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Assessment of wolffish in NAFO subarea 1

by

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Abstract

There are three species of wolffish in Greenland waters, Atlantic wolffish (*Anarhichas lupus*), spotted wolffish (*Anarhichas minor*) and Northern wolffish (*Anarhichas denticulatus*), but only the two first are of commercial interest. Although spotted and Atlantic wolffish are easily distinguishable from one another (spotted wolffish has spots, and Atlantic wolffish has stripes), the fishing industry and catch statistics have so far made no distinction between the two species. A historic separation of the catch statics on a species level, may prove difficult, although some observations of the species composition have been made through research work and exists in the literature. Commercial fishery targeting wolffish started in the 1928, but significant landings were not seen until after World War II. Initially, wolffish were targeted inshore for production of wolffish skin. In 1951 production of frozen filets caught inshore (mainly spotted wolffish) started and reported landings increased to a level of 5000-6000 tons. With the failing cod fishery off West Greenland trawlers started targeting Atlantic wolffish on the banks off West Greenland and from 1974-1976 reported landings from trawlers were around 3000 tons per year. During the 1980's reported catches gradually decreased, and landings were at a very low level during the 1990's. From 2003 landings gradually increased and stabilized at a level of around 1000 tons, mainly spotted wolffish landed from small vessels and open boats to factories in division 1A-C and remained at this level until 2014. In 2015, reported catches have decreased and the lower catch level has continued until 2019 with just 190 t. It is reasonable to assume that the decrease is related to fishery targeting more profitable species, limiting catches to exploited bycatch only.

Two surveys cover the stock of wolffish in NAFO 1A. The surveys have both registered an increasing spotted wolffish biomass in the recent decade but are in less agreement in regard to Atlantic wolffish. The difference between the survey indices for Atlantic wolffish can largely be explained by differences in survey area where the increase in the Greenland SFW survey is mainly observed north of the EU-Germany survey area. In the Greenland Shrimp and fish survey, the abundance index of both species seems to increase at a steady rate.



Introduction

Three species of wolffish occur in Greenland waters, Atlantic wolffish (*Anarhichas lupus*), spotted wolffish (*Anarhichas minor*) and Northern wolffish (*Anarhichas denticulatus*). Only the first two (spotted wolffish and Atlantic wolffish) are of commercial interest, since northern wolffish is of low quality (gelatinous and watery). Spotted wolffish has a larger maximum length (~140 cm) than Atlantic wolffish (~ less than 100 cm) and the individual growth rate for Atlantic wolffish is slower than for Spotted wolffish in subarea 1 (Beese and Kändler 1969, Schmidt 1980). Although spotted and Atlantic wolffish are easily distinguishable from one another (spotted wolffish has spots, and Atlantic wolffish has stripes), the fishing industry and catch statistics have rarely distinguished between the two species in landing reports or logbooks. A historic separation of the catch statistics on a species level, may prove difficult, although some observations of the species composition have been made through research work. A thorough breakdown of the catches on a species level and inshore offshore areas might improve the knowledge about the distribution of the species (see also Riget F.F. 1985). Research performed by Greenland and Federal Republic of Germany (Beese and Kändler, 1969), revealed an almost complete absence of Atlantic wolffish in landings and research fishery from division 1A and 1B in 1957 and 1960, but a dominance of Atlantic wolffish in division 1C in 1976 (99% by weight, depth 70-90 meters) and 1D in 1980 (58% by weight, depth 300-500 meters) (Schmidt 1980). Therefore, the breakdown of the catches by division gives some indication of species composition as Atlantic wolffish has a more southern distribution and seems more connected to the shallow offshore banks. Spotted wolffish can be found in all divisions offshore and through survey and landing observations, still seems to be the dominant species in the fjords. However, Atlantic wolffish has shifted its distribution further north during the past decade (Nygaard and Nogueira, 2020) and can be found as far north as the Upernavik district. Atlantic wolffish has also been observed in surveys in the Disko bay (1A inshore) and Sisimiut (1B inshore).

Description of the Fisheries

From 1928, small catches of wolffish from Greenland waters were landed by British fishing vessels. However, the commercial fishery for wolffish in West Greenland started around 1938 and was originally based on the production of wolffish skins (mostly spotted wolffish) while the meat was used locally. Production of skins stopped during World War II but resumed in 1945 and peaked in 1948 with a production of more than 100.000 wolffish skins equivalent of about 800 tons (table 1, fig 1). In 1951, a production of frozen fillets started and developed to an important production in the Maniitsoq area (div. 1C) and the fishery gradually spread to the northern inshore areas (Divisions 1A-1B). The fishery was carried out by longliners as a directed fishery targeting mainly spotted wolffish. Annual landings reached a level of more than 5000 tons by 1957 and stayed at this level of 4000 to 6000 until 1970. With the failing cod fishery off West Greenland trawlers started targeting Atlantic wolffish on the banks off West Greenland and from 1974-1976 reported landings from trawlers were around 3000 tons per year (Schmidt 1980). The highest reported catches occurred in 1977-1979, but in these years non-Greenlandic vessels were excluded from the valuable cod fishery on the banks off West Greenland and massive misreporting were documented (cod reported as American plaice, wolffish or other species). The corrected landings in these years are much lower than official landing statistics (Horsted 1980). After 1980 the cod fishery gradually decreased from West Greenland and catches of wolffish also decreased in this period. The Gradual switch from cod to shrimp fishery may however have meant that an unknown amount of wolffish could have been taken and discarded in the shrimp fishery. A study of bycatch in the shrimp fishery conducted in 1994 indicated a low bycatch of spotted wolffish in all divisions and then bycatch of Atlantic wolffish where low and mainly occurred in the southernmost divisions (Engelstoft 1996). However, survey indices of wolffish were at a low level during the 1990's. To minimize bycatch in the shrimp fishery, offshore shrimp trawlers has been equipped with grid separators since 2002 (G.H. 2001) and the grid separators have been mandatory for inshore operating vessels since 2011 (G.S. 2011). After the implementation of the sorting grids, studies of bycatch in the shrimp fishery indicated very low bycatches of wolffish in the shrimp fishery

when using the grid separators (Sünksen 2007). Sünksen (2007) does not provide length distributions in the publication, but the estimated amounts were converted to total estimates of wolffish to be around 15 tons of Atlantic wolffish (~0,01%), 1,5 tons of spotted wolffish (~0,001%) and less than 0,2 tons of northern wolffish (~0,0001%) in 2007. In 2007, all survey indices of wolffish were at a higher level than during the 1990's and it seems likely that the grids separators used in the shrimp fishery offer high protection to wolffish. After the implementation of the sorting grids several species have been increasing in abundance and biomass. From 2003 landings gradually increased and stabilized at a level of around 1000 tons, mainly spotted wolffish landed from small vessels and open boats to factories in division 1A-C and remained at this level until 2014. In 2015, reported catch decreased to 333 t and the lower catch level has continued until 2019 with just 190 t. Of these 186 were landed to factories from vessels operating inshore while only 4 t were reported as bycatch in the offshore fishery. The decreasing landings in the recent years is likely a result of fishermen targeting easier and more profitable species like cod and Greenland halibut inshore. It is reasonable to assume that the catches of wolffish since 2015 are landed bycatch from fishery directed towards other species.

Assessment

No analytical assessment was performed.

Commercial fishery data

Data on length distribution in catches are rarely available from wolffish. Discrepancy between the species is not always done in logbooks or factory landings data and wolffish are often reported as wolffish sp. ("CAT"). Factory landing data and logbook data for both species combined was available (table 1 and fig 1). Combining logbook data from vessels operating offshore and Factory landing data from small boats and vessels operating inshore gives a distribution of the catches and bycatches from 2017-2019 (Figure 2).

Research Survey data

There are two surveys partly covering the stocks of Atlantic wolffish and spotted wolffish in subarea 1. The EU-Germany (EU-G) survey (Fock and Stransky 2014) and Greenland Shrimp Fish (SFW) survey in West Greenland (Nygaard and Nogueira 2020). The EU Germany survey has a longer time series (since 1982, 0-400m, 1C-F) and the Greenland shrimp and Fish survey in West Greenland covers a larger geographical area and depth range (since 1992, 600m, 1A-F). Both surveys are appropriate in regard to main depth distribution of both Atlantic and spotted wolffish, but the Greenland Shrimp and Fish Survey, has a larger and better geographical coverage in relation to wolffish. The EU-G survey has had limited coverage of the Greenland West coast in recent years, and no updates of the indices for wolffish has been received since 2016. The Greenland shrimp and fish survey covers a much larger area, but due to vessel decommission, the survey was conducted with chartered vessels in 2018 (Sjödörberg) and 2019 (Helga Maria). However, both chartered vessels used the gear from the previously used research vessel (RV Pâmiut).

Atlantic wolffish:

Biomass and abundance indices decreased in the 1980s in the EU-Germany survey and stabilized at a low level during the 1990's (fig. 3).

The Greenland SFW survey biomass index has slowly increased both prior to and after the gear change in 2005 and the abundance index has gradually increased throughout the time series (disregard the two extreme outlier years 2005 and 2015) (Figure 3). Although the gear was changed in 2005, the two separate time series seems well connected and a clear pattern of increasing abundance seems apparent (Figure 3). The differing trends observed in the EU-Germany survey and the Greenland shrimp and fish survey can largely be explained with the difference in survey area. The increase in the indices observed in Greenland shrimp and fish survey are mainly observed in divisions 1A-B and therefore outside the EU-Germany survey area. Therefore, the stagnant indices observed in the EU-Germany survey are likely caused by a change in distribution further North (1AB), than during the 1990s (Nygaard and Nogueira 2020). Length distributions in the Greenland Shrimp and fish survey consist of all sizes from 5-70 cm with a mode at 10 cm and decreasing numbers with size (fig 6). The updated indices for wolffish fall within the same range and overall trend of the previous survey vessel indices for both wolffish species.

Spotted wolffish:

The EU-Germany survey biomass indices decreased significant in the 1980s and were at low levels during the 1990 (fig 4). After 2002, the survey biomass index started increasing and have reached the level seen in the beginning of the time series. Abundance indices in the EU-Germany survey decreased from 1982 to 1995 but have gradually increased since then and reached a highest level observed since the beginning of the 1980s (fig 4).

The Greenland Shrimp and fish survey biomass index were at low levels during 1990's but started increasing after 2002. The biomass index continued the increase after the gear change in 2005 and the time series before and after the gear change seems well connected (fig 4). The Greenland Shrimp and fish survey abundance index have gradually increased both prior to and after the gearchange and the indices seems well connected (fig 4). Length distributions in the Greenland SFW survey consist of all sizes from 5-120 cm with a mode at 10 cm and adult individuals around 100 cm. Particularly in the most recent 5 years there seems to be good recruitment as higher than usual numbers spotted wolffish in the interval 10-14 cm are observed (Figure 7).

Both species:

In the Greenland SFW survey, the abundance index of both species seems to increase at a steady rate (fig 3 and 4 right). Since the 1990's the biomass of spotted wolffish / Atlantic wolffish, has gradually change from 50:50 to 85:15 and varying a little from year to year (Figure 5). The slower somatic growth rate of Atlantic halibut could explain the slower increase in the biomass index for Atlantic wolffish, compared to spotted wolffish.

Conclusions

2015 there has been very little directed fishery for wolffish in subarea 1, and the catches have mainly been limited to bycatch in other fisheries.

The increase in survey abundance and biomass indices for both species, coincide with the implementation of sorting grids in the shrimp fishery in 2002.

The Gearchange in the Greenland Shrimp and fish survey from 2004 to 2005 and the update of the survey indices using chartered vessels in 2018 and 2019, does not seem to have impacted the survey indices. Both the biomass and abundance indices remain within the same trend channels before and after the changes in the survey.

Atlantic wolffish

This stock underwent full assessment in 2017, with the advice that there should be no directed fishery targeting Atlantic wolffish in Subarea 1, since the biomass indices of the EU-Germany survey were far below the initial values. The indices in this survey have not been updated since 2016. However, as the surveys in EU-Germany and the Greenland shrimp and fish survey in the overlapping period were around the same level, it seems reasonable to assume that the biomass remains below the level of the 1980's. The survey biomass and abundance indices continue to increase in the Greenland Shrimp and fish survey.

Survey length frequencies indicates that the stock is mainly constituted by younger individuals. The higher survey abundance indices in 4 of the most recent 5 years, indicate better recruitment than during the preceding decade.

Spotted wolffish

In 2017, the ICES Harvest Control Rule 3.2 for data limited stocks, combined with the survey index from the Greenland shrimp and fish survey, was used to formulate the advice. Although the survey indices had been increasing, the advice was reduced to 975 t, after applying a first-year precautionary buffer.

Chartered vessels were used in 2018-2019 to update the Greenland Shrimp and fish survey. However, the updated indices fall within the same increasing trend as observed in the most recent two decades. Although the catches have been below the TAC since 2015, there is no indications that the decreasing catches are related to a decrease in the stock. The decrease is likely related to more valuable species being targeted.

The recent survey indices indicate that the stock continues to grow. Therefore, it is advisable to use the ICES Harvest Control Rule 3.2 for data limited stocks, combined with the survey index from the Greenland shrimp and fish survey to update the advice for the 2021-2024 period.

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Table 1. Catches of wolffish, Atlantic wolffish and spotted wolffish combined in Subarea 1 by NAFO division. (NK indicates subarea 1 -Not Known).

YEAR	1A	1B	1C	1D	1E	1F	NK	Total	NOTE
1945							60	60	1
1946	32,5	16	0,5	1	0	0	0	50	1
1947	375	90	0	0	15	20	0	500	1
1948	576	120	16	8	24	64	155	955	1
1949	632	94	16	0	16	23	324	1104	1
1950	621	73	7	15	15	15	12	742	1
1951	434	149	0	12	6	19	266	886	1
1952	53	380	327	0	0	0	628	1388	1
1953	0	126	1974	0	0	0	634	2734	1
1954	24	0	2410	0	0	0	370	2804	1
1955	35	141	3274	70	0	0	519	4039	1
1956	315	385	2800	35	0	0	1191	4691	1
1957	585	540	3330	45	0	0	1102	5602	1
1958	640	880	2480	0	0	0	879	4879	1
1959	372	806	1922	0	0	0	808	3908	1
1960	304	1164	1528	575	364	468	0	4403	2
1961	382	887	1794	1152	667	678	63	5623	3
1962	254	862	1576	820	850	581	0	4941	3
1963	525	842	1930	1191	907	718	5	6158	4
1964	474	838	1133	870	807	731	25	4878	5
1965	519	1152	2079	968	416	645	0	5779	5
1966	298	1001	1540	955	672	919	6	5391	5
1967	460	1243	1312	1119	483	506	10	5133	5
1968	594	1405	1635	365	176	384	120	4679	5
1969	644	1050	1409	248	92	110	219	3772	6
1970	658	979	765	174	354	173	214	3317	7
1971	525	842	737	181	58	167	522	3032	8
1972	508	894	744	684	346	100	871	4147	8
1973	764	1001	1095	1100	684	235	22	4901	8
1974	516	1203	1424	2156	848	147	0	6290	8
1975	509	1370	1664	2055	545	235	0	6378	8
1976	432	783	1966	1725	855	344	0	6105	8
1977	445	618	1060	416	422	133	(1000)	4110	9
1978	460	753	746	130	72	7	(800)	2970	9
1979	357	515	692	90	43	34	(1400)	3529	10
1980	620	1423	1898	861	275	335	0	5412	11
1981	400	839	1394	308	207	278	291	3717	11
1982	262	636	1539	898	331	263	0	3929	11
1983	145	692	719	475	679	559	0	3269	11
1984	50	231	880	228	268	173	60	1890	11
1985	39	238	933	162	206	226	0	1804	11
1986	80	249	678	204	251	205	30	1697	11
1987	0	0	0	0	17	12	1438	1467	11
1988	68	134	628	261	214	573	111	1989	11
1989	90	91	180	117	309	222	74	1083	11
1990	65	86	116	97	57	182	152	755	11
1991	98	33	84	16	30	79	14	354	11
1992	62	62	44	5	5	12	0	190	11
1993	41	67	33	3	2	11	0	157	11

Table 1 continued. Catches of wolffish, Atlantic wolffish and spotted wolffish combined in Subarea 1 by NAFO division (NK indicates subarea 1 -Not Known).

YEAR	1A	1B	1C	1D	1E	1F	NK	Total	NOTE
1994	26	31	36	0	0	4	0	97	¹¹
1995	19	7	22	0	0	1	0	49	¹¹
1996	29	0	15	0	0	1	0	45	¹¹
1997	30	2	30	0	0	0	0	62	¹¹
1998	0	0	28	0	0	0	0	28	¹¹
1999	1	1	17	87	0	6	0	112	¹¹
2000	0	1	22	5	0	3	21	52	¹¹
2001	1	1	29	4	1	3	26	65	¹¹
2002	14	0	28	8	27	10	0	87	¹¹
2003	142	1	90	2	25	46	0	306	¹¹
2004	205	18	0	35	2	51	0	311	¹¹
2005	161	28	162	47	35	91	0	524	¹¹
2006	267	94	236	26	42	99	0	764	¹¹
2007	425	211	133	32	20	59	0	880	¹¹
2008	600	217	276	37	5	66	0	1201	¹¹
2009							1175	1175	¹²
2010							1315	1315	¹²
2011	365	158	196	13	4	3	42	779	¹³
2012	344	335	292	17	7	15	0	1010	¹⁴
2013	441	175	203	11	7	15	0	855	¹⁴
2014	342	119	388	12	9	34	0	908	
2015	64	30	141	13	72	10	0	331	
2016	40	27	80	7	19	10	0	183	
2017	18	21	81	51	26	41	0	238	
2018	17	18	114	47	44	20	0	260	
2019	27	32	81	17	6	23	0	186	

NOTES

1. After E. Schmidt 1980. Total landings are given by E.Schmidt. Division landings are estimated from division percentage from the Greenlandic fleet only given by E. S. (1946-1959). Landing division by other nations are listed as NK (not known).
2. 116 Tons landed by Icelandic vessels in 1960 (Statlant) does not figure in the statistics by E.S. Division landings are estimated from division percentage (all nations) given by E. Schmidt 1980 and corresponds well with Statlant 21 statistics (years 1960-1976).
3. After E. Schmidt 1980.
4. After E. Schmidt 1980. Estimate of Greenland catch in 1963 is 40 tons higher than Statlant 21 statistics.
5. After E. Schmidt 1980.
6. After E. Schmidt 1980. 13 Tons landed by DDR vessels in 1969 does not figure in the statistics by E.S.
7. After E. Schmidt 1980. 324 Tons landed by DDR vessels in 1970 does not figure in the statistics by E.S.
8. After E. Schmidt 1980.
9. After E. Schmidt 1980. Unreliable statlant 21 catches. See S.A. Horsted 1980, for discussion.
10. After E. Schmidt 1980. Unreliable statlant 21 catches. See S.A. Horsted 1980, for discussion. Estimate of Greenland catch is 398 tons higher in the statistics by E.S. than in Statlant 21 statistics.
11. Based on IGNAF/Statlant 21 data (1980-2008).
12. STACFIS estimate.
13. 42 tons from unknown division by factory vessel receiving catches from small boats.
14. Division recalculated by author.

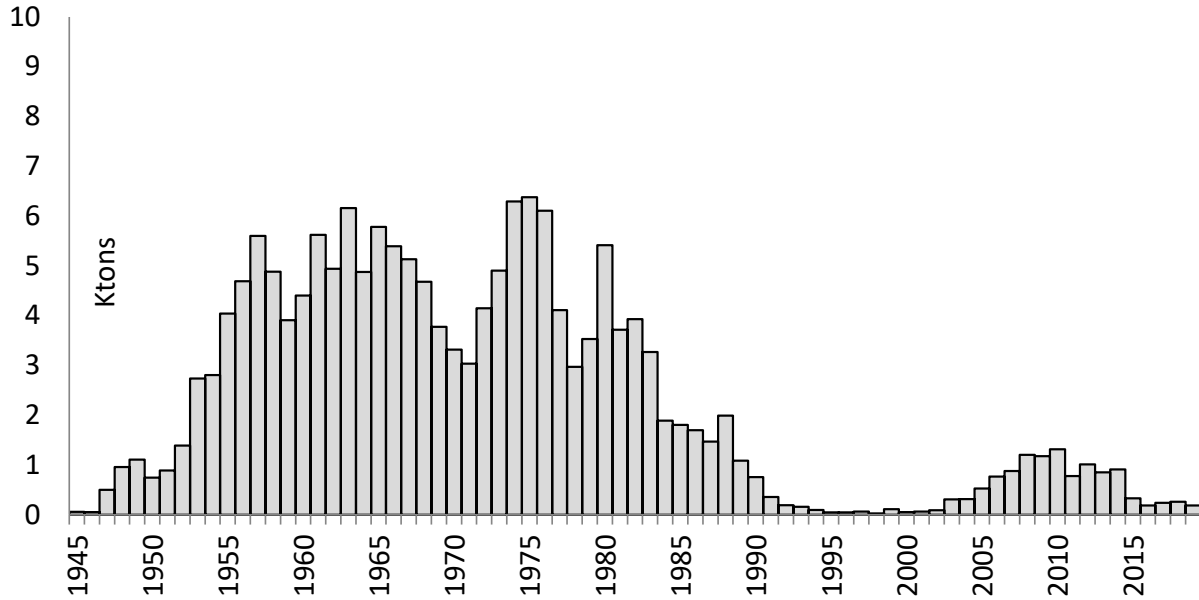


Figure 1. Annual landings of spotted and Atlantic wolffish combined in West Greenland (Subarea 1) since 1945.

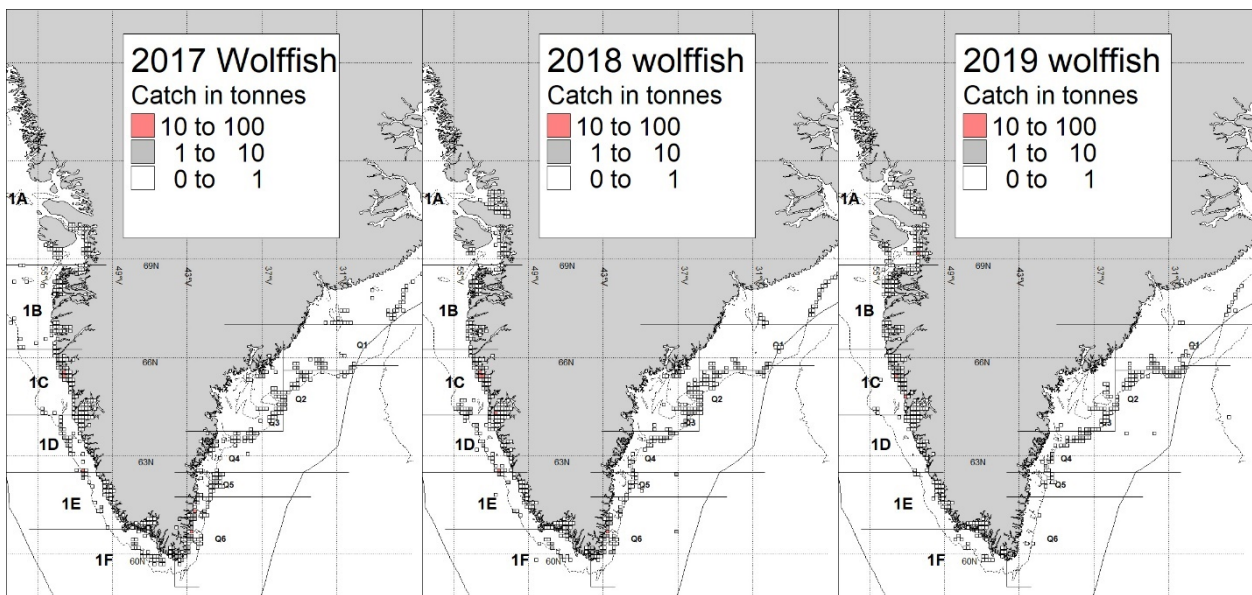


Figure 2. Landings and reported offshore catch of wolffish by statistical square from 2017-2019.

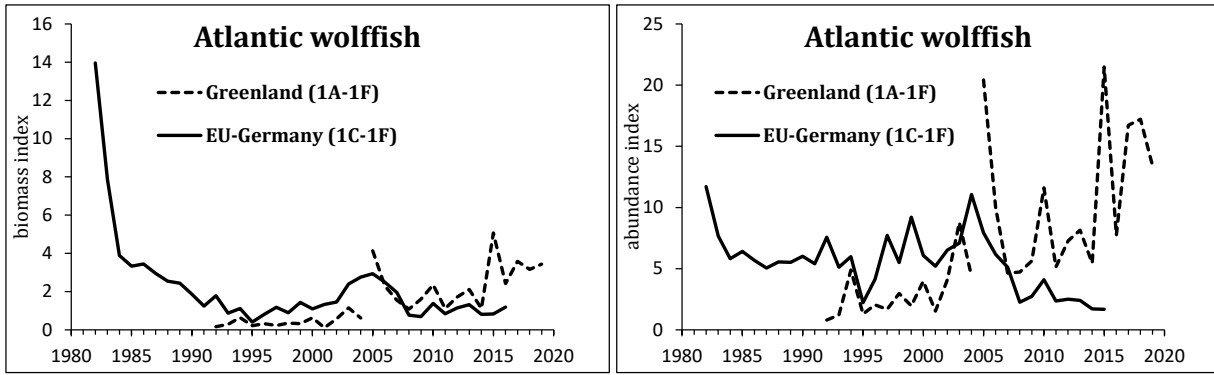


Figure 3. Atlantic wolffish survey indices of biomass (left) and abundance (right) indices from the EU-Germany survey and the Greenland shrimp and fish survey in West Greenland.

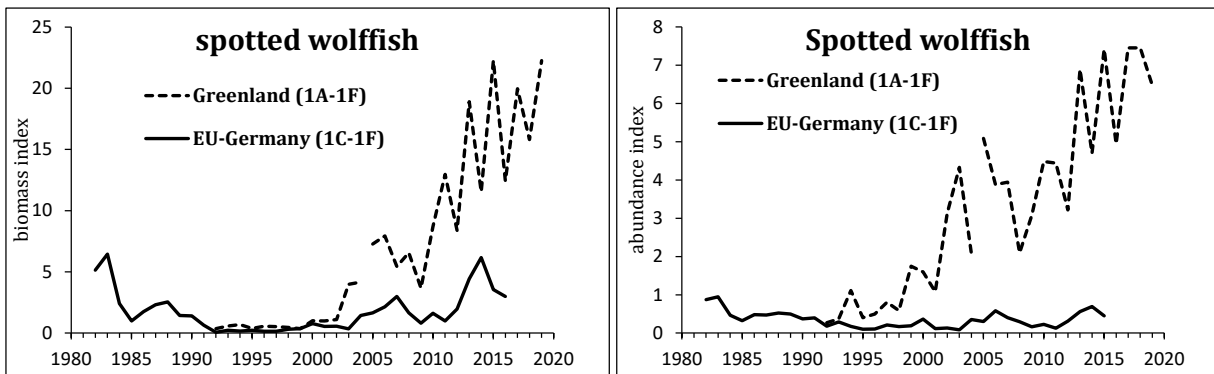


Figure 4. Spotted wolffish survey indices of biomass (left) and abundance (right) indices from The EU-Germany survey.

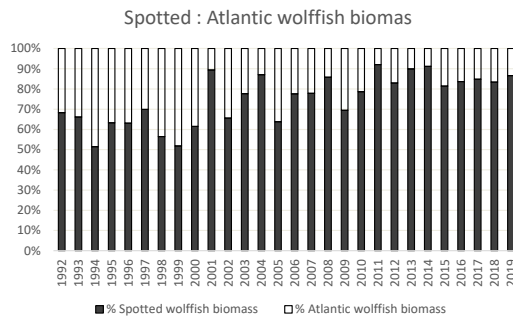


Figure 5. Percentage distribution of Spotted wolffish to Atlantic wolffish in the Greenland Shrimp and Fish survey.

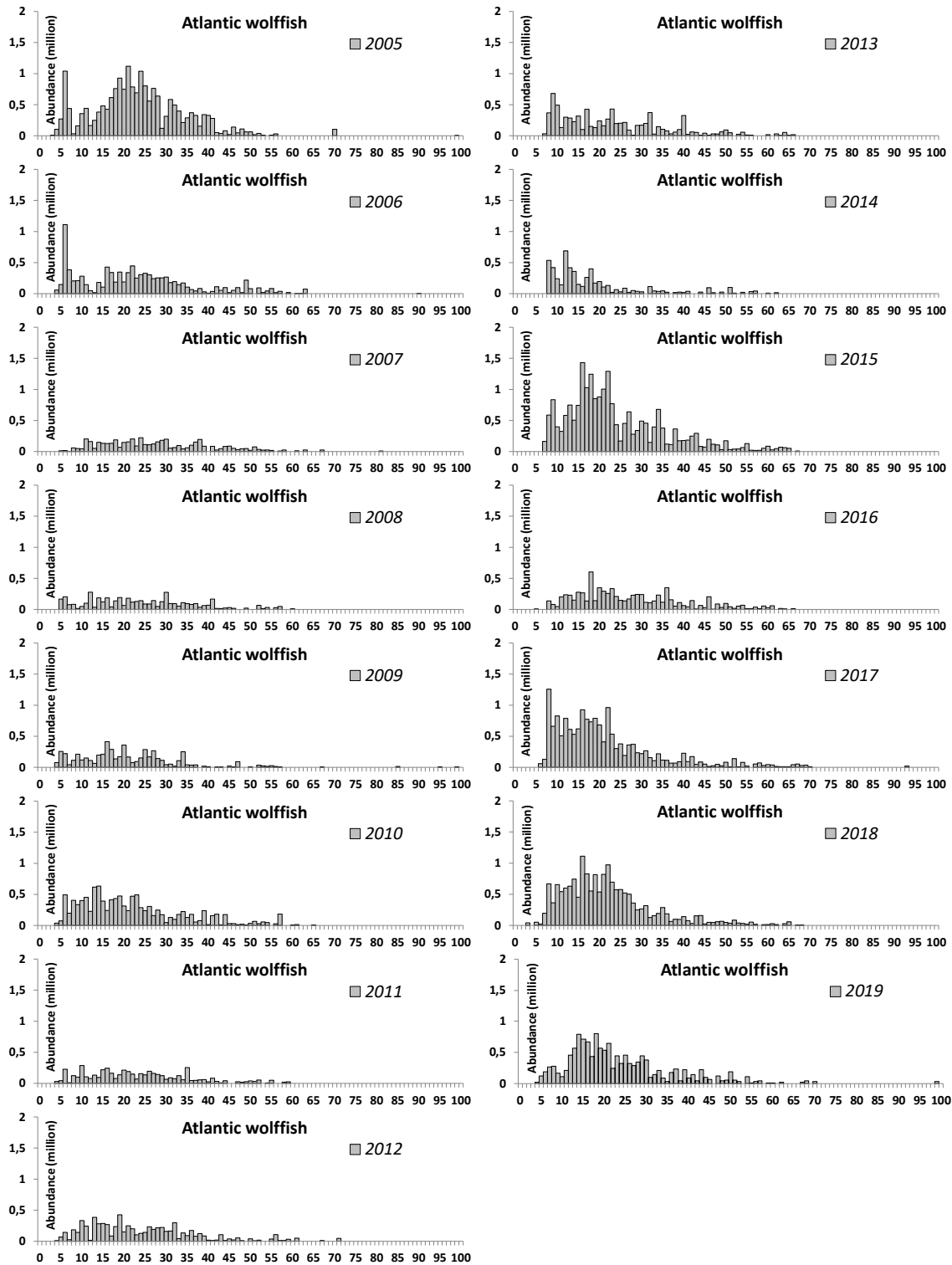


Figure 6. Atlantic wolffish (*Anarhichas lupus*) length frequencies for West Greenland.

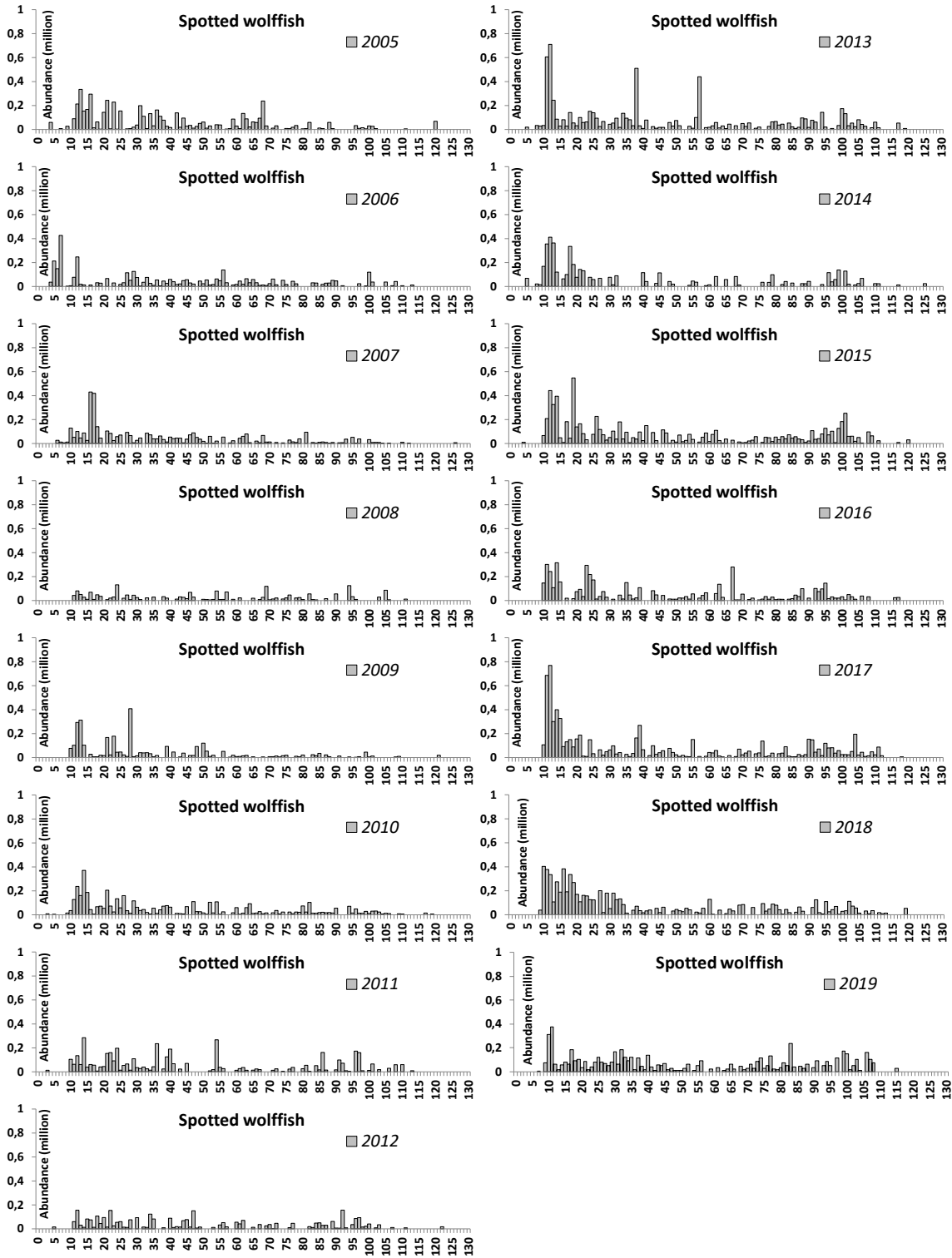


Figure 7. Spotted wolffish (*Anarhichas minor*) length frequencies for West Greenland.