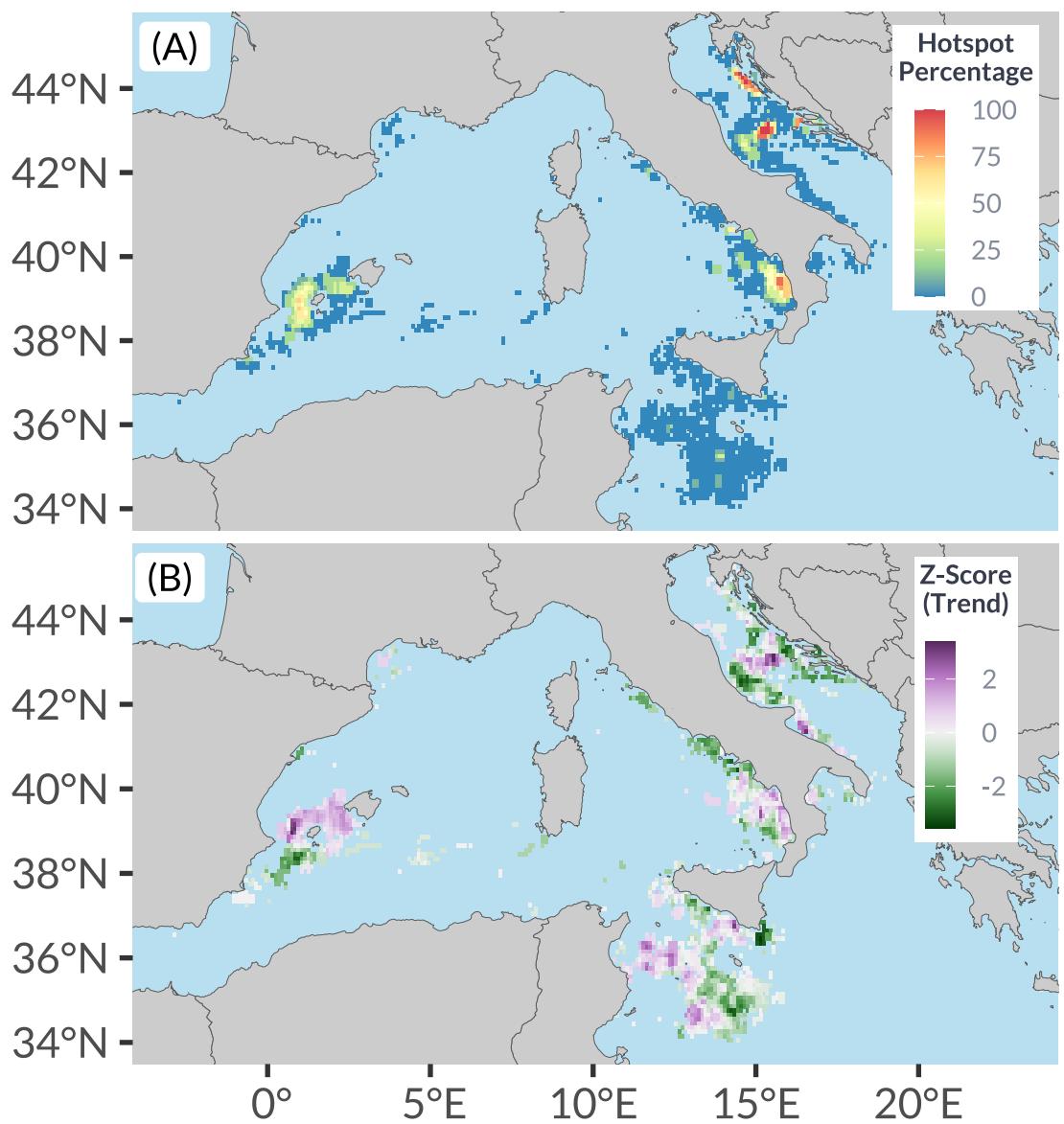


Figure 7: Hotspot percentage and trend scores for purse seiners in the Mediterranean. The percentage reflects the years in which a given cell was a hotspot based on the Getis-Ord  $Gi^*$  statistic. The Z-score is derived from the Mann-Kendall statistic.

### **3.3 Temporal changes**

Longline fishing hours show a clear seasonal trend where activity is highest during warmer months (mainly in the summer) and lowest in the colder months around winter (Fig. 8A). Some areas show high effort earlier in the season in spring (for example south of Malta) and others are more persistent later in the season in fall (for instance around Ibiza). The time series show a similar seasonal trend, although the intensity varies between years, and it appears that the longline season is expanding between years (Fig. 8B). The highest annual longline fishing hours throughout the study time were recorded for 2022 and the lowest for 2015 (Tab. 1).

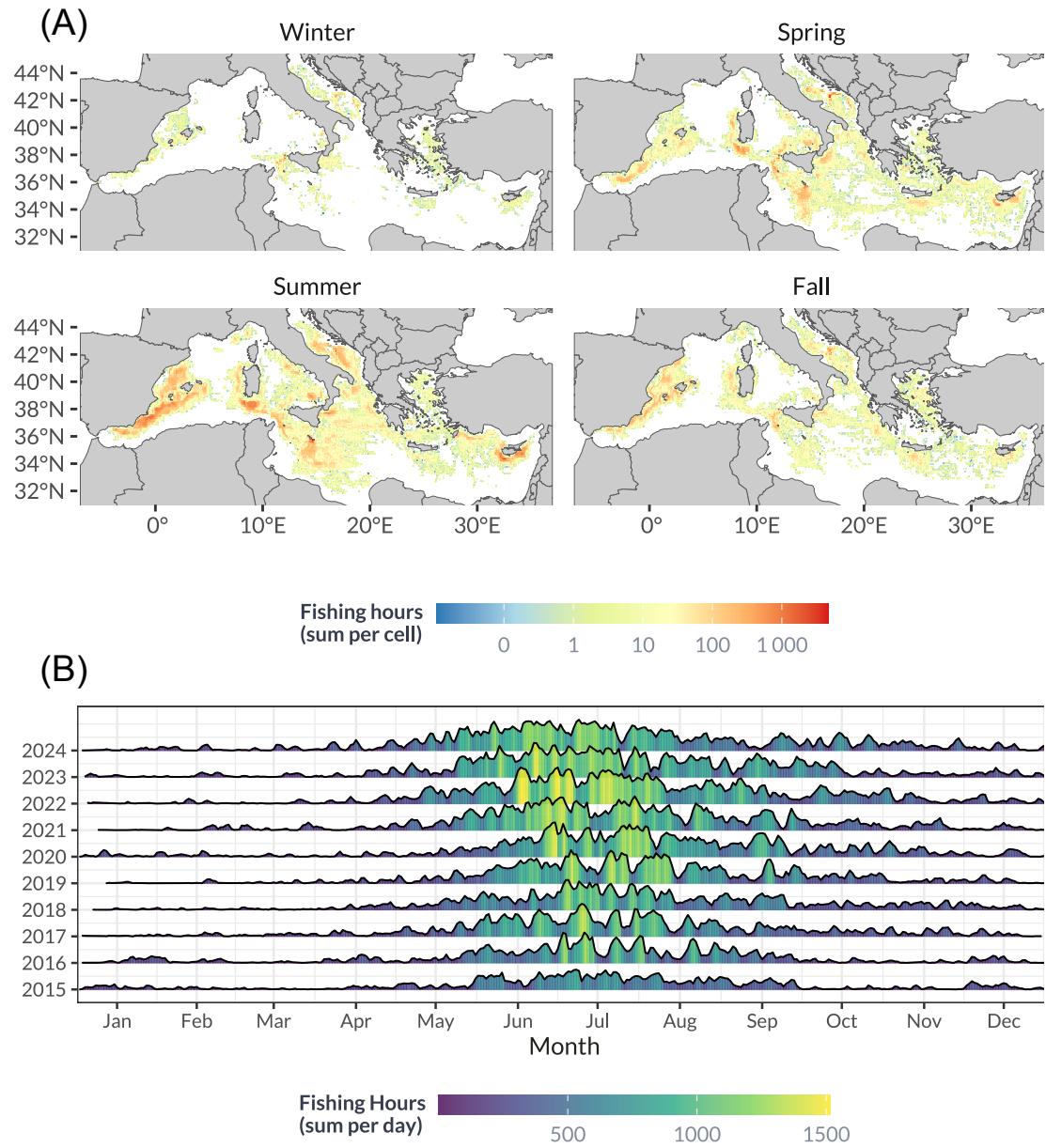


Figure 8: Temporal changes in longline fishing hours. A) Spatial differences between seasons. Hours are summed per season and cell and colour is on a log-scale. Seasons are defined based on calendar dates: winter (Dec 21 - Mar 19), spring (Mar 20 - Jun 20), summer (Jun 21 - Sep 21), and fall (Sep 22 - Dec 20). B) Time series of fishing hours, summed per year and day.

Regarding the purse seine fleet, fishing hours show a very pronounced seasonal trend with a peak in spring (Fig. 9). The core areas of the fishery during spring are the Balearic Islands, along the coast of Calabria (south-west Italy), and the central

Table 1: Annual sum of fishing hours for purse seiners and longliners.

Year	Fishing hours	
	Purse seiners	Longliners
2015	4,193	71,846
2016	5,313	89,136
2017	5,901	107,345
2018	6,128	106,130
2019	5,931	113,261
2020	5,636	124,927
2021	5,706	133,361
2022	5,675	149,059
2023	5,085	139,068
2024	6,661	137,406

Adriatic. In the Adriatic, there appears to be purse seine activity throughout the whole year (Fig. 9A). The purse seine season for large-pelagic species is limited to the months of May and June and is consistent between years (Fig. 9B). Highest annual fishing hours for purse seiners were recorded in 2024 and the lowest in 2015 (Tab. 1).

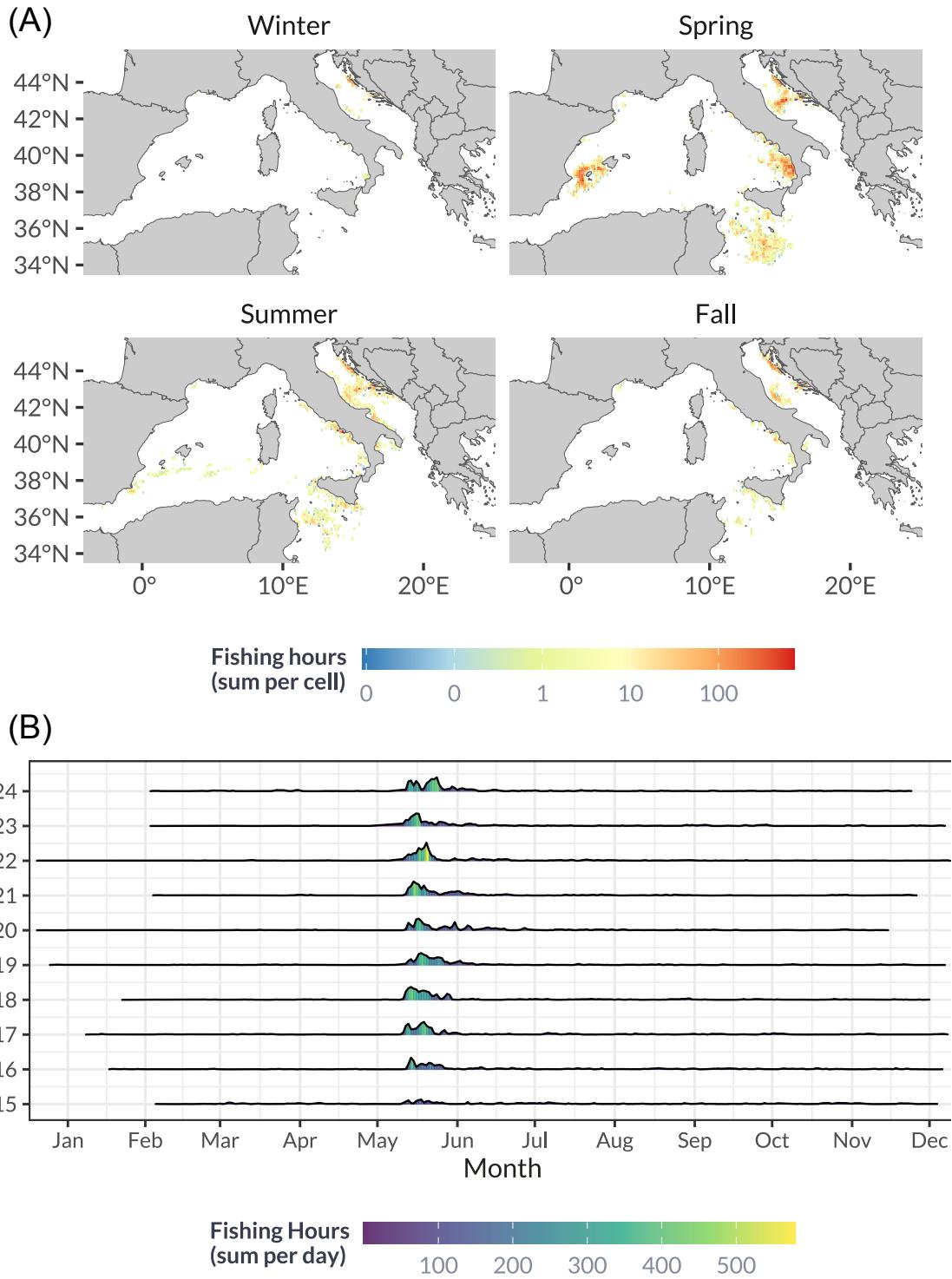


Figure 9: Temporal changes in purse seine fishing hours. A) Spatial differences between seasons. Seasons are defined based on calendar dates: winter (Dec 21 - Mar 19), spring (Mar 20 - Jun 20), summer (Jun 21 - Sep 21), and fall (Sep 22 - Dec 20). Hours are summed per season and cell and colour is on a log-scale. B) Time series of fishing hours, summed per year and day.

### 3.4 Flag countries

Vessels were flagged to a total of 10 countries and the majority of vessels analysed were longliners (Tab. 2; see Fig. S2 and S3 for a spatial overview by country). Italy shows the highest amount of both purse seiners and longliners identified in the GFW data.

Table 2: Number of vessels by country and gear type in 2024 from our detections compared to vessels with drifting longlines currently registered with the GFCM and tuna purse seine vessels currently registered with ICCAT. ‘–’ indicates no recorded vessels for that gear. PS = purse seiners, LL = longliners

Country	Detected PS	Reg. PS	% PS	Detected LL	Reg. LL	% LL
Albania	–	2	0.0%	–	–	–
Algeria	3	39	7.7%	–	–	–
EU-Croatia	2	3	66.7%	–	–	–
EU-Cyprus	–	1	0.0%	14	15	93.3%
Egypt	–	2	0.0%	–	–	–
EU-France	13	21	61.9%	–	4	0.0%
EU-Greece	–	–	–	8	24	33.3%
EU-Italy	16	19	84.2%	60	83	72.3%
EU-Malta	–	2	0.0%	19	17	111.8%
Libya	–	15	0.0%	–	–	–
Morocco	1	5	20.0%	–	–	–
EU-Spain	5	7	71.4%	22	30	73.3%
Tunisia	–	59	0.0%	–	–	–
Turkey	–	36	0.0%	–	–	–
<b>Total / Mean</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>30.1%</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>58.6%</b>

Most regions with high fishing activity are fishing grounds shared by multiple countries (Fig. 10). Regions with high overlap between flag countries for longliners include the Balearic Islands, south of Crete, and south of Malta, which are also areas with high fishing hours (Fig. 5A). For purse seiners, fishing generally is more concentrated and thus, overlap is also higher, as seen in the core fishing areas of the Balearic Islands and south of Malta (Fig. 10).

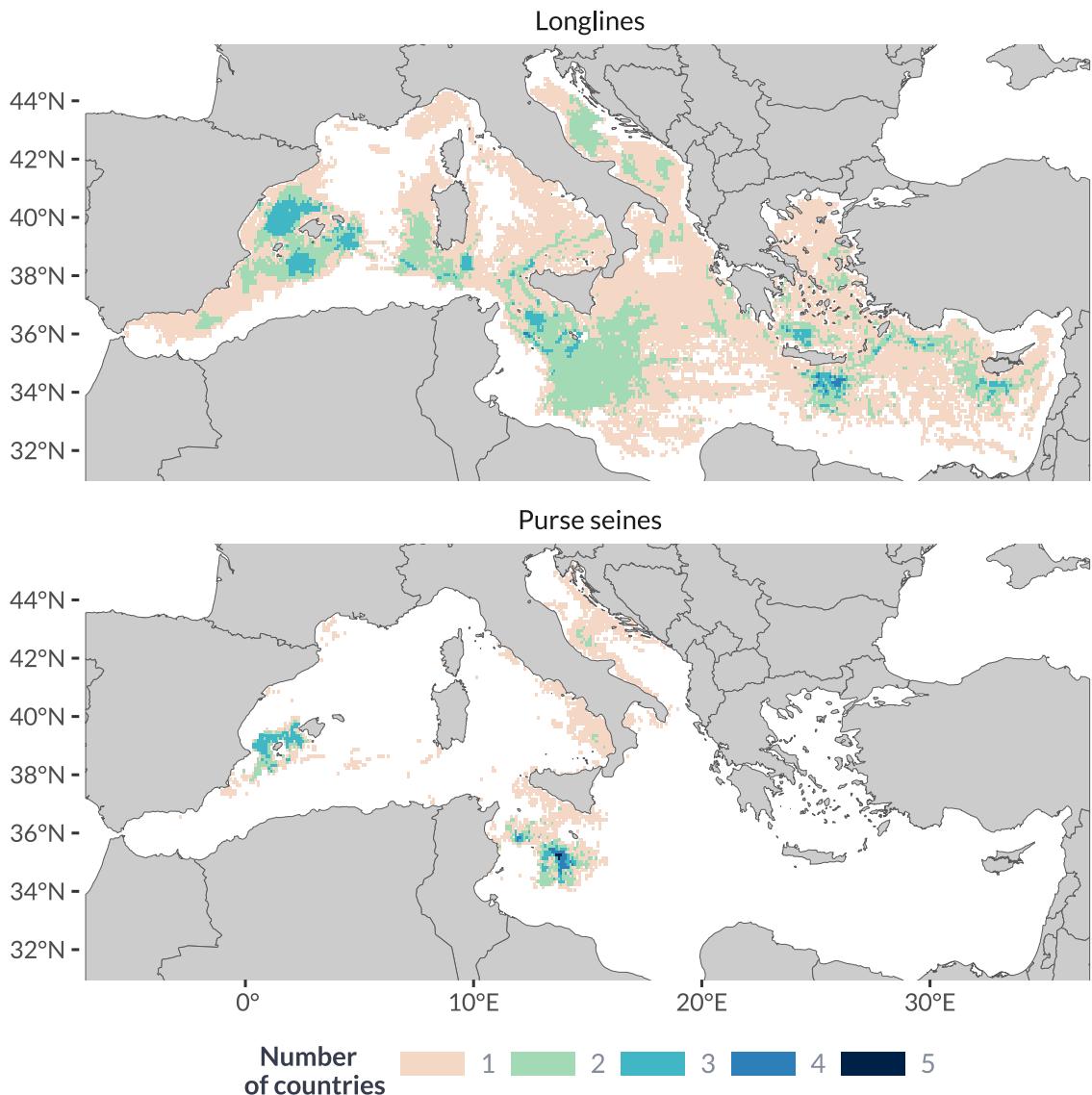


Figure 10: Number of countries fishing per cell for longliners and purse seiners between 2015-2024.

A comparison of fishing hours from the GFW data with catch data from ICCAT shows that AIS under-represents fishing activity by non-EU countries relative to EU countries (Fig. 11). Even though, many non-EU countries account for a substantial share of the total reported catches. Notably, AIS also does not capture any French longline vessels.

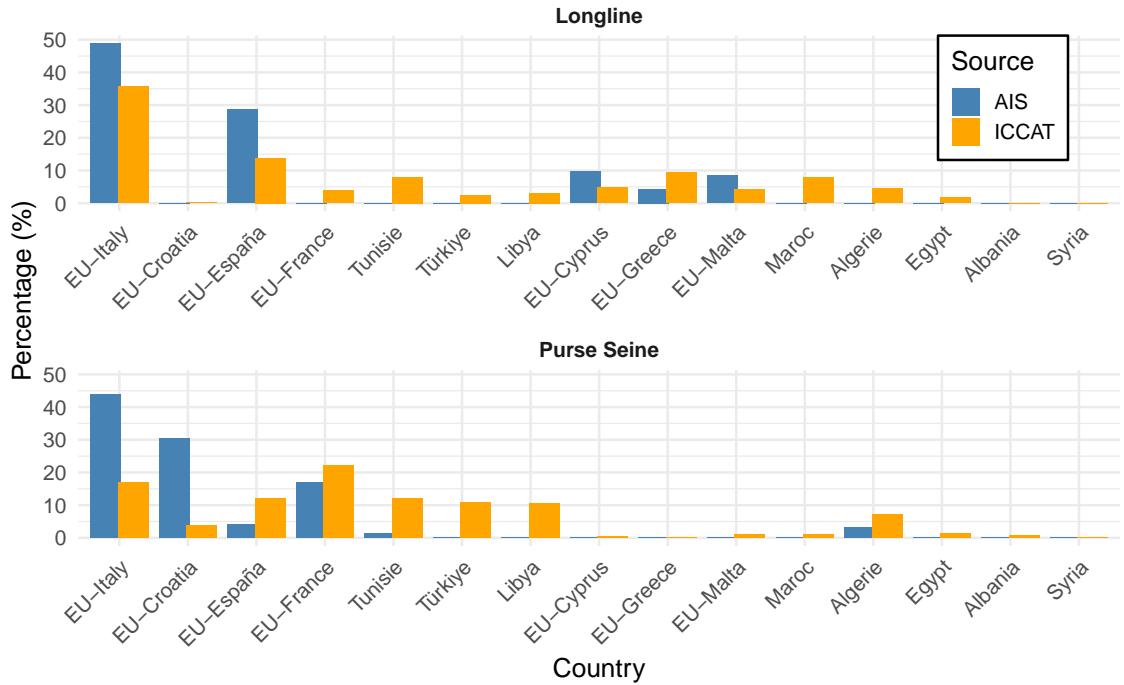


Figure 11: Comparison of relative percentages between GFW AIS data and ICCAT catch data. AIS percentages are relative to the total fishing hours between all countries. ICCAT percentages are relative to the total weight of catches between all countries.

### 3.5 Depth and distance to port

The relationship between the cumulative proportion of fishing hours and the distance to port reveals that most fishing activity of both gear types is concentrated less than 100 km from the closest port (Fig. 12A). The trend for the depth is different between gear types, where most purse seine fishing occurs at shallower depths (> 1000 m; 50% above 500 m depth) and longline fishing takes place over much greater depth ranges (Fig. 12B; 50% above 1600 m depth).

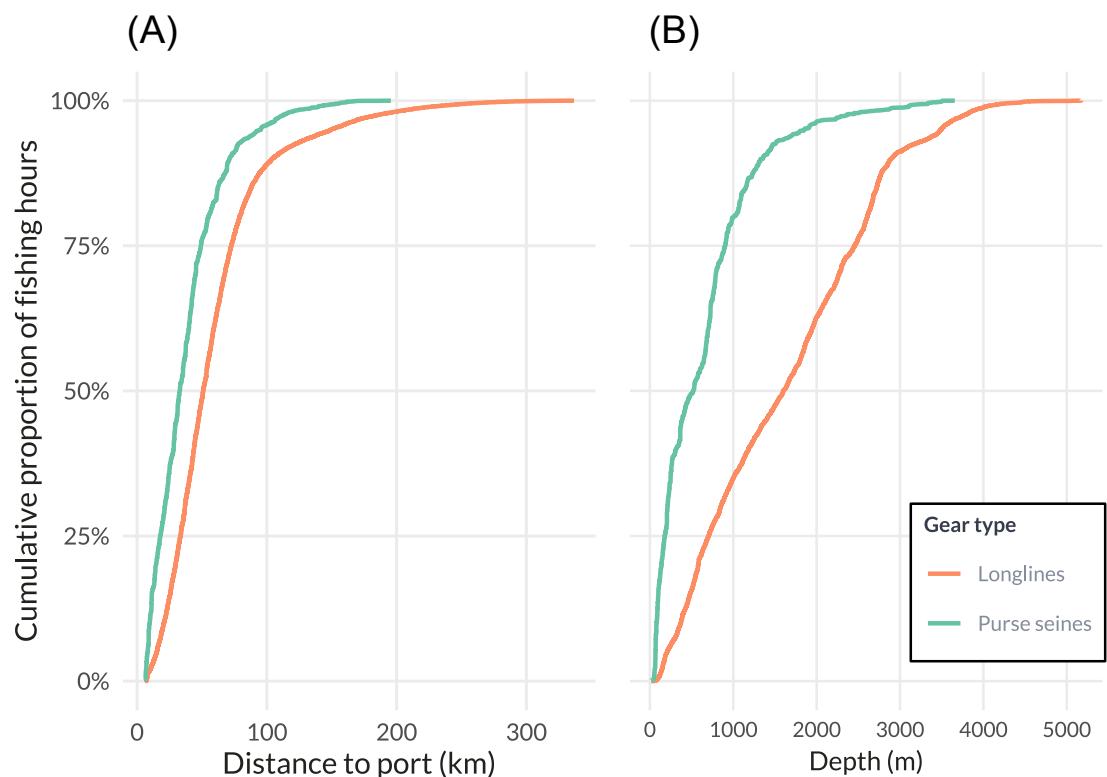


Figure 12: Cumulative proportion of fishing hours with A) Distance to port and B) Depth.

## 4 Discussion

Our analysis of fishing activity targetting LPF in the Mediterranean revealed that a total of 213 unique longline and purse seine vessels that accounted for an average of over 120 000 fishing hours annually, with concentrated effort along the Spanish Mediterranean coast, Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, the Adriatic, and around Cyprus. These areas correspond to some of the main known spawning and feeding grounds of LPF in the Mediterranean. Supporting this, both fleets also exhibited strong seasonal patterns, with longline fishing peaking in summer and purse seine fishing concentrated in spring driven by the migration towards spawning grounds. Most fishing activity occurred within 100 km of ports, with purse seiners operating in shallower waters compared to the broader depth range of longliners. Monitoring the depth or distance to port of individual fleets could provide insights into potential shifts in distribution related to climate change for example. Notably, the majority of vessels detected by AIS were flagged to EU countries, especially Italy, and AIS data suggested an under-representation of non-EU fishing activity when compared to official catch and vessel records from ICCAT and GFCM.

### 4.1 Main risk areas (hotspots)

Fishing hotspots and thus, the main risk areas for LPF, aligned with their known aggregation sites, particularly around the Balearic Islands, the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Adriatic Sea, and off the coasts of Cyprus and Malta. These regions overlap with key spawning and feeding areas identified in previous studies.

For large BFT ( $> 150$  kg), spawning migrations from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean drive intense seasonal purse seine activity when they enter the Mediterranean around mid-May and remain until mid-July to spawn (Fromentin and Lopuszanski, 2013). There is however, also individuals that stay resident in the Mediterranean the whole year-round. This has been documented for both the

eastern and western Mediterranean, and these resident individuals are mostly smaller (Cermeño et al., 2015; Heinisch et al., 2008). BFT in the Mediterranean are targetted by both drifting longlines and purse seines. The purse seine hotspots identified around the Balearic Islands and in the Tyrrhenian Sea coincide with known spawning grounds (Medina, 2020). Interestingly, the spawning area in the Strait of Sicily was not consistently identified as a hotspot, likely because of a lack in AIS adoption in non-EU countries that fish there.

The Adriatic Sea appeared to be the most consistent purse seine hotspot identified in our study and is frequented by purse seiners from Italy and Croatia (Fig. 7 and S3). Purse seine activity occurred here all in all seasons particularly by the Croatian fleet (Fig. 9 and S3). This might be explained by the presence of smaller individuals in this region throughout the whole year due to the fact that Croatia and Italy are the only countries permitted to catch individuals < 30 kg for the use in tuna farms. Although the season is officially restricted from 15 May until 15 July (ICCAT, 2018), Croatia has declared purse seine catches outside this window in our study period (Fig. S4).

The spawning of BFT in the Mediterranean has been shown to be highly reliant on the position of a frontal region where newly arrived, less saline Atlantic water meets more saline, resident Mediterranean waters around the Balearic Islands (Reglero et al., 2012). The position of this front is however, variable between years (Balbín et al., 2014). The centroid of the purse seine hotspots in which the individuals migrating from the Atlantic to spawn are targetted, should thus follow the position of this front between years. In the present analysis we were able to show that the location of fishing in this hotspot changes between years and following the variable front is a possible explanation for this.

Swordfish show more complex migration patterns, but spawning migration is linked to thermal fronts, particularly the 24°C isotherm (Palko et al., 1981; Arocha, 2007). Corresponding to this, they spawn from June to August in areas west of the

Balearic Islands until the Strait of Gibraltar, in the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Strait of Messina, the Levantine Sea, and the Gulf of Taranto in the Ionian Sea (see Fig. 5 in Arocha, 2007). They are targeted mainly by the longline fleet and corresponding hotspots overlapped closely with these spawning areas, particularly in the western Mediterranean and the Tyrrhenian region.

One critical aspect of the swordfish fisheries in the Mediterranean is the differential habitat use of juveniles and adults where juveniles are more associated to coastal waters, and adults more to deeper, pelagic waters (Damalas and and, 2014). This distinction has important implications for their ecology but also fisheries management. Juvenile catch rates in the Mediterranean have been shown to be at high level before a minimum size of 100 cm lower jaw fork length was established in 2017 through ICCAT Regulation 16-05 (Di Natale et al., 2002; Mauricio, 2020). This minimum size limit has however, led to an increase in discards, as many caught individuals fall below the threshold which in turn means that fishers need to exert more effort to reach quotas, as these undersized catches are often discarded (García-Barcelona et al., 2020). Monitoring the fine-scale spatio-temporal extent of these fisheries could thus, prove as a valuable tool in informing spatial or seasonal closures and assessing compliance where they are already in place. The swordfish stock in the Mediterranean is currently still considered overfished but a seasonal closure has been implemented from January to the end of March that also extends to the albacore fleet during October and November [ICCAT Rec 16-05].

Monitoring changes in the depth and season at which the swordfish fishery operates, could also indicate changes in the type of longline used, as different longlines are used at different depths and at different times of the season (see Barcelona, Salvador García et al. (2010) for a full overview of longlines used by the Spanish fleet).

Probably due to the usage of different longlines that target different species that

are all analysed together for our analysis, our study does not show clear trends in most hotspots and is limited in linking changes inside each longline hotspot to species specific characteristic (dynamic) habitats, like we were able to do for the purse seine hotspot around the Balearic Islands.

The clear seasonality of the purse seine fleet can be attributed to the timing of BFT migration into the Mediterranean and the implemented TAC's which are reached in a very short amount of time. The longline season appears to be expanding over time which could be related to temperatures being higher for longer due to climate change or an increase in fishing activity is necessary to reach the TAC's. In general however, there are no large-scale shifts in fishing grounds and they stay mostly in similar areas from 2015 until 2024. This finding shows that large variation in spawning grounds is rare for the LPF targetted by the gears analysed here. In case of the longline fleet, it is however not possible to differentiate between types of longlines and target species which does not allow us to make fine-scale assessments of changes in this fleet.

Capture as non-target species in Mediterranean longline fisheries is a concern for seabirds, marine mammals, pelagic elasmobranchs, and sea turtles (Barcelona, Salvador García et al., 2010; Macías López et al., 2012; Kleitou et al., 2017; Báez et al., 2013; Carpentieri et al., 2021). Drifting longlines are estimated to be responsible for the bycatch of for example about 27 000 individual sea turtles annually in the Mediterranean alone (Carpentieri et al., 2021). The same authors also identified the most important parameters when investigating capture rates of loggerhead turtles to be fishing effort, including detailed information on the métier and the time spent fishing. The longline hotspots that were identified in our analysis, show overlap with estimates of high relative abundance of loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) most notably in the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Baleric Islands, and south of Malta (DiMatteo et al., 2022; Burgess et al., 2010). Burgess et al. (2010) analysed the longline fishery around Malta and reported that *Caretta caretta* makes

up 40% of the total catch in terms of individual animals. Considering that this area sees some of the highest longline activity identified in this study and shows an increasing trend, closer monitoring on bycatch rates is necessary. Although there appear to be recent advances in reducing bycatch of turtles for example in Spain, these are driven by changes in métier (mainly due to deeper sets that sink faster) and not through targetted management (Báez et al., 2019). Future economically driven changes in métier could thus, easily reverse this decrease. The results and methodology employed here, could be a starting point to identify high risk areas overlapping with important turtle habitat, to better target the deployment of onboard observers. This is just an example for one species group, but further studies could look into fine-scale spatial overlap between non-target species and longlines, to better estimate the risk for specific species groups.

A significant number of vessels are likely to be missed due to inconsistencies and poor maintenance of vessel registries. Improving the quality of these registries is essential to better identify and include vessels in future analyses. Furthermore, the lack of historic vessel authorization data in a downloadable format limits retrospective analyses at the level of individual vessels. Since 2018, the usage of VMS is mandated by ICCAT for fishing vessels above 15 m length overall LOA that are authorized to fish in waters beyond their flag countries jurisdiction, and for all fishing vessels above 24 m LOA. Additionally, all bluefin tuna vessels authorized for fishing by ICCAT are required to use VMS and share their data with ICCAT. This data is however, not made publicy due to concerns about privacy. Incorporating this information into stock assessments and making it publicly available could however greatly aid in increasing the transparency of these fisheries that are often linked to Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing (ICCAT, 2024b) (need more citations).

## 4.2 Data caveats

AIS technology was not designed for the estimation of fishing effort and thus, there are some persistent challenges in deriving fishing effort from these tracking devices. First, there are differences in the coverage of different AIS receivers. Global Fishing Watch receives raw AIS signals from terrestrial receivers, satellite receivers, and *Dynamic AIS*, which are receivers onboard thousands of large vessels that travel along major shipping routes and relay AIS signals they receive to satellites. Reception of these signals is however, not homogenous in all places, especially in areas with high vessel density like the Mediterranean. Additionally, there have been changes in the AIS sources that underlie the calculation of fishing hours from GFW throughout our study period. This could potentially mask real variation in fishing hours and lead to an apparent increase in activity while in reality only coverage increased. This is the reason why time series derived from this data is difficult to analyse, however GFW is currently working on an additional dataset that quantifies AIS coverage for each vessels' trip which would enable a more detailed, quantitative analysis of differences in fishing activity over time. Second, AIS is biased towards larger vessels ( $> 15$  m) and towards countries in which this technology is mandatory as shown in this study. This is especially relevant in the Mediterranean, as the majority of fishing vessels belong to the small-scale fleet and an important part of Total Allowable Catches are held by non-EU countries. French longliners for example operate in the Gulf of Lions but we were not able to detect any French longline vessel through AIS, likely because they are  $< 15$  m (Farrugio, 2013). Third, The fishing detection model used by GFW is a general model that analyses different métiers and even different gear types under the same *effort* metric which is fishing hours. These hours include multiple fishing-related activities. This can be for example, setting gear, soak time, gear hauling but also searching for fish. The two main gear types in our study usually use dif-

ferent measures of effort. For pelagic longlines for example the number of hooks or hauls and for tuna purse seines for instance the number of sets. This can result in overestimation of fishing hours as recently demonstrated by Hintzen et al. (2025). The authors showed that GFW data can overestimate the real time spent fishing by between 30% and 380% but also that the geographic position of hauls was identical based on self-sampling data from two pelagic trawling fleets. This illustrates that the results of our studies should not be interpreted as an absolute measure of fishing effort exerted but rather as a relative quantitative measure that is indicative of broad-scale trends especially considering the large time frame for which data was analysed. Fourth, AIS is not able to detect different métiers as small changes in gear type for example can mean that a different species is being targetted. This is one of the limitations here, as all three LPF are targetted by different types of longlines, but we are not able to differentiate between the fishing hours of each métier based on AIS. Further research could improve this for example through combining logbook data on catches with AIS data to estimate catch per unit effort (CPUE), allowing a more accurate evaluation of fishing operations and thus, resource abundance (Niu et al., 2024).

The results of this study demonstrate the broad distribution of fishing in almost the whole Mediterranean Sea and can contribute to the sustainable exploitation of migratory LPF. The methods used here could be combined with other data like log books to get a more detailed information on changes in relative abundance of target species. This information would provide more detailed information to management which is necessary for the implementation of ecosystem-based management. The areas we identified as fishing hotspots and potentially also the migratory paths between them could be prime targets for management for example to implement seasonal or spatial closures. Relano and Pauly (2022b) proposed to protect migratory LPF through *Blue Corridors*, essentially protected areas along the species' migratory pathways. Our findings could help in identifying

these areas. Mapping of the intensity of fishing does also have direct implications for conservation, as bycatch rates can be quite high for pelagic longliners in the Mediterranean.

## 5 Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive, spatially explicit assessment of LPF fisheries in the Mediterranean using AIS data from 2015 to 2024. By linking fishing effort to known ecological features such as spawning grounds and migratory pathways, it offers valuable insights for spatial management and conservation. While spatial distributions have remained broadly consistent, evolving patterns in timing, gear depth, and fleet composition suggest that fisheries are responding to both regulatory and environmental pressures. Our results underscore the importance of integrating fine-scale spatial data into fisheries management frameworks to enhance resilience, sustainability, and bycatch mitigation in a rapidly changing ocean.

## **6 Acknowledgements**

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# A Supplementary Material

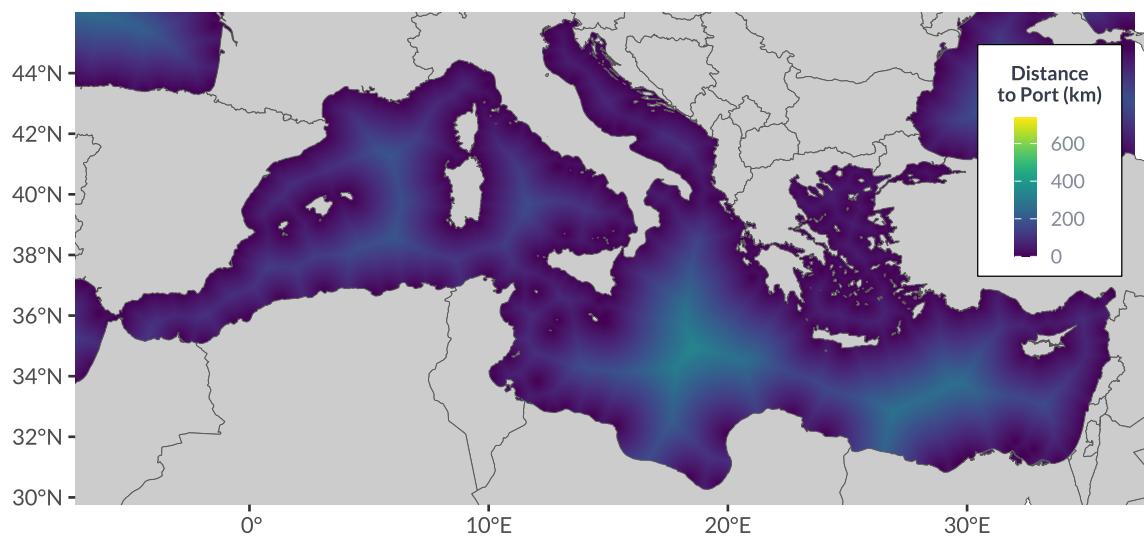


Figure S1: Distance to port in km throughout the Mediterranean.

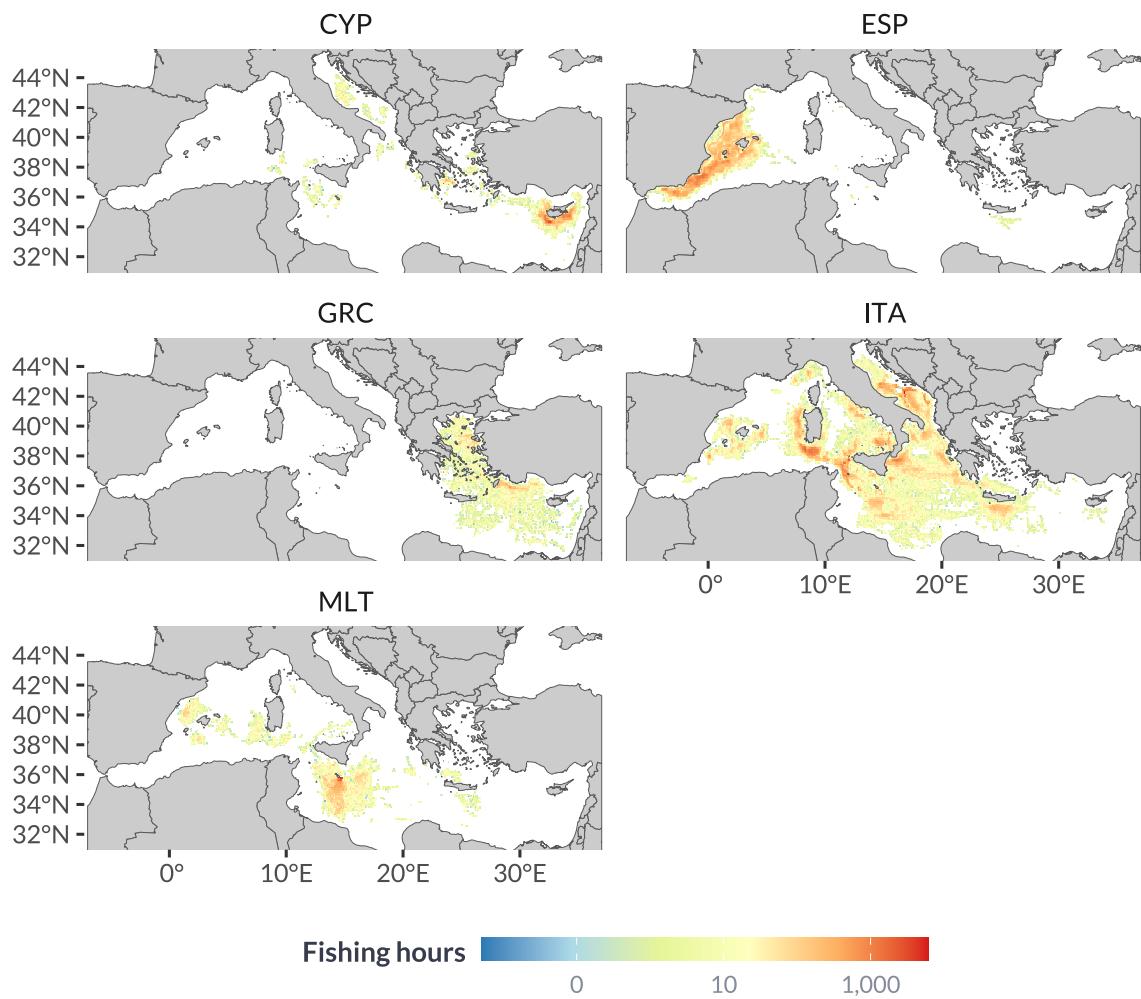


Figure S2: Sum of longline fishing hours per flag country (2015-2024). CYP = Cyprus; ESP = Spain, GRC = Greece, ITA = Italy, MLT = Malta

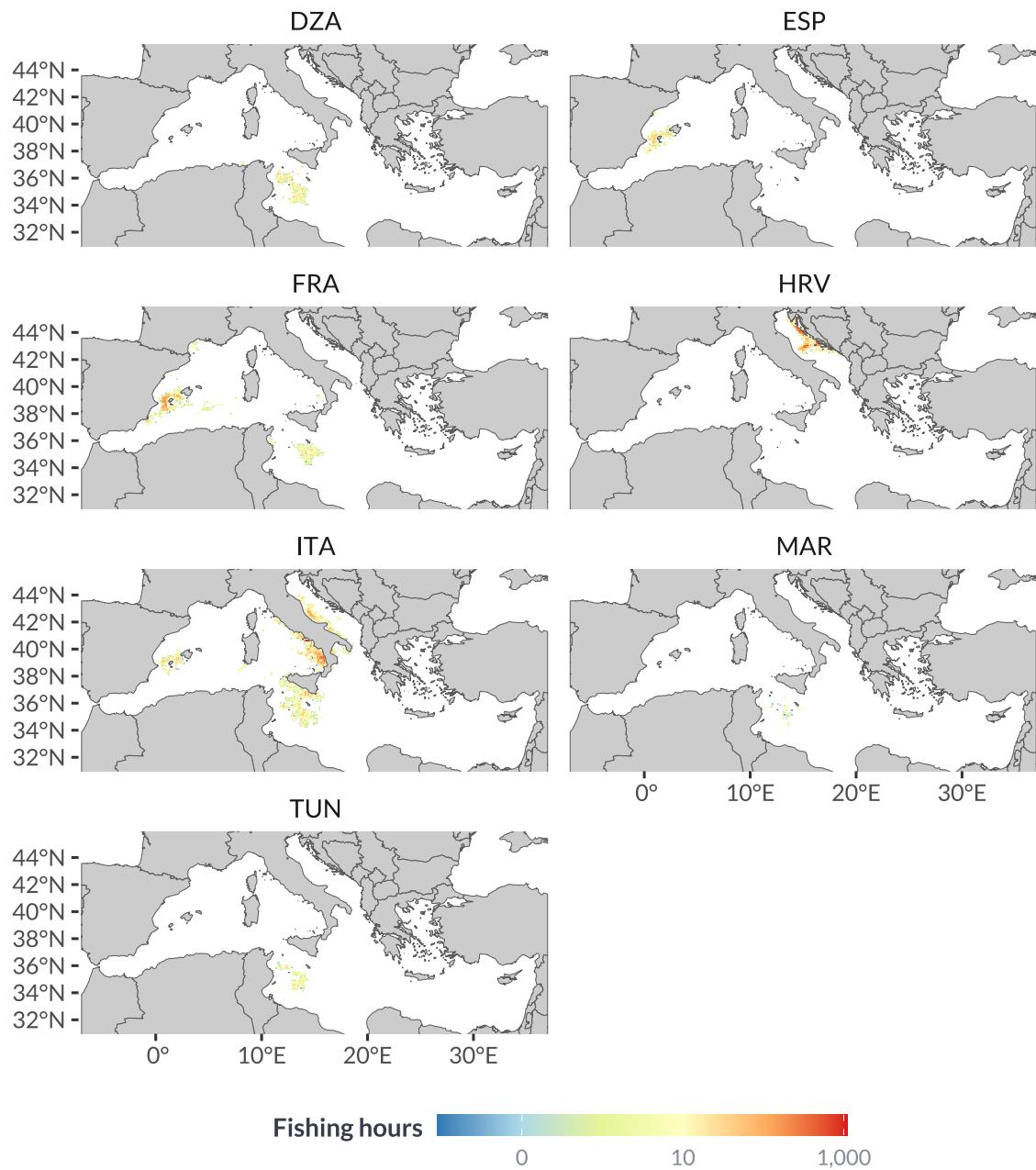


Figure S3: Sum of purse seine fishing hours per flag country (2015-2024). DZA = Algeria, ESP = Spain, FRA = France, HRV = Croatia, ITA = Italy, MAR = Morocco, TUN = Tunisia.

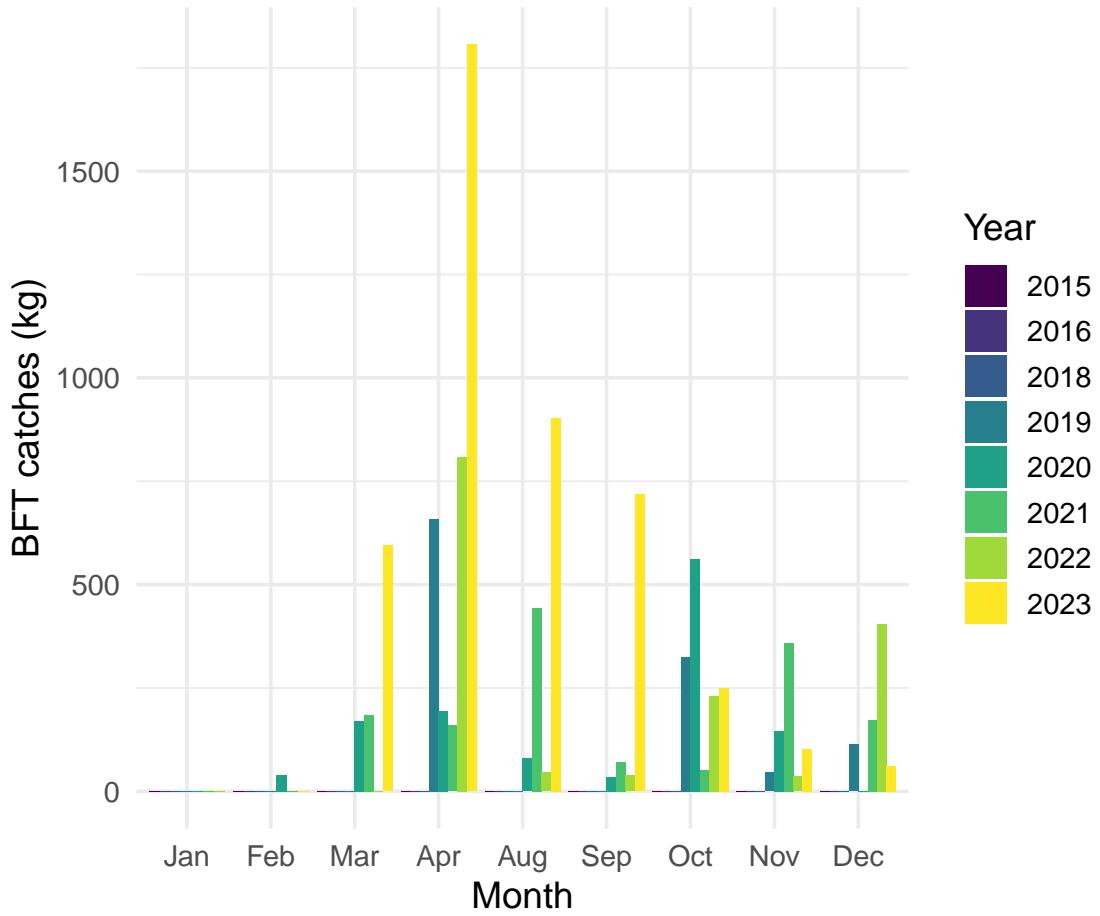


Figure S4: Reported bluefin tuna (BFT) purse seine catches of Croatia. May, June, and July were excluded as they are orders of magnitude higher and did not allow for graphic comparison between months with lower activity.

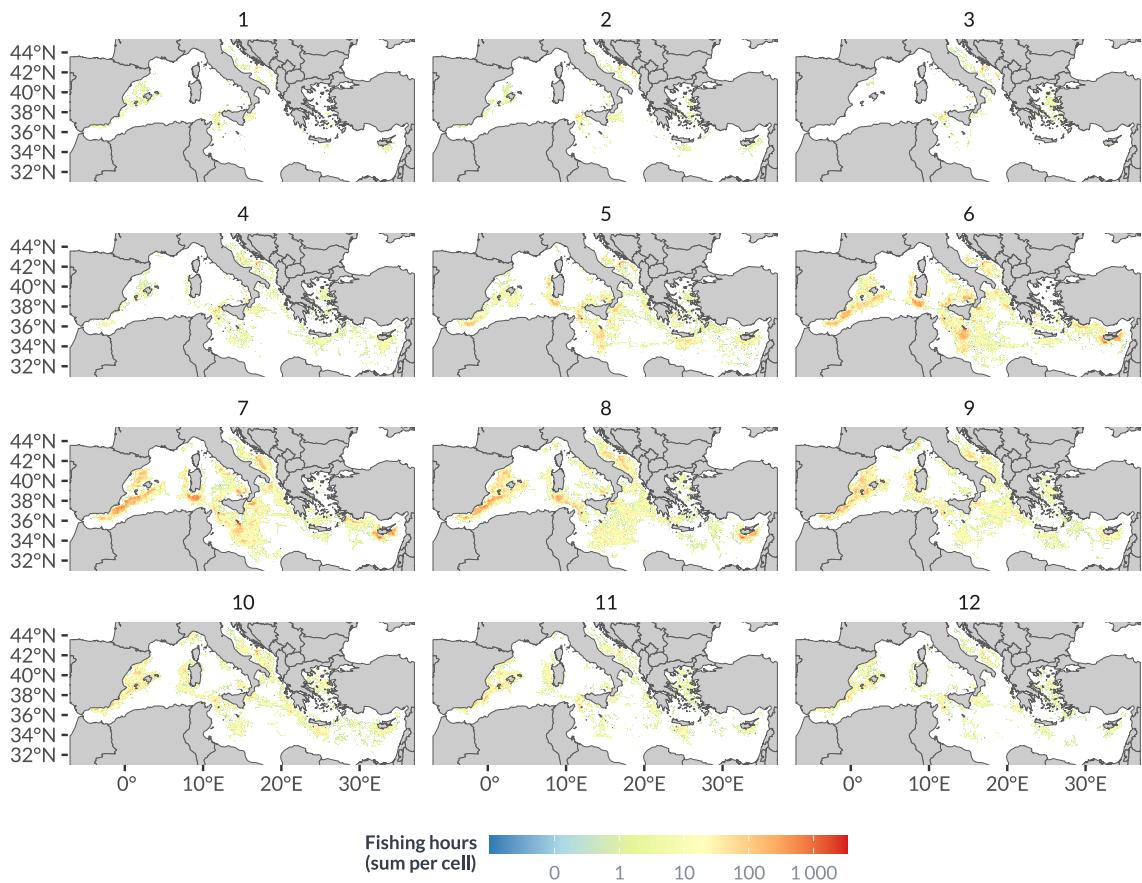


Figure S5: Sum of longline fishing hours per cell for each month between 2015-2024. Colours are on a log-scale.

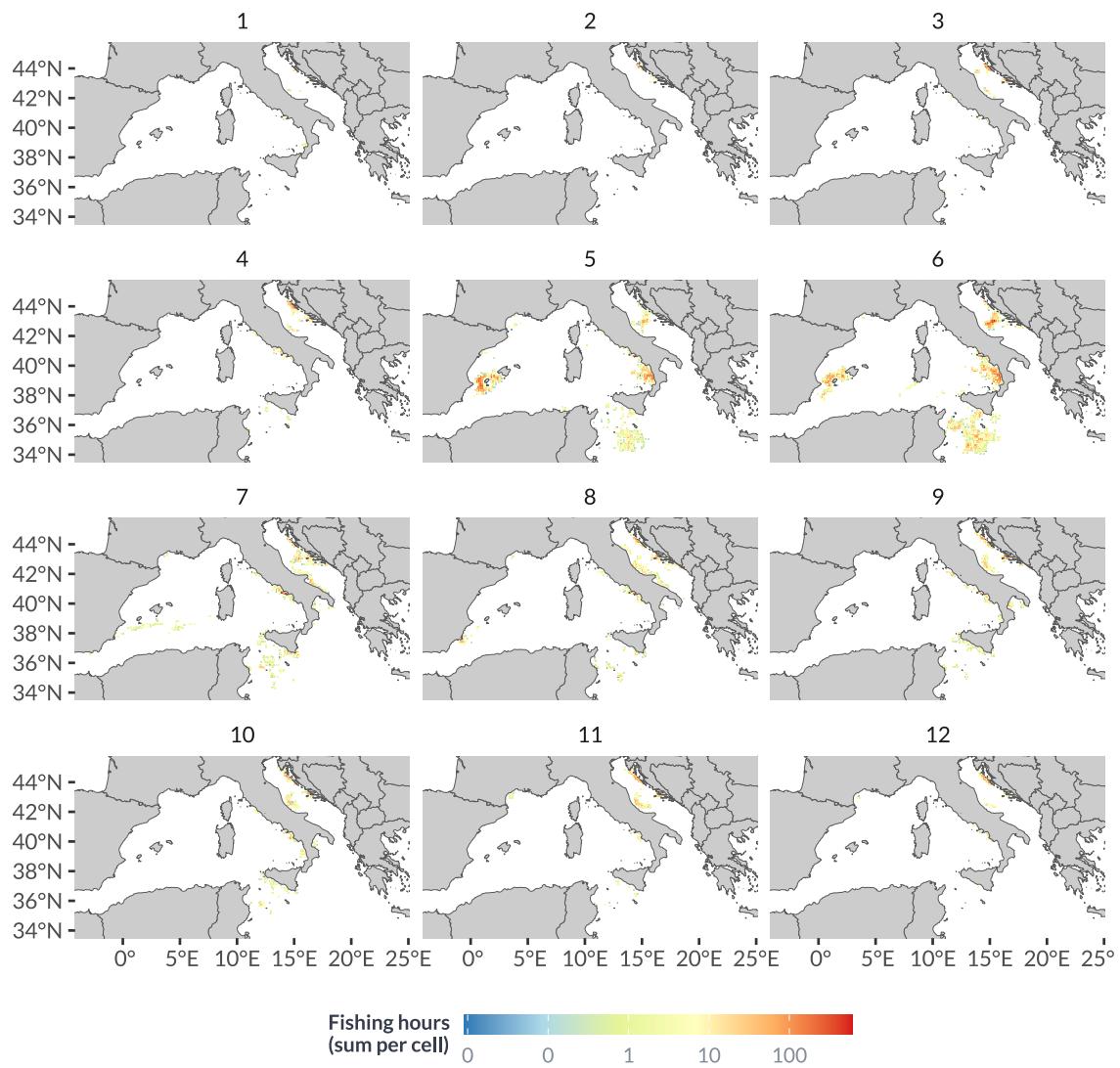


Figure S6: Sum of purse seine fishing hours per cell for each month between 2015-2024. Colours are on a log-scale.

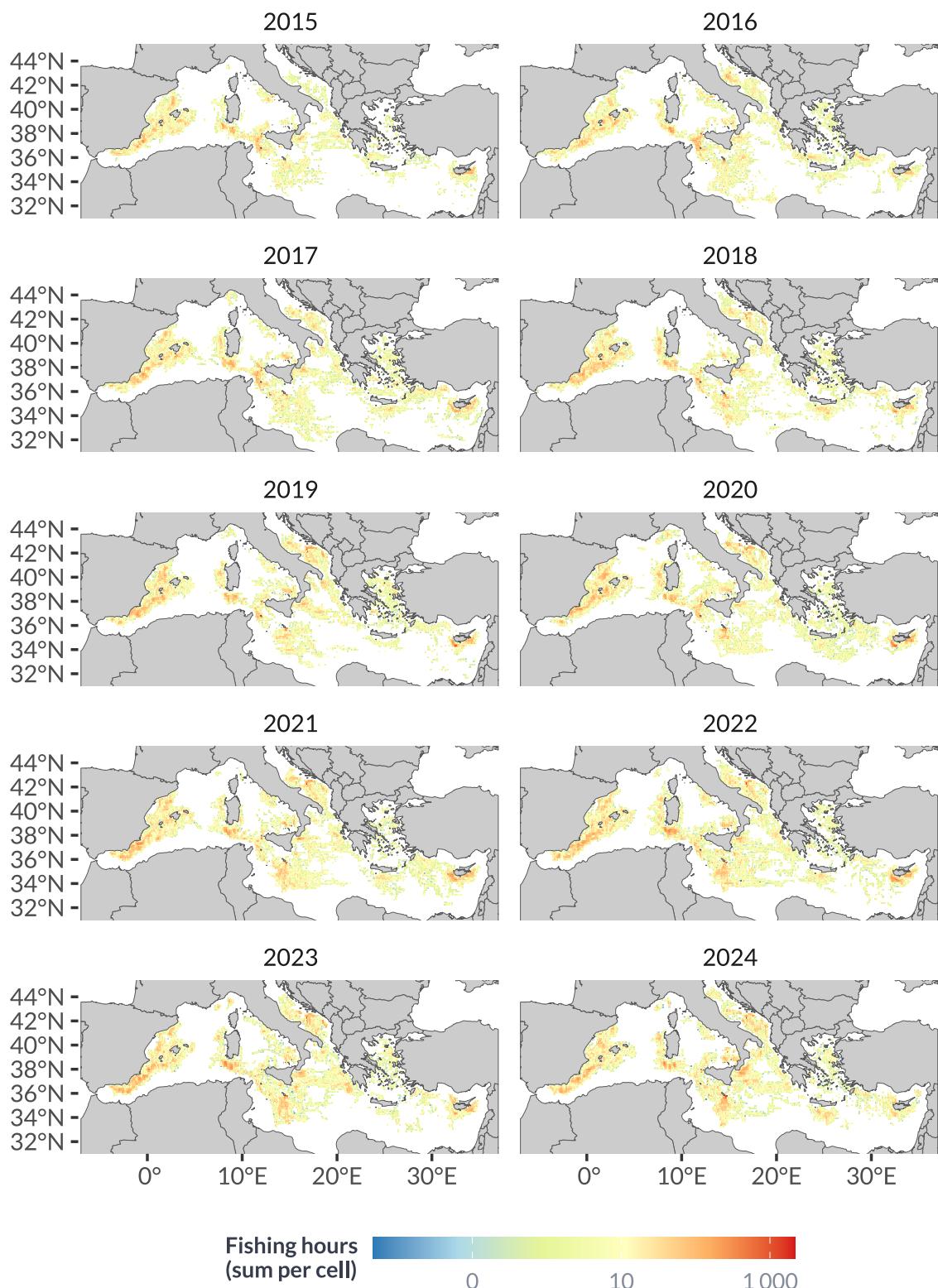


Figure S7: Sum of longline fishing hours per cell for each year. Colours are on a log-scale.

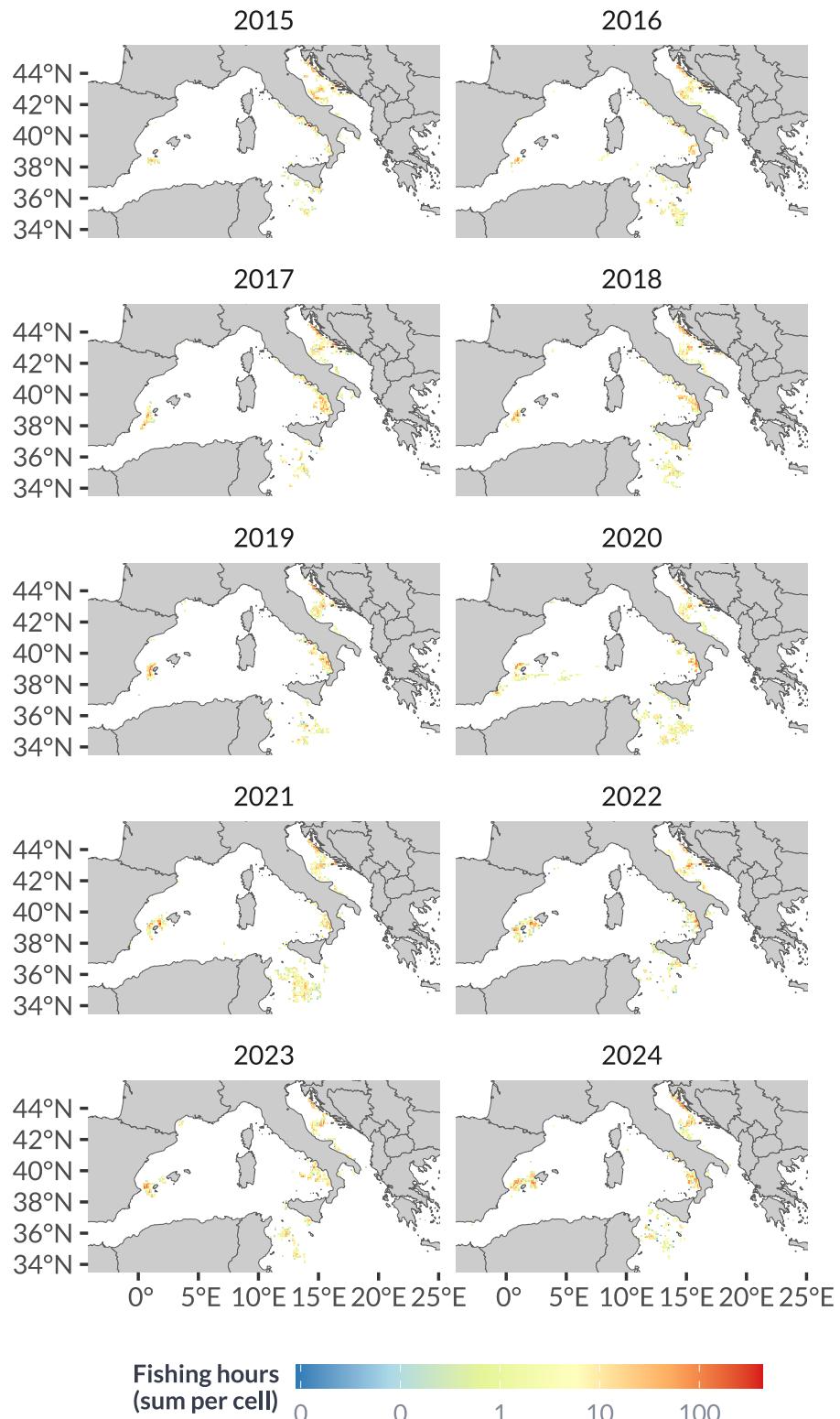


Figure S8: Sum of purse seine fishing hours per cell for each year. Colours are on a log-scale.