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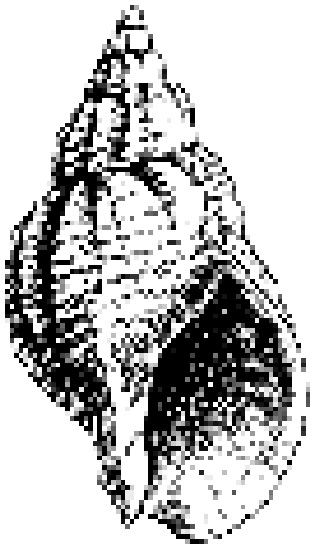
SUBDIVISION 3PS OFFSHORE WHELK: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF MALE SIZE AT MATURITY



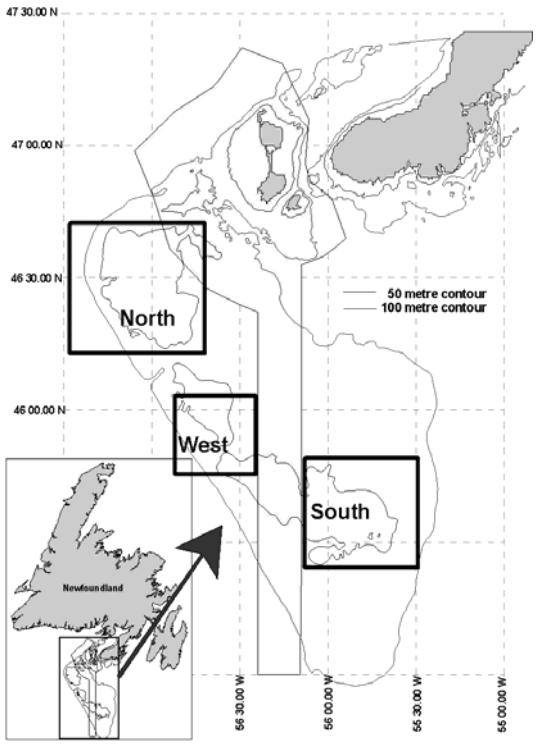


Figure 1: 3Ps Whelk fishing grounds.

Context

The commercial fishery for the Common Northern or Waved Whelk (Buccinum undatum) *began in Newfoundland and Labrador in 1986. Initially, the fishery was restricted to localized inshore areas in southern Labrador and insular Newfoundland with whelks supporting short-term pulse fisheries that waxed and waned due to market demand and resource availability. In the early 2000's the fishery in offshore Subdivision 3Ps developed and expanded rapidly. The fishery is currently concentrated in three distinct offshore areas (not DFO management areas), the North, West and South grounds with a fishing season running from April 1- September 30. The fishery is competitive, with an established pre-emptive TAC of 5,000 t. and is restricted to core fishers who prosecute the fishery by using long-line fleets of baited conical traps at depths ranging from 45-60 m. Each enterprise is permitted to fish up to 500 traps. Fishers must complete and submit a mandatory fishing logbook. The minimum legal size that may be landed is 63 mm shell height and sorting of undersized whelks must be done on the fishing grounds. There is no biological basis for this size limit. Rather, it is determined by industry requirements. A Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) is in place to track vessel fishing activities. Data used to calculate effort and CPUE are derived from logbooks.*

A Regional Advisory Process (RAP) was convened during Feb. 28 - Mar. 11, 2011 to update the available information on whelks with emphasis on the size at which sexual maturity is attained. Participants included DFO Scientists, Fisheries managers, representatives from Industry, the Provincial Government and Memorial University.

SUMMARY

- Total landings for offshore 3Ps in 2010 were 5,030 t. More than half the landings (57%) were from the South grounds, with the North and West grounds contributing 27% and 16% respectively. The fishery on the West grounds is recent, beginning in 2007, and is much smaller in area than either the North or South grounds.

- CPUE indicates that fishery performance has gradually improved since 2007.

- There was no apparent relationship between size and maturity for females.

- Size at 50% maturity for males was 59 mm shell height; however, this is an imprecise estimate due to sampling limitations.

- It would be premature to consider the preliminary male size-at-maturity estimates from this assessment as representative of offshore Subdivision 3Ps.

BACKGROUND

Species Biology

The life cycle and biology of the Waved Whelk are reviewed in Rochette (2009).

The Waved Whelk (*Buccinum undatum)* is a boreal neogastropod of the Atlantic Ocean. In the western north Atlantic, it is found from New Jersey to Labrador. It is a relatively large and long-lived gastropod that attains up to 120 mm in shell height and >10 years of age. It is more active in colder water and tolerates salinities down to ~20 ppt. It is found on various types of substrates (boulders, cobbles, mud) but occurs in greatest densities on soft bottoms at 15-30 m depth.

The Waved Whelk has a large muscular foot which it uses to crawl over the seafloor. It has been reported to crawl to baited traps at speeds of 7-15 cm/minute and from distances of 20-30 m. Detection and localization of food is likely largely via chemotaxis and a specialized organ in the whelk's mantle cavity, the osphradium. Whelks appear to have a broad diet and varied means of acquiring food. They feed on live and dead animal tissues using a long eversible proboscis which is an extension of the digestive system. Predators include sea stars, arthropods (crabs and lobsters), and fishes (e.g., wolf eels). Although whelks are highly mobile, they spend much of their time stationary on the bottom or buried in the sediments, sometimes with only the siphon protruding.

This species is dioecious (separate sexes) and fertilization is internal. Whelks are polygamous; females store sperm from many males. There is virtually no information on critical reproductive processes such as mate choice, sexual selection, and sperm competition. Sexual maturation is relatively slow with maturity probably reached at 4-7 years of age depending on gender and location. Females mature at an older age and larger size than males. Females lay their embryos inside capsules which they attach to hard structures such as rock. Embryos undergo complete (direct) development within 3-8 months before emerging as crawling whelks. Larger females lay a greater number of capsules than smaller ones but the number of embryos per capsule (~2500-3000) seems independent of female size. Less than 1% of embryos likely survive in nature, mainly because many serve as nurse eggs for earlier-developing individuals and also because other animals, particularly sea urchins, prey upon them. In the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence,

copulation and egg deposition occur in spring and summer and juveniles emerge from capsules in late autumn and winter, while in Europe, copulation and egg laying occur in autumn. The period for mating and egg laying in Subdivision 3Ps offshore is unknown. Adult whelks are reported to feed less during mating and egg laying than at other times.

Because of its seemingly high 'catchability' (attraction to baited traps), low reproductive rate (see above), and limited dispersal, this species is thought to be susceptible to localized over-exploitation, and has been extirpated in some areas of its range. Populations are isolated due to the absence of a pelagic larval stage and limited movement of adults. Not surprisingly, Waved Whelk populations display marked variation in different phenotypic traits such as size at sexual maturity. Susceptibility to local extinctions and high potential for local adaptation suggest micromanagement of commercially exploited whelk populations may be desirable, for both economic and conservation purposes.

The Fishery

The fishery began in inshore areas of Labrador and Insular Newfoundland in the mid 1980s. Since then this fishery has been prosecuted on an opportunistic basis dependent on market conditions and resource availability. There are 3 whelk fishing areas in offshore Subdivision 3Ps; North, West and South grounds (Fig. 1). The fishery began in the North ground in 2004 with landings of 690 t and expanded rapidly thereafter, in terms of number of active licenses, area fished and total landings (Fig. 2). Landings peaked at 5,790 t in 2007 and dropped by 16% to 4,860 t in 2009 before increasing slightly to 5,030 t in 2010. The number of active licenses increased from 21 in 2004 to 58 in 2006 and has changed little since. The fishery has been prosecuted in offshore Subdivision 3Ps (Fig. 3) under a competitive quota of 5,000 t since 2008. Each fisher is restricted to 600 traps. CPUE indicates that fishery performance has gradually improved since 2007 (Fig 2). The whelk fishery extends from April to September and coincides with the Subdivision 3Ps offshore Snow Crab (*Chionoecetes opilio*) fishery, for which most offshore whelk fishers are also license holders. This may result in delays in the start of the whelk fishery as fishers usually complete the crab fishery before prosecuting the whelk fishery and could allow females a chance to deposit their egg masses before being captured.

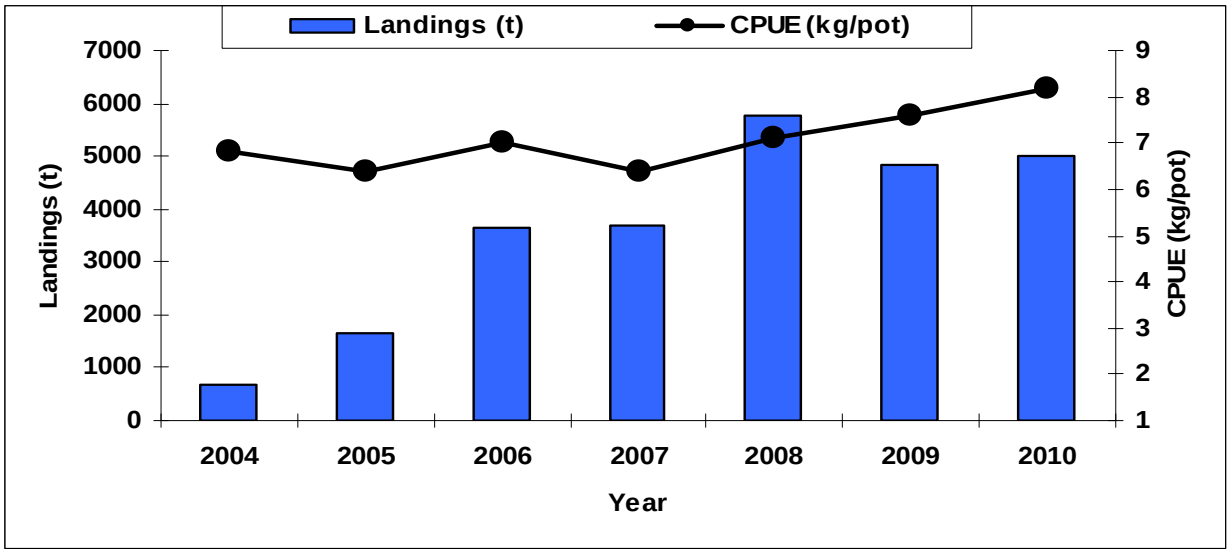


Figure 2: Summary of offshore Subdivision 3Ps whelk landings and CPUE.

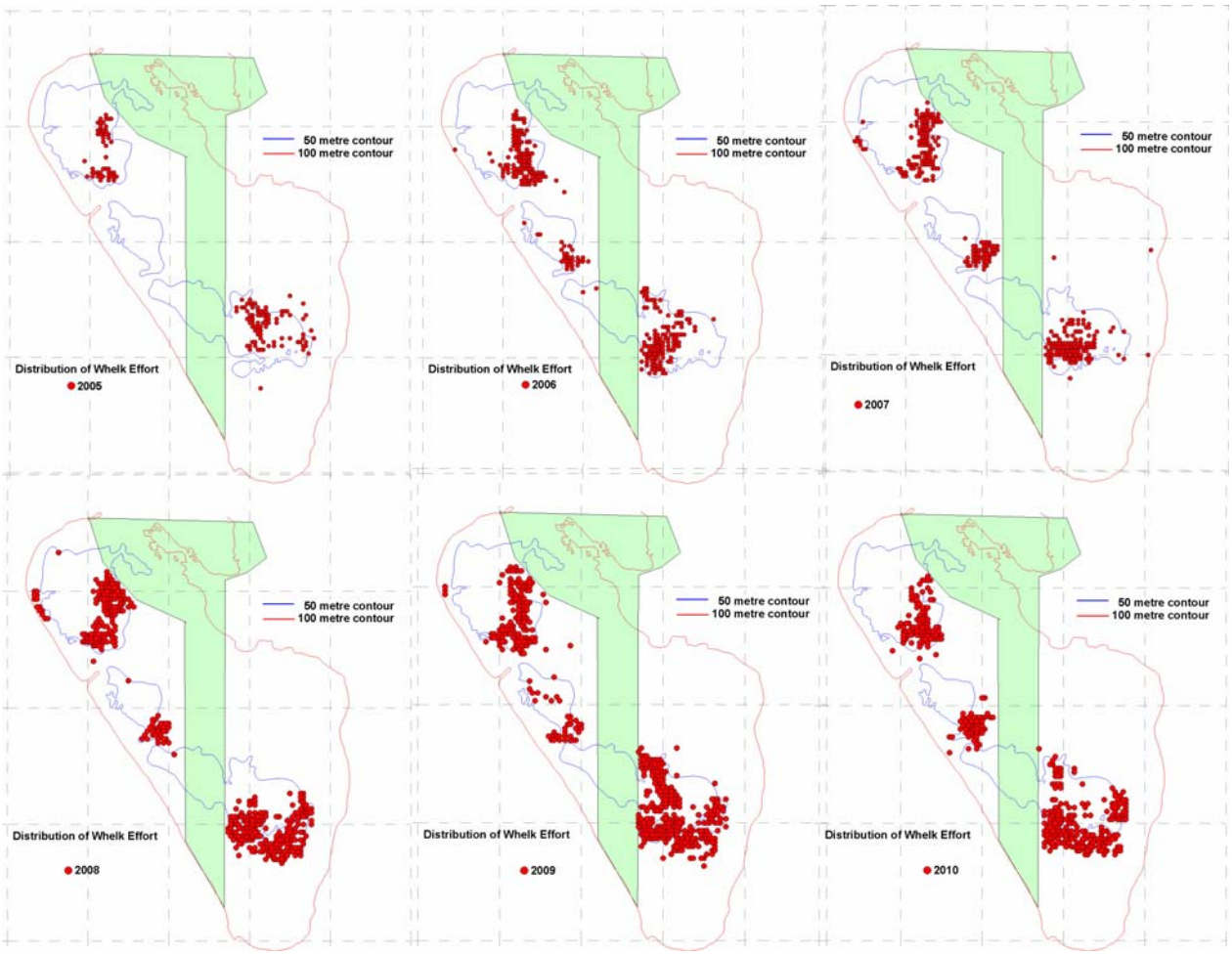


Figure 3: Distribution of whelk fishing effort in Subdivision 3Ps offshore 2005-2010.

ASSESSMENT

Size at Maturity

Data on size (shell height) at sexual maturity were acquired for whelks collected from four commercial trap catches during the 2010 fishery. These samples, from a small portion of the South ground, were frozen and transported to the laboratory for dissection. Maturity was determined for males only because there was no apparent relationship between size and maturity for females. This problem is common throughout the species range. Male maturity was determined by the relationship of penis length to shell height, with maturity defined as penis length being greater than 50% of shell height.

Results showed that size at 50% maturity for males was at 59 mm shell height (Table 1 and Fig. 4). However this is an imprecise estimate as there were broad confidence intervals around the logistic regression model (Fig. 4). Furthermore the relationship was based upon samples that were biased toward large mature males.

Our estimate of size at 50% maturity (59 mm) is below legal size of 63 mm, and well below the legal size of 70 mm in the Quebec fishery. In the Subdiv. 3Ps study area, a 70 mm shell height

(the legal size in Quebec), was associated with an 80% probability of maturity (Fig. 4 and Table 1).

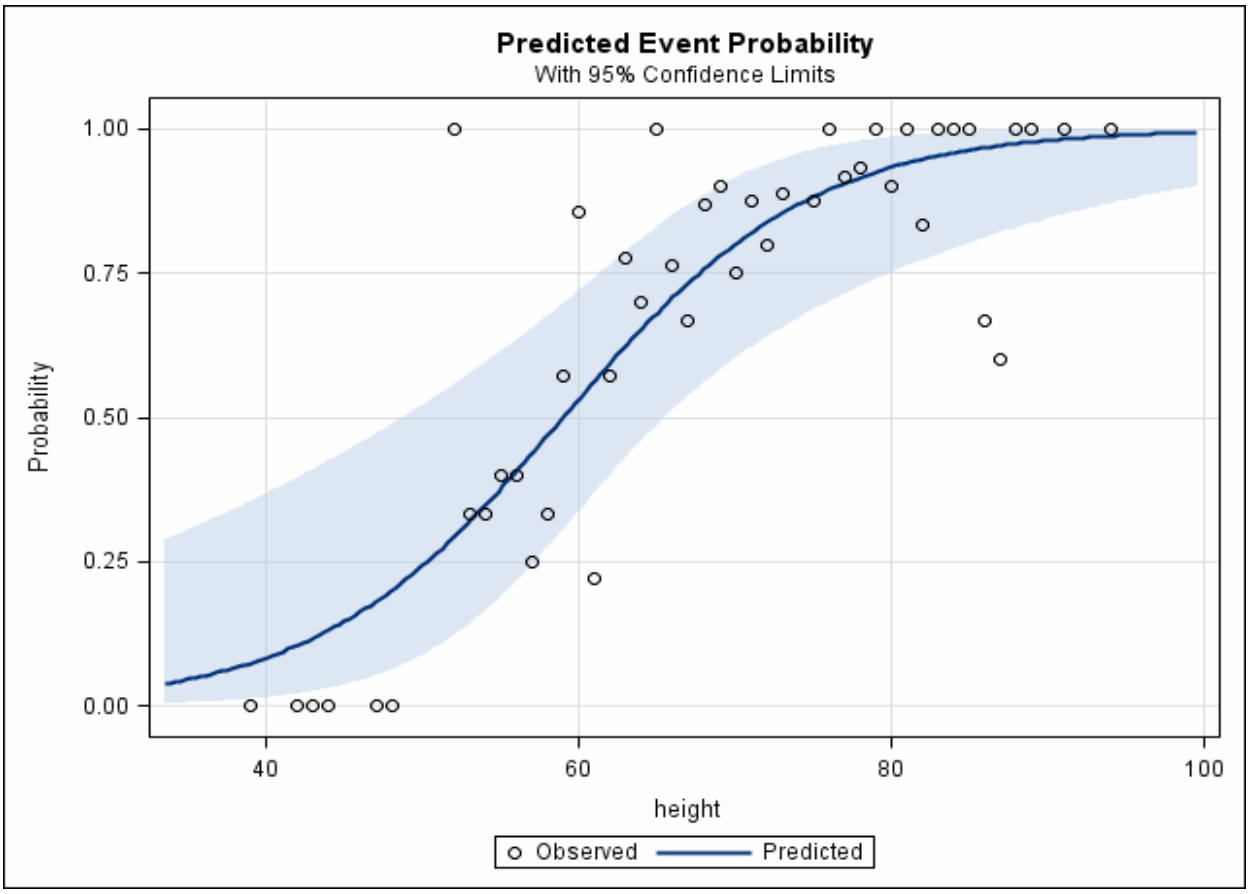


Figure 4: Size at 50% maturity of male Whelks from the South grounds of Subdivision 3Ps. The shaded area represents 95% confidence limits.

A matrix of percent maturity of male whelk at shell height is given in Table 1. If the 70 mm legal size currently in force in the Quebec Region was adopted for male whelks in Subdivision 3Ps 80% of the males from the 2010 commercial samples would be mature.

Table 1: Matrix of probability of male maturity at height for Subdivision 3Ps male whelks.

Probability of Maturity	Height (mm)
0.4	55.7
0.45	57.4
0.5	59.0
0.55	60.6
0.6	62.2
0.65	63.9
0.7	65.7
0.75	67.7
0.8	70.0
0.85	72.7
0.9	76.4
0.95	82.3

Sources of Uncertainty

There is inadequate information on the reproductive potential of the population. While probability of size at 50% maturity of 3Ps male whelks has been calculated (see above) the sample size used in the analysis is small and areal coverage of sampling within the subdivision is very limited. Information on female size at 50% maturity has been difficult to determine, while data on all other aspects of reproductive biology such as frequency of egg capsule deposition, number of embryos surviving to juvenile stage per capsule cluster and development time of encapsulated embryos are unknown for this area. Growth rates for both male and female whelks are also unknown.

CONCLUSIONS AND ADVICE

It would be premature to consider the preliminary male size-at- 50% maturity estimates from this assessment as representative of offshore Subdivision 3Ps. More extensive work, including broader spatial coverage and enhanced sampling effort is required to determine reliable and representative size-at-maturity estimates in order to address these uncertainties. Studies in Quebec suggest that site specific size at maturity is highly variable on small spatial scales. If this holds true for 3Ps whelks then the sampling conducted to date is inadequate to allow the setting of a size-limit based on current knowledge of 3Ps whelk biology. There is a need for increased research efforts to establish the size at 50% maturity of whelks over a broad area of this subdivision in order to determine if the current legal size of 63 mm shell height is appropriate to ensure reproductive capacity is maintained. In addition, increased at-sea observer sampling is necessary to determine levels of potential discard mortality and recruitment. Research into growth rates and methods of promoting exclusion/retention of undersized whelks from traps is also needed.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

More comprehensive biological data necessary for the provision of advice to assist in formulating management strategies are not available. However it appears that the resource, as reflected by fisheries statistics, is currently being exploited at a rate that may not be detrimental to its sustainability.

As it is not possible to visually determine the sex of whelks upon capture, options such as a "male-only" fishery regulation are not practical and cannot be enforced.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

This Science Advisory Report is from the Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat, Regional Advisory Meeting of February 28 – March 4 and March 7 – 11, 2011 on Snow Crab in NAFO Divisions 2HJ3KLNO, Subdivision 3Ps and Division 4R; Subdivision 3Ps Whelk and Sea Scallop. Additional publications from this process will be posted as they become available on the DFO Science Advisory Schedule at http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas-sccs/index-eng.htm.

DFO. 2009. Proceedings of a Workshop on Canadian Science and Management Strategies for Whelk; 3-4 June 2008. DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Proceed. Ser. 2009/024.

Rochette, R. 2009. Ecology of the Whelk *Buccinum undatum*: An Overview. In: DFO. 2009. Proceedings of a Workshop on Canadian Science and Management Strategies for Whelk; 3-4 June 2008. DFO Can. Sci. Advis. Sec. Proceed. Ser. 2009/024.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact: David Taylor
Fisheries and Coeans Canada
PO Box 5667
St. John's, NL A1C 5X1
Tel: (709) 772-2077
Fax: (709) 772-4105
E-Mail: dave.taylor@dfo-mpo.gc.ca

This report is available from the:

Centre for Science Advice (CSA)
Newfoundland and Labrador Region
Fisheries and Oceans Canada
PO Box 5667
St. John's, NL A1C 5X1

Telephone: (709) 772-8892
Fax: (709) 772-6100
E-Mail:dale.e.richards@dfo-mpo.gc.ca
Internet address: www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas

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