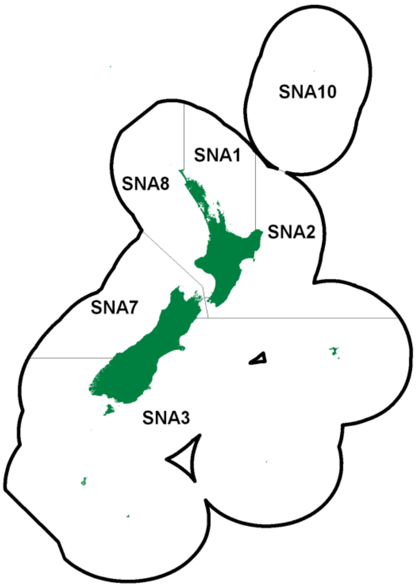
SNAPPER (SNA 8)

(*Chrysophrys auratus*)
Tamure, Kouarea



1. FISHERIES SUMMARY

1.1 Commercial fisheries

Table 1 and Table 2 provide a summary by fishing year of the reported commercial catches, TACCs, and TACs for SNA 8. Landings and TACC are plotted in Figure 1.

Table 1: Reported landings (t) of snapper from SNA 8 from 1931 to 1990.

Year	SNA 8	Year	SNA 8
1931–32	140	1961	1 178
1932–33	159	1962	1 352
1933–34	213	1963	1 456
1934–35	190	1964	1 276
1935–36	108	1965	1 182
1936–37	103	1966	1 831
1937–38	85	1967	1 477
1938–39	89	1968	1 491
1939–40	71	1969	1 344
1940–41	76	1970	1 588
1941–42	62	1971	1 852
1942–43	57	1972	1 961
1943–44	75	1973	3 038
1944	69	1974	4 340
1945	124	1975	4 217
1946	244	1976	5 326
1947	251	1977	3 941
1948	215	1978	4 340
1949	277	1979	3 464
1950	318	1980	3 309
1951	364	1981	3 153
1952	361	1982	2 636
1953	1 124	1983	1 814
1954	1 093	1984	1 536
1955	1 202	1985	1 866
1956	1 163	1986	959
1957	1 472	1987	1 072
1958	1 128	1988	1 565
1959	1 114	1989	1 571
1960	1 202	1990	1 551

Notes:
1. The 1931–1943 years are April–March but from 1944 onwards are calendar years.
2. The ‘QMA totals’ are approximations derived from port landing subtotals, as follows: SNA 8 Paraparaumu to Hokianga.
3. Before 1946 the ‘QMA’ subtotals sum to less than the New Zealand total because data from the complete set of ports are not available.
4. Data up to 1985 are from fishing returns: data from 1986 to 1990 are from Quota Management Reports.
5. Data for the period 1931 to 1982 are based on reported landings by harbour and are likely to be underestimated as a result of under-reporting and discarding practices. Data include both foreign and domestic landings.

Table 2: Reported landings (t) of snapper from SNA 8 from 1983–84 to present and gazetted and actual TACCs (t) for 1986–87 to present. QMS data from 1986–present.

Fishstock	SNA 8	
FMAs	8, 9	
	Landings	TACC
1983–84†	1 725	–
1984–85†	1 546	–
1985–86†	1 828	–
1986–87	893	1 331
1987–88	1 401	1 383
1988–89	1 527	1 508
1989–90	1 551	1 594
1990–91	1 659	1 594
1991–92	1 459	1 594
1992–93	1 543	1 500
1993–94	1 542	1 500
1994–95	1 436	1 500
1995–96	1 558	1 500
1996–97	1 613	1 500
1997–98	1 589	1 500
1998–99	1 636	1 500
1999–00	1 604	1 500
2000–01	1 631	1 500
2001–02	1 577	1 500
2002–03	1 558	1 500
2003–04	1 667	1 500
2004–05	1 663	1 500
2005–06	1 434	1 300
2006–07	1 327	1 300
2007–08	1 304	1 300
2008–09	1 345	1 300
2009–10	1 280	1 300
2010–11	1 313	1 300
2011–12	1 360	1 300
2012–13	1 331	1 300
2013–14	1 275	1 300
2014–15	1 272	1 300
2015–16	1 328	1 300
2016–17	1 334	1 300
2017–18	1 288	1 300
2018–19	1 293	1 300
2019–20	1 347	1 300
2020–21	1 295	1 300
2021–22	1 720	1 600
2022–23	1 728	1 600

† FSU data. SNA 8 = Statistical Areas 037, 039–048.

In 1 October 2005 the TACC for SNA 8 was reduced to 1300 t within a TAC of 1785 t to ensure a faster rebuild of the stock. From 1 October 2021, the TACC for SNA 8 was increased to 1600 t with allowances for customary and recreational sectors and other sources of mortality (Table 3).

All commercial fisheries have a minimum legal size (MLS) for snapper of 25 cm.

Table 3: TACs, TACCs, and allowances (t) for SNA 8 as of 1 October 2023.

Fishstock	TAC	TACC	Customary allowance	Recreational allowance	Other mortality
SNA 8	3 065	1 600	100	1 205	160

Foreign fishing

Japanese catch records and observations made by New Zealand naval vessels indicate that significant quantities of snapper were taken from New Zealand waters by Japanese vessels from the late 1950s until 1977. There are insufficient data to quantify historical Japanese catch tonnages for the respective snapper stocks. However, trawl catches have been reported by area from 1967 to 1977, and longline catches from 1975 to 1977 (Table 4). These data were supplied to the Fisheries Research Division of MAF in the late 1970s; however, the data series is incomplete, particularly for longline catches.

Table 4: Reported landings (t) of snapper from 1967 to 1977 by Japanese trawl and longline fisheries.

Year	(a) Trawl	Trawl catch (all species)	Total snapper trawl catch	SNA 8
1967		3092	30	NA
1968		19 721	562	309
1969		25 997	1 289	929
1970		31 789	676	543
1971		42 212	522	403
1972		49 133	1 444	1 217
1973		45 601	616	466
1974		52 275	472	363
1975		55 288	922	735
1976		133 400	970	676
1977		214 900	856	708

Year	(b) Longline	Total Snapper	SNA 8
1975		1 510	749
1976		2 057	1 127
1977		2 208	1 104

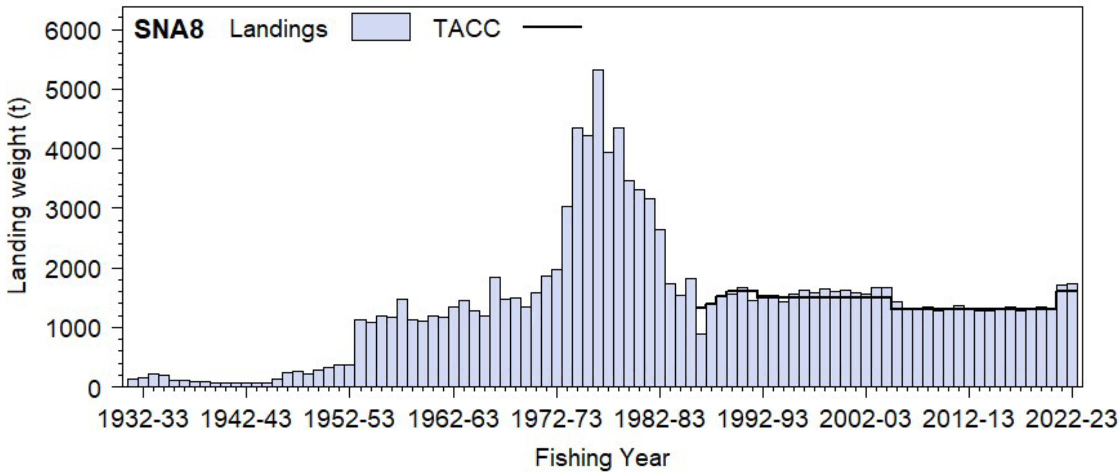


Figure 1: Total reported landings and TACC for SNA 8.

1.2 Recreational fisheries

The snapper fishery is the largest recreational fishery in New Zealand. It is the major target species on the northeast and northwest coasts of the North Island and is targeted seasonally around the rest of the North Island and the top of the South Island. The current allowance within the SNA 8 TAC is shown in Table 3.

1.2.1 Management controls

The two main methods used to manage recreational harvests of snapper are minimum legal size limits (MLS) and daily bag limits. Both have changed over time (Table 5). The number of hooks permitted on a recreational longline was reduced from 50 to 25 in 1995.

Table 5: Changes to minimum legal size limits (MLS) and daily bag limits used to manage recreational harvesting levels in SNA 8.

Stock	MLS	Bag limit	Introduced
SNA 8	25	30	1/01/1985
SNA 8 (FMA 9 only)	25	20	30/09/1993
SNA 8 (FMA 9 only)	27	15	1/10/1994
SNA 8	27	10	1/10/2005

1.2.2 Estimates of recreational harvest

A background to the estimation on recreational harvest of snapper is provided in the Introduction – Snapper chapter. Recreational harvest estimates for SNA 8 are provided in Table 6.

In 2005, the Snapper Working Group and Plenary considered recreational catches from SNA 8. Two alternative levels were assumed for the recreational catch from 1990 to 2004, either 300 t or 600 t. The Plenary considered that these values were likely to bracket the true average level of catch in this period. The estimate from the 2006–07 aerial overflight survey of the SNA 8 fishery (260 t) suggests that the assumed value of 300 t may have been the more plausible. There are potential sources of bias associated with the aerial-access estimate, both negative (a potential underestimation of the shore-based harvest, especially to the south) and positive (over-reporting of harvests by charter boat operators in a log book survey which are included in the estimate). The 2011–12, 2017–18 and 2022–23 national panel surveys provided plausible results and are considered to be broadly reliable. Web camera/ creel survey boat ramp monitoring in SNA 8 started in late 2011 and has found no general trend in fishing effort, but a gradual fluctuating increase in catch rates and hence harvest, since that time (up to 2021–22), consistent with the National Panel Survey. Preliminary examination of the 2022–23 data suggest a decline in that year, consistent with the reduced National Panel Survey estimate. No estimates of absolute catch have yet been developed from these ramp monitoring data.

Table 6: Recreational catch estimates for snapper stocks. Totals for a stock are given in bold. The telephone/diary surveys ran from December to November but are denoted by the January calendar year. Mean fish weights were obtained from boat ramp surveys (for the telephone/diary and panel survey catch estimates). Numbers and mean weights are not calculated in the tag ratio method. Amateur charter vessel (ACV) and recreational take from commercial vessels under s111 general approvals as reported, with Total the sum of NPS, ACV and s111. ACVs have only been required to report harvest for SNA since 2020–21.

			Harvest survey			ACV	s111	Total
Stock	**Year**	**Method**	**Number of fish (000s)**	**Harvest estimate (t)**	**CV**	**(t)**	**(t)**	**(t)**
SNA 8								
Total	1991	Tag ratio	–	**250**	–			
Total	1994	Telephone/diary	361	**238**	–			
Total	1996	Telephone/diary	271	**236**	–			
Total	2000	Telephone/diary	648	**661**	–			
Total	2001	Telephone/diary	1 111	**1 133**	–			
Total	2007	Aerial-access	–	**260**	**0.10**			
Total	2011–12	Panel survey	557	**630**	**0.16**	**3**	**9**	**641**
Total	2017–18	Panel survey	654	**830**	**0.13**	**16**	**6**	**853**
Total	2022–23	Panel survey	354	**543**	**0.12**	**157**	**2**	**702**

1.3 Customary non-commercial fisheries

Snapper form important fisheries for customary non-commercial, but the annual catch is not known. The information on Māori customary harvest under the provisions made for customary fishing is limited (Table 7). It is likely that Māori customary fishers utilise the provisions under recreational fishing regulations. Customary reporting varies within SNA 8. Large areas of SNA 8 are gazetted under the Fisheries (Kaimoana Customary Fishing) Regulations 1998 which require reporting on authorisations. In the areas not gazetted, customary fishing authorisations issued would be under the Fisheries (Amateur Fishing) Regulations 2013, where there is no requirement to report. The numbers reported in Table 7 may be underestimated.

Table 7: Customary approvals and reported harvest in SNA 8 from 2005–06 to present.

Year	Quantity approved (kg)	Reported actual quantity harvested (kg)	Number of authorisations issued
2005–06	250		4
2006–07	120	40	2
2007–08	130	30	2
2008–09	330	151	5
2009–10	4 747	3 046	14
2010–11	5 130	3 089	14
2011–12	3 800	2 633	16
2012–13	4 367	2 439	17
2013–14	12 825	4 514	30
2014–15	17 730	5 887	20
2015–16	14 388	6 553	31
2016–17	3 693	1 669	17
2017–18	770	534	11
2018–19	7 090	1 344	32
2019–20	15 500	2 422	34
2020–21	9 770	270	24
2021–22	2 460		7
2022–23	29 225		74

1.4 Illegal catch

No new information is available to estimate illegal catch. For modelling SNA 8 an assumption was made that non-reporting of catch was 20% of reported domestic commercial catch prior to 1986 and 10% of reported domestic commercial catch since the QMS was introduced. This was to account for all forms of under-reporting. These proportions were based on the black-market trade in snapper and higher levels of under-reporting (to avoid tax) that existed prior to the introduction of the QMS. The 10% under-reporting post-QMS accounts for the practice of ‘weighing light’ and the discarding of legal-size snapper.

1.5 Other sources of mortality

No estimates are available regarding the amount of other sources of mortality on snapper stocks; although high-grading of longline fish and discarding of under-sized fish by all methods occurs. An at-sea study of SNA 1 commercial longline fisheries in 1997 (McKenzie 2000) found that 6–10% of snapper caught by number were under 25 cm (MLS). Results from a holding net study indicate that mortality levels amongst lip-hooked snapper caught shallower than 35 m were low.

Estimates for incidental mortality were based on other catch-at-sea data using an age-length structure model for longline, trawl, seine, and recreational fisheries. In SNA 1, estimates of incidental mortality for the year 2000 from longlines were less than 3% and for trawl, seine, and recreational fisheries between 7% and 11% (Millar et al 2001). In SNA 8, estimates of trawl and recreational incidental mortality were lower, mainly because of low numbers of 2- and 3-year old fish estimated in 2000.

In SNA 1, recreational fishers release a high proportion of their snapper catch, most of which was less than 27 cm (recreational MLS). An at-sea study in 2006–07 recorded snapper release rates of 54.2% of the catch by trailer boat fishers and 60.1% of the catch on charter boats (Holdsworth & Boyd 2008). Incidental mortality estimated from condition at release was 2.7% to 8.2% of total catch by weight depending on assumptions used.

2. BIOLOGY

For further information on snapper biology refer to the Introduction – Snapper chapter. A summary of published estimates of biological parameters for SNA 8 is presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Estimates of biological parameters.

Fishstock	Estimate			Source
1. Instantaneous rate of natural mortality (*M*)				
SNA 1, 2, 7, & 8	0.075			Hilborn & Starr (in Langley 2020)
2. Weight = a(length)^b (Weight in g, length in cm fork length)				
All	a = 0.04467	b = 2.793		Paul (1976)
3. von Bertalanffy growth parameters				
	Both sexes combined			
	K	t_0	L_∞	
SNA 8 (1990s)	0.16	-0.11	66.7	Gilbert & Sullivan (1994)

3. STOCKS AND AREAS

New Zealand snapper are thought to comprise either seven or eight biological stocks based on: the location of spawning and nursery grounds; differences in growth rates, age structure, and recruitment strength; and the results of tagging studies. These stocks comprise three in SNA 1 (East Northland, Hauraki Gulf, and Bay of Plenty (BoP)), two in SNA 2 (one of which may be associated with the BoP stock), two in SNA 7 (Marlborough Sounds and Tasman Bay/Golden Bay) and one in SNA 8. Tagging studies reveal that limited mixing occurs between the three SNA 1 biological stocks, with greatest exchange between BoP and Hauraki Gulf.

Tagging studies in SNA 8 have shown considerable movements of fish between South Taranaki Bight and the area north of Cape Egmont. However, recent *Kaharoa* WCNI trawl surveys indicate some differences in the age structure of snapper between the two areas which may suggest a degree of spatial stratification of the SNA 8 stock.

Tagging studies in SNA 7 (1986/87) and SNA 8 (1990) revealed reciprocal movements of snapper between Tasman Bay/Golden Bay and South Taranaki Bight, although the scale of the movement was relatively low during that period.

Location-based snapper catch data from the trawl fisheries in SNA 7 and southern SNA 8 has revealed an overlap of the distribution of snapper catches in western approaches to Cook Strait between D'Urville Island and Kapiti Island, particularly since 2014–15. Snapper age compositions are available from recent (2018–2020 and 2022) *Kaharoa* trawl surveys of the South Taranaki Bight and the Tasman Bay/Golden Bay area of the WCSI trawl survey. There are strong differences in the relative strength of individual year classes from the 2019 South Taranaki Bight age composition compared to the 2018 and 2020 surveys, while the 2019 STB age composition was very similar to the age structures from the 2019 Tasman Bay/Golden Bay trawl survey and the commercial fishery in the TBGB area. These observations indicate a degree of mixing of the snapper populations between SNA 7 and the STB area (SNA 8), although the extent of mixing may vary between years, potentially related to variation in the timing of the main spawning period in each area.

The 2022 South Taranaki Bight (STB) trawl survey age composition was dominated by a very strong age 5 cohort , representing the 2017 year class. The 2017 year class was not present as a strong age 3 cohort in the previous (2020) survey, suggesting an immigration of snapper into the STB region. The 2017 year class appeared to be moderately strong in the age compositions from 2018, 2019 and 2020 surveys in the northern area of SNA 8 (at ages 1, 2 and 3 yr, respectively) but was not particularly strong in the 2022 survey age composition. The 2017 year class was observed to be very strong in

Tasman Bay and Golden Bay when surveyed in 2019, 2021 and 2023. This year class also represented the dominant age class in the 2022–23 age composition from the SNA 7 commercial fishery

The SNA 8 trawl fishery was sampled in 2022–23, partitioned between the areas north and south of Cape Egmont. The age composition of the commercial fishery in STB was similar to the age composition from the 2022 WCNI trawl survey, dominated by the 2017 year class at age 5. For all three fisheries (north of Egmont, STB and Tasman Bay/Golden Bay, there were broad similarities in the relative proportion of fish in the older (greater than 9 years) age classes. A comparison of the average length at age from the three areas revealed that initial growth rates were faster for fish sampled from Tasman Bay and Golden Bay, while growth rates were similar between STB and northern SNA 8 up to age 5 years. For older age classes, the average length at age diverged between STB and northern SNA 8, with average length at age for STB approximating Tasman Bay and Golden Bay from about 7 years of age.

4. STOCK ASSESSMENT

An assessment for SNA 8 was conducted in 2020 and finalised in 2021. The assessment was refined and updated in 2024.

4.1. Stock assessment model

The 2024 stock assessment of SNA 8 was conducted using an age-structured population model implemented in Stock Synthesis. There were two main changes to the assessement from the previous (2021) assessment: a) the model was initialised in 1975 under exploited conditions and b) recruitment deviates were not constrained to an average of zero (simple deviates rather than dev_vector). Initialising the model in 1975 reduced the influence of the catch from the pre QMS period when the annual catches are considered to be more uncertain. The initial (1975) population age structure was informed by the age composition data available from the trawl fisheries from the mid-late 1970s. The entire catch history (from 1931) was retained for a model sensitivity. A simulation study based on SNA 8 had shown that the parameterisation of annual recruitment via constrained deviates biased estimates of spawning biomass (current and reference) under conditions of increasing recruitments, as evident in SNA 8 (Marsh et al 2024). Recruitment parameterisation based on simple deviates provided unbiased estimates of spawning biomass.

The model incorporated data to the 2023–24 fishing year (2024 model year) including:

- Commercial catches by method, 1931–2024;
- Recreational catches, 1931–2024;
- Tag biomass estimates and population length compositions 1990, 2002;
- Estimates of numbers at age 2, 3, 4, and 5 year from *Kaharoa* inshore trawl surveys;
- Single trawl CPUE indices 1997–2023;
- Pair trawl CPUE indices 1974–1991;
- Single trawl catch age compositions (27 observations) 1975–2023;
- Pair trawl catch age compositions (18 observations) 1975–2006;
- Recreational catch length compositions; and
- Average length-at-age derived from otolith samples.

Commercial catches

Reported commercial catches from 1931–1990 were compiled by Gilbert & Sullivan (1994). These catches include estimates of reported foreign catches for 1968 to 1979 (Gilbert & Sullivan 1994). Annual commercial catches from 1986–87 to 2022–23 fishing years were available from catch reporting under the Quota Management System (Figure 2). The 2023–24 catch was assumed to be at the level of the TACC (with an additional allowance for unreported catch).

Previous snapper assessments have included an additional component of catch to account for unreported commercial catches (Davies et al 2006). Annual unreported catches were assumed to represent an additional 20% of the reported catch in the period prior to the introduction of the QMS and 10% of the reported catch in the subsequent years.

The commercial catch was dominated by two main fishing methods: single trawl and pair trawl. The pair trawl fishery developed in the mid-1970s and was the dominant method during 1976–1989 accounting for an average of 75% of the annual catch. The proportion of the catch taken by each trawl method during 1989–90 to 2023–24 was determined from the catch and effort data from the fisheries.

The compiled commercial catch history included estimates of foreign catch; i.e., trawl catches from 1967 to 1977 and longline catch from 1975 to 1977 were included at the reported levels (Davies 1999). However, catch reports from the Japanese longline fleet were not available for 1965–1974 (Davies et al 2006). Following previous assessments (e.g., Davies et al 2006), an additional catch of 2000 t per annum was assumed for the Japanese fleet for that period.

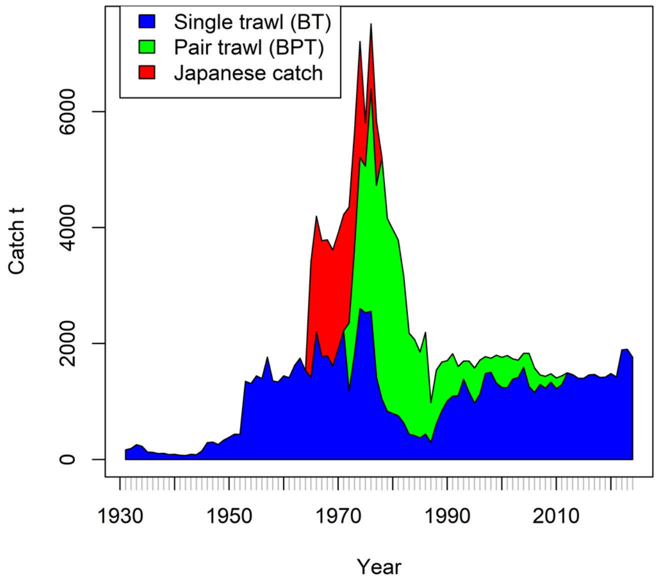


Figure 2: Annual commercial catches included in the SNA 8 assessment, assuming unreported Japanese longline catches of 2000 t. The base model was initialised in 1975 (i.e., excluded earlier catches).

Recreational catches

A time series of recreational catch for 1931–2024 was configured, informed by recreational catch estimates available from 1990 (Figure 3). There was no information available regarding earlier (pre-1990) levels of recreational catch. Previous assessments formulated annual catches for this period based on an assumed initial (1931) level of recreational catch of 60 t and a linear increase in catch over subsequent years to the level of the 1990 recreational catch estimate (239 t). Annual catches were assumed to remain at the same level during 1990–1996.

Recreational catches in 2007, 2012, 2018 and 2023 were assumed to be equivalent to the point estimates from the respective recreational surveys, assumed known without error. The scaled boat ramp survey estimates of recreational catch provided annual catch estimates for the years 2013 to 2022 (except 2018).

A preliminary catch history was configured that assumed that recreational catches increased linearly between each successive survey. The resultant catch history was incorporated in a preliminary configuration of the assessment model to generate a biomass trajectory that provided estimates of the exploitation rate for the recreational fishery corresponding to each survey estimate. The resultant estimates of exploitation rate were then used to iteratively regenerate the recreational catches in the years between the survey estimates (for 1997 to 2011). Exploitation rates were assumed to change linearly between successive surveys and the interpolated exploitation rate was applied to the annual biomass estimates to determine the recreational catches for the intervening years.

The recreational catch estimate for 2023 was considered to be an anomolously low value, presumably due to unfavourable weather conditions during 2022–23. Two alternative scenarios were assumed for the recreational catch in 2024 and for the projection period: a) based on the exploitation rate corresponding to the recreational catch estimate from 2018 (*RecF*) or b) a constant recreational catch of 1000 t, representing an intermediate level of catch between the *RecF* option and the 2023 recreational catch estimate.

Length composition data from the SNA 8 recreational fishery revealed that smaller fish were typically caught inside the west coast harbours (Hokianga, Kaipara, Manukau, Raglan, Kawhia) rather than the coastal area outside the harbours. On that basis, the annual recreational catches were partitioned into two fisheries based on these definitions, apportioned based on the recent distribution of catch (approximately 25% within harbours).

Customary Catch

There were no reliable estimates of annual customary catches from SNA 8 available for inclusion in the assessment model, although recent information indicated that the level of customary catch was relatively low (less than 6 t per annum, Table 7). A component of the customary catch was probably included within the time series of recreational catch estimates and no additional estimate for customary catch was included in the assessment model.

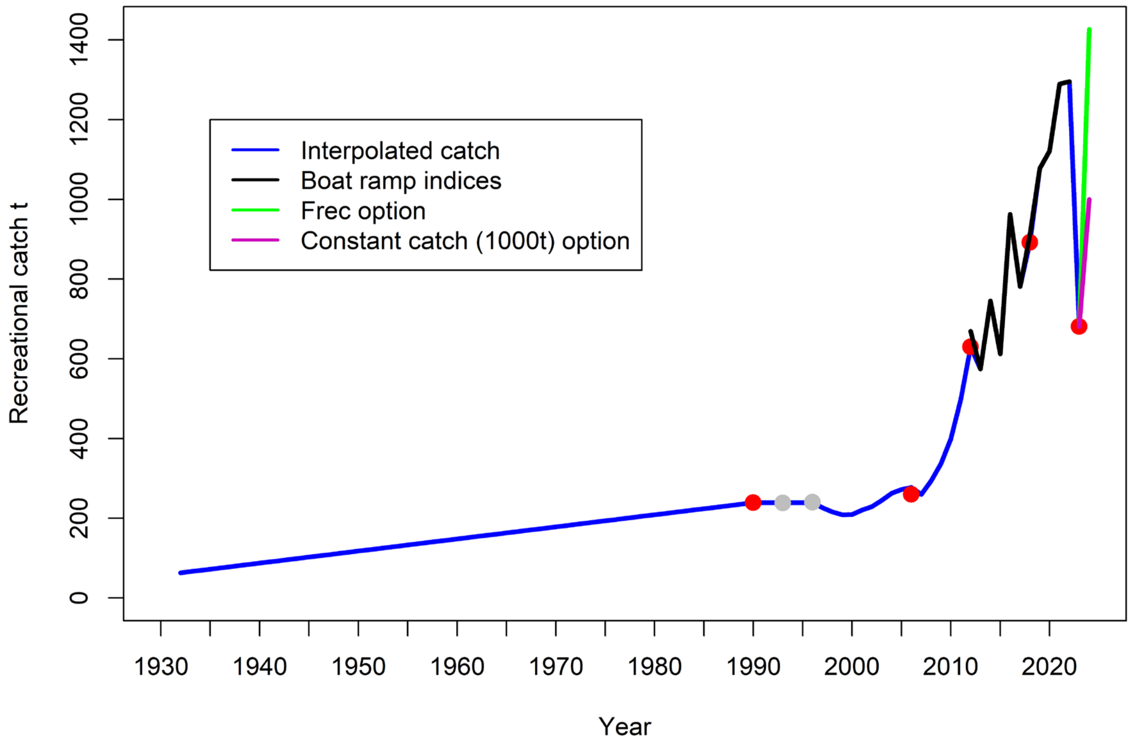


Figure 3: Recreational catch estimates from SNA 8 (red points) and boat ramp indices (black line) used in the derivation of the recreational catch history (blue line). Two alternative levels of catch were assumed for 2024: the green line represents the catch predicted assuming the recreational harvest rate from 2018, the purple line assumes a recreational catch of 1000 t. The grey points are additional recreational catch estimates from the 1993–94 and 1995–96 telephone diary surveys (presented for comparison only).

Tagging biomass

Two estimates of absolute biomass are available from tagging programmes conducted in 1990 and 2002. The current assessment used the equivalent biomass estimates included in a previous assessment; i.e., 1990, 9505 t (CV = 0.18) and 2002, 10 442 t (CV = 0.12) (Davies et al 2013). The biomass estimates were derived to represent all fish in the population 3 years and older, corresponding to fish above 25 cm fork length (FL).

The two tagging programmes also provided estimates of the population length composition for fish above 25 cm FL. The current assessment used the population proportions-at-length included in the previous assessment (Davies et al 2013). These length compositions represented fish aged 3 years and older and, accordingly, were truncated at a lower bound of 25 cm which approximates the lower length range of 3-year old fish.

Trawl survey indices

Trawl surveys of inshore finfish species, including snapper, off the west coast of the North Island were first conducted by RV *Kaharoa* in October–November 1986 and 1987. The spatial extent of these initial surveys was relatively limited and did not encompass the broader distribution of snapper. The survey area was extended for the subsequent series of trawl surveys that were conducted in 1989, 1991, 1994, 1996, and 1999 (Morrison and Stevenson 2001). The *Kaharoa* trawl surveys were reinstated in 2018 and additional surveys were conducted in 2019, 2020 and 2022 (Jones et al 2022; 2023; 2024).

Since 1989, all surveys have encompassed a core area (from Ninety Mile Beach to North Taranaki Bight extending to the 100 m depth contour) and applied a similar spatial stratification. The spatial domain of the core area was refined to account for the removal of the Māui dolphin trawl exclusion area which was not sampled by the 2018–2022 trawl surveys (Jones et al 2023).

The core area was applied to derive a comparable time series of survey biomass indices and scaled length compositions. The length compositions were converted to age compositions using an age-length key derived from otoliths collected from the core area of the survey.

The surveys were conducted at the beginning of the fishing year (October–November) and have been assigned to the corresponding model year following the calendar year of the survey. For example, the trawl survey in November 2018 was assigned to the 2019 model year (and denoted the 2018–19 survey). Correspondingly, the ages of the sampled fish were incremented to the age at 1 January following the survey (e.g., fish aged 1+ at the time of the survey were assigned an age of 2 years).

The five biomass indices from the earlier surveys were substantially lower than the biomass estimates from the three recent surveys, although there was also a considerable difference in the magnitude of these three recent indices (Figure 4). The corresponding age compositions from the surveys revealed that the earlier surveys were dominated by 2- to 5-year old fish. For the recent surveys, the age compositions comprised a higher proportion of fish older than 6 years, particularly for the 2019–20 and 2020–21 surveys.

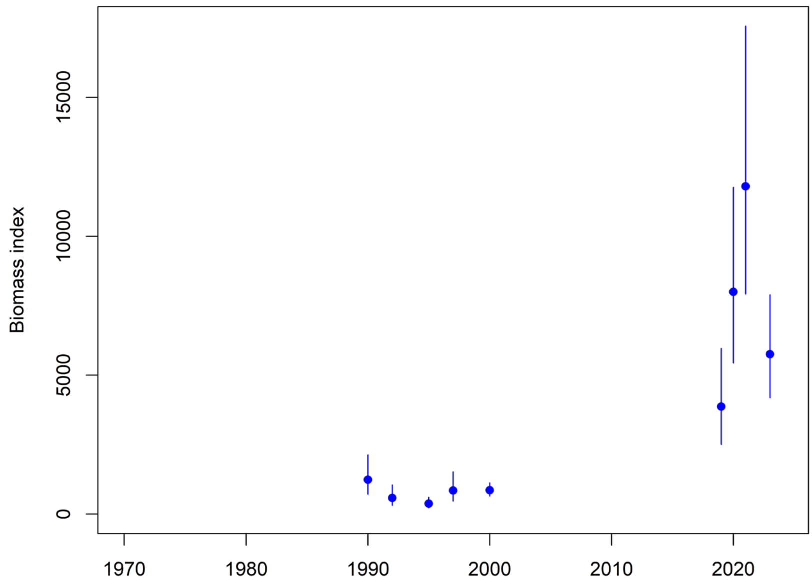


Figure 4: Snapper total biomass indices (and 95% confidence intervals) from the core area of the WCNI trawl survey area.

Most of the large increase in the biomass indices between the 2018–19 and 2019–20 trawl surveys was attributable to an increase in the abundance of fish surveyed in the 8- to 12-year old age range fish. The comparison of successive estimates of the individual year classes indicated that the catchability of these older fish was greater for the 2019–20 survey than for the 2018–19 survey. There was some concern regarding the timing of the 2018–19 trawl survey which was later than the other surveys in the series. The distribution of snapper catches and the gonadal maturation data suggested that the 2018–19 survey may have coincided with the main spawning period (Jones et al 2023). Consequently, a significant proportion of the adult biomass may have been concentrated in areas not adequately sampled by the survey, in particular the shallower areas in the vicinity of harbour entrances.

Similarly, there was a considerable increase in the snapper biomass indices between the 2019–20 and 2020–21 trawl surveys (Figure 4), including an increase in the abundance of older fish (> 10 years). Most of the increase in biomass was in the 50–100 m depth range in the vicinity of Kaipara Harbour and Manukau Harbour. This may indicate an expansion of the distribution of mature snapper, from the shallower areas not fully sampled by the current trawl survey, thereby increasing the overall availability of snapper to the trawl survey. The lower biomass estimate from the 2022–23 trawl survey was attributable to a considerably lower abundance of the fish in the year classes sampled in the two previous surveys at ages greater than 5 y (i.e., fish older than 7 y in 2020–2023). This indicated that the availability of mature fish to the 2022–23 trawl survey was considerably lower than for the 2019–20 and 2020–21 trawl surveys.

The survey age compositions were partitioned to derive estimates of numbers of fish in each age class. Survey estimates of 1-year old fish (0+) were relatively imprecise compared with estimates of numbers of fish in the older age classes. There were a limited number of year classes for which successive estimates of relative abundance (numbers of fish) were available from across a range of age classes from successive surveys. However, estimates of the numbers of 1-year old fish were generally substantially lower than subsequent estimates of the same year class at older ages and the individual estimates were poorly correlated. This indicated that the survey estimates of 1-year old fish probably did not provide a reliable index of the relative abundance of an individual year class. This was probably because a large proportion resided in shallow water and harbours, which were not surveyed.

In contrast, there was a reasonable correspondence between successive trawl survey estimates of the number of fish in a specific year class over the 2- to 5-year age classes (Figure 5). For example, the estimates of abundance of the 2016 year class from the three successive trawl surveys (at ages 3, 4, and 5 years) indicated that the year class was one of the strongest indices from the respective series. This suggested that the trawl surveys were consistently sampling fish within those age classes.

Commercial age compositions

There is a considerable time series of age compositions available from the single trawl (27 years) and pair trawl fisheries (18 years), including samples from the mid-late 1970s. These samples are characterised by a high proportion of fish in the oldest, aggregated age group (30+ ‘plus group’). Fish older than 30 years represented a trivial proportion of the sampled catch from 1990 onwards. The more recent age compositions tended to be dominated by relatively strong year classes that are evident in successive samples.

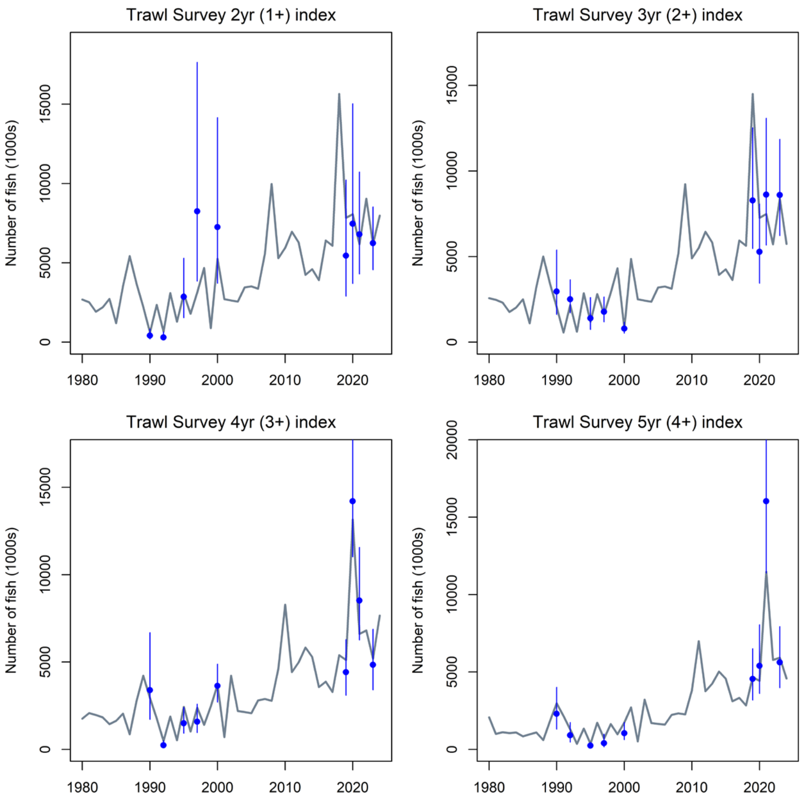


Figure 5: The four sets of age-specific trawl survey abundance indices (blue points and associated 95% confidence intervals) and the model fit to each set of indices (grey lines).

CPUE indices

Vignaux (1993) derived CPUE indices for the pair trawl fishery for 1974–1991 and these CPUE indices have been incorporated in the stock assessments of SNA 8 conducted since Gilbert & Sullivan (1994). The CPUE indices declined considerably during 1974–1986 and then recovered somewhat over the subsequent years (Figure 6). The CPUE indices have an associated CV of 0.13–0.30 (Vignaux 1993) and Davies et al (2013) assumed an additional process error of 0.20.

A standardised CPUE analysis of the SNA 8 single trawl fishery catch and effort data was updated, including data from 1996–97 to 2022–23 (following Langley 2017). The data set comprised individual trawl records (fishing event-based data) from trawls targeting snapper, trevally, and red gurnard during January–April. The annual CPUE indices were relatively constant during 1996–97 to 2006–07. The indices increased considerably over the subsequent years; the indices from 2018–19 to 2022–23 were 438% of the initial decade, although the recent indices were highly variable (Figure 6). In recent years, there had been a limited number of vessels operating in the inshore trawl fishery and the operation of the vessels had changed in response to the increase in the abundance of snapper (increased avoidance). It was considered that the standardised CPUE analysis had not adequately accounted for the changes in fleet configuration and fishing operation.

The trawl CPUE indices updated for this assessment had an associated CV of 0.12–0.18. From the results of preliminary modelling, the CPUE indices were assigned a process error of 0.1.

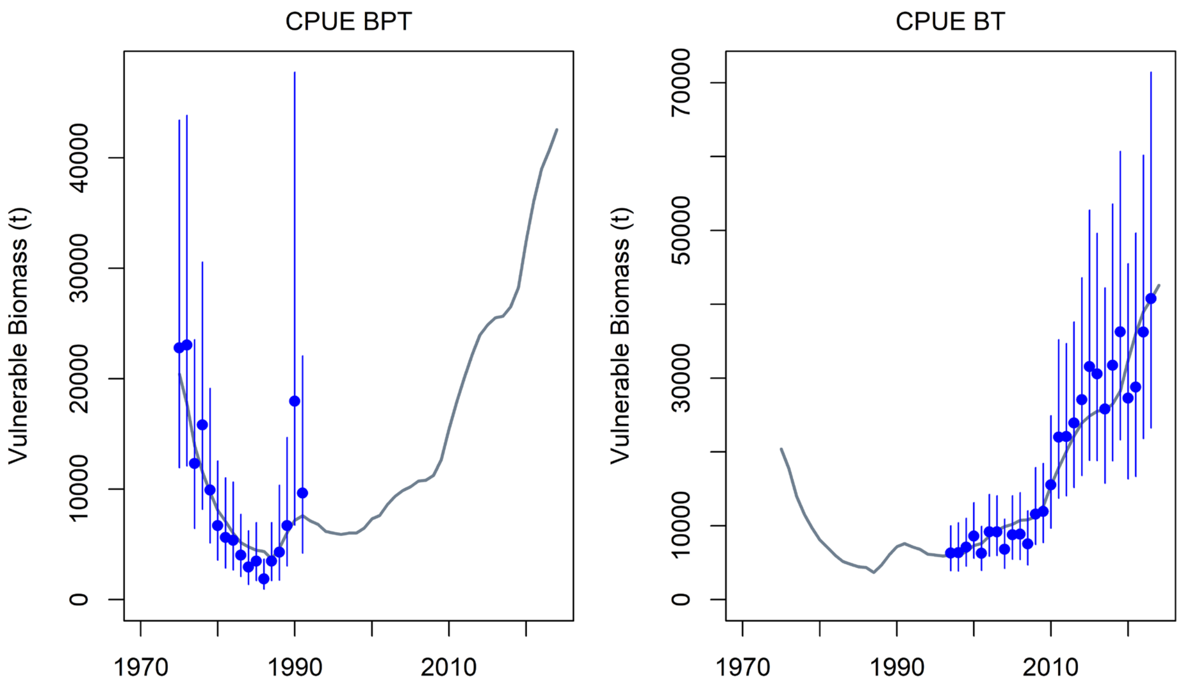


Figure 6: BPT CPUE indices (left) and BT CPUE indices (right). The grey line represents the model fit to the indices.

Model structure

The base assessment model initialised the population in 1975 under exploited conditions. The population structure included 30 age classes (both sexes combined), the oldest age class representing an aggregated 'plus' group (30 years and older). The model data period extended to the 2024 year (2023–24 fishing year). The initial age structure was derived by estimating an equilibrium fishing mortality rate and recruitment deviations for the initial age structure (1950–1974 year classes). An alternative model option (*start1931*) incorporated the entire SNA 8 catch history (from 1931) and assumed that the initial population age structure was in an equilibrium, unexploited state.

The key biological parameters for the SNA 8 stock assessment are presented in Table 9. Natural mortality (*M*) was specified as a constant value of 0.075 based on the analysis of Hilborn & Starr (given in Langley 2020).

There is no evidence of sexual dimorphism in snapper growth and the growth parameters have been determined for both sexes combined. There is a large data set of age-length observations from snapper sampled from the mid-1970s to recent years. These data indicated that the growth of snapper had varied over time characterised by three periods: slower growth rates of fish sampled during the 1970s, higher growth rates during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, and slower growth rates since the mid-2000s. Separate growth parameters (*k* and *Linf*) of the von Bertalanffy function were estimated for these three time blocks (1931–1979, 1980–2005, and 2006–2024) during the preliminary modelling phase. The model was informed by the time series of age-length data aggregated as annual mean length-at-age observations. The resultant growth parameters were fixed in the final set of model options (and the mean length-at-age observations were not included in the input data sets). The estimated growth parameters were very similar for the early and recent periods, and the growth parameters for the intervening period were comparable with the published growth parameters derived from the same period.

The parameterisation of growth in Stock Synthesis constrains annual growth increments to be greater than or equal to zero. Thus, the decline in growth rates between 2005 and 2006 resulted in a transition in the growth of individual cohorts with the length of the older cohorts remaining constant for several years.

Maturity was assumed to be length based and was informed by gonad staging data from the WCNI trawl surveys (1994, 1996, 1999, 2018 and 2019)[1]. The maturity ogive was parameterised with a logistic function with 50% maturity at 35 cm (5% at 26 cm, 95% at 44 cm). This corresponded to onset of maturity from about 3 years and full maturity at about 7 years.

Table 9: Biological parameters and priors for the interim base case model.

Component	Parameters	Value, Priors	
Biology	*M*	0.075	Fixed
	VB Growth	*Len1* = 13.1 cm	Fixed
	1931–1979	*k* = 0.146, *Linf* = 54.5 cm	Fixed
	1980–2005	*k* = 0.112, *Linf* = 69.6 cm	Fixed
	2006–2021	*k* = 0.150, *Linf* = 54.4 cm	Fixed
	CV length-at-age	0.08	Fixed
	Length-wt	*a* = 4.467e-5, *b* = 2.793	Fixed
	Maturity at length (logistic)	L50% = 35 cm, L5% 26 cm, L95% 44 cm	Fixed
Recruitment	LnR_0		Estimated (1)
	B-H SRR steepness *h*	0.95	Fixed
	SigmaR σR	0.6	Fixed
	Recruitment deviates	Initialising period (1950–1974)	Estimated (25)
		Main period (1975–2021)	Estimated (47)

The model was structured with an annual time step comprising two seasons (October–January and February–September). The seasonal structure partitioned the main spawning period and commercial catch (season 1). Spawning was assumed to occur instantaneously at the start of the year and recruitment was a function of the spawning biomass at the start of the year. A Beverton-Holt spawning stock-recruitment relationship (SRR) was assumed with a fixed value of steepness (*h*). The main recruitment deviates (1975–2021) from the SRR were estimated assuming a standard deviation of the natural logarithm of recruitment (σ_R) of 0.6. There was no averaging constraint applied to the recruitment deviates (i.e. estimated as simple independent deviates). Additional recruitment deviates (1950–1974) were estimated to initialise the age structure in 1975.

The base model assumed a high value of steepness (0.95). Initially, the high value was adopted to ensure stability in the MCMC sampling; a lower value of steepness (0.85) resulted in a significant proportion of samples crashing during the 2000s due to very low recruitments predicted from the low stock biomass and the assumed SRR. This issue was resolved when recruitments were estimated as simple independent deviates. However, there was no information to support the lower value of steepness; the very high recruitments occurred in the mid 2000s when the stock was at a very low level (aproximately 10% SB_0). Nonetheless, the lower value of steepness (0.85) was retained for a model sensitivity.

The model was configured to encompass three commercial fisheries: single trawl (BT), pair trawl (BPT), and Japanese longline. In addition, there were two recreational fisheries (inside and outside harbours). Age composition data are available from the single trawl fishery (27 observations) and the pair trawl fishery (18 observations). For all age compositions, no error was assumed to be associated with the age determination.

A comparison between the age compositions from the single and pair trawl fisheries revealed no appreciable difference in the age structure of the catch from the two methods. A common age-specific selectivity function was assumed for the two fisheries, and the associated sets of CPUE indices parameterised using a flexible, double normal selectivity function enabling the estimation of the age

[1] The 2020 WCNI survey was not included because its timing potentially excluded part of the population which was spawning in unsurveyed area; the 2022 WCNI survey data were not available when this analysis was conducted.

of peak selectivity, the widths of the ascending and descending limbs, and the selectivity of the terminal (oldest) age class.

There were no data from the Japanese longline fishery and the level of catch was assumed. The selectivity function for the fishery was defined to approximate the selectivity of a generalised snapper longline fishery with a knife-edge selectivity at age 5 years and full selection of the older age classes.

The two recreational fisheries were characterised by differences in length composition. The length composition data were included in a preliminary model option and the selectivity of each fishery was estimated using a length-based, double normal selectivity function. The resultant estimate of selectivity for the harbour fishery was tightly constrained around a mode of 28–32 cm, whereas the recreational fishery outside the harbours was estimated to have a broader selectivity for larger fish. The selectivity parameters were fixed in the final model options and the recreational fishery length frequency observations were excluded from the estimation procedure.

The tagging biomass estimates and associated population length observations were derived for all fish aged 3 years and older (Davies et al 2006). Accordingly, an age-specific, knife-edged selectivity function was assumed with an associated catchability of 1.0.

The WCNI trawl survey data were reconfigured to determine estimates of the relative abundance of the individual age classes which appear to be consistently sampled by the trawl survey; i.e., fish aged 2 (1+), 3 (2+), 4 (3+), and 5 (4+) years. Thus, four separate sets of indices were derived from the trawl survey data, expressed as the number of fish at age from each survey (with an associated coefficient of variation). The indices were incorporated in the model with a corresponding age-specific selectivity and separate catchability coefficients. The abundance indices and age compositions used in the model are summarised in Table 10. Estimated parameters and structural assumptions are summarised in Table 11.

The initialising equilibrium fishing mortality was estimated assuming an age-based selectivity equivalent to the BPT and BT selectivity function. Fishing mortality was modelled using a hybrid method that calculates the harvest rate using Pope's approximation and then converted to an approximation of the corresponding fishery specific *F*. The timing of the fisheries and CPUE indices within the year were specified so that annual catches were taken instantaneously halfway through the first season (October–January). This was generally consistent with the period of the main commercial catch.

Table 10: Summary of input data sets for the Base Case assessment model. The relative weighting includes the Effective Sample Size (ESS) of age/size composition data and the coefficient of variation (CV) associated with the abundance data.

Data set	Model years	Nobs	Error structure	Observation error/ESS	Process error
			Lognormal		
Tag biomass	1990, 2002	2	Lognormal	0.18, 0.12	–
BT CPUE indices	1997–2023	26	Lognormal	0.12–0.18	0.1
BPT CPUE indices	1974–1991	18	Lognormal	0.12–0.30	0.2
Trawl survey age 2yr	1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023	8	Lognormal	0.16–0.39	–
Trawl survey age 3yr	1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023	8	Lognormal	0.16–0.32	–
Trawl survey age 4yr	1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023	8	Lognormal	0.12–0.38	–
Trawl survey age 5yr	1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023	8	Lognormal	0.18–0.45	–
BT age comp	1975, 1976, 1990–2010, 2013, 2016, 2019, 2023	29	Multinomial	ESS 6–35	
BPT age comp	1975, 1976, 1978–1980, 1986, 1987, 1989–1992, 2000–2006	18	Multinomial	ESS 10–36	
Tag length comp	1990, 2002	2	Multinomial	ESS 10	

Table 11: Estimated parameters and structural assumptions for the interim base model.

Parameter	Number of parameters	Parameterisation, priors, constraints
LnR_0	1	Uniform, uninformative
Main Rec devs (1975–2021)	47	SigmaR 0.6, simple deviates
Initial Rec devs (1950–1974)	25	SigmaR 0.6
Initial equilibrium F	1	Uniform, uninformative
Selectivity BPT and BT commercial	4	Double normal
Selectivity JP	–	Knife edged 5 yr
Selectivity trawl survey age indices	–	Fixed, age specific (4)
Catchability trawl survey age indices	4	Uniform, uninformative
Selectivity tag	–	Knife edged 3 yr
Selectivity Recreational (2)	–	Fixed
CPUE q	2	Uniform, uninformative

The main data inputs were assigned relative weightings based on the approach of Francis (2011). The two sets of trawl CPUE indices (BPT and BT) were assumed to have a lognormal distribution with observation error specified as the standard error of the individual CPUE indices. Based on initial model fits the indices were assigned an additional process error of 0.1 for the BT CPUE indices and 0.2 for the BPT CPUE indices. The tagging biomass indices and age-specific trawl survey indices were assigned the native coefficient of variation from each index with no additional process error. For the two sets of fisheries age compositions, the individual age compositions were each assigned an Effective Sample Size approximating the value derived from Method TA1.8 of Francis (2011).

Model uncertainty was determined using Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) implemented using the Metropolis-Hastings algorithm. For each model option, 1000 MCMC samples were drawn at 1000 intervals from a chain of 1.1 million following an initial burn-in of 100 000. The performance of the MCMC sample was evaluated using a range of diagnostics.

Previous assessments determined stock status relative to the equilibrium, unexploited spawning (mature) biomass of female fish (SB_0) with current biomass defined as the biomass in the terminal year of the model ($SB_{CURRENT}$ or SB_{2024}).

However, recruitment to the SNA 8 stock was estimated to have been substantially higher during 2005–2021 compared to the preceding period (1975–2004). Consequently, estimates of SB_0 (derived from long term average recruitment) were not considered to represent a reliable measure of the overall productivity of the stock under recent levels of recruitment. Estimates of current stock biomass were considered to be more reliable in absolute terms (rather than relative to SB_0), indicating that a fishing mortality based management target would be appropriate. Current levels of fishing mortality were reported relative to the level of fishing mortality that resulted in $SB_{40\%}$ under equilibrium conditions (i.e., $F_{SB40\%}$). The reference level of age specific fishing mortality was determined from the composite age-specific fishing mortality from the last year of the model data period (2023–24). Estimates of equilibrium yield were determined from the level of fishing mortality that produced the target biomass level ($F_{SB40\%}$), which was equivalent to an exploitation rate of 4.8%.

Results

The model provided a coherent fit to all the main datasets. The trend in stock biomass was consistent with previous stock assessments (Davies et al 2013, Langley 2020, Langley 2021); i.e., the stock was estimated to have been heavily exploited in the early model years due to the high catches in the 1960s and early 1970s. Fishing mortality rates remained high during the late 1970s and early 1980s and the stock biomass reached a nadir in 1987 at about 7% of the current (2023–24) biomass level. The spawning biomass increased slightly in the late 1980s, following the recruitment of the strong 1985 and 1986 year classes, and then remained at a relatively low level throughout the 1990s. The more recent data sets, specifically the recent CPUE indices and age compositions, provided a coherent signal that stock abundance had increased considerably since 2010, primarily due to an increase in recruitment from the mid-2000s.

Annual recruitments were generally below average during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Figure 7). Relatively large recruitments were estimated during the mid-2000s when the stock biomass was still at a low level. Recruitment was well above average during 2005–2021, with exceptionally high recruitments estimated for 2006, 2016–2018 and 2020. These estimates of recent recruitment were informed by the age-specific trawl survey indices.

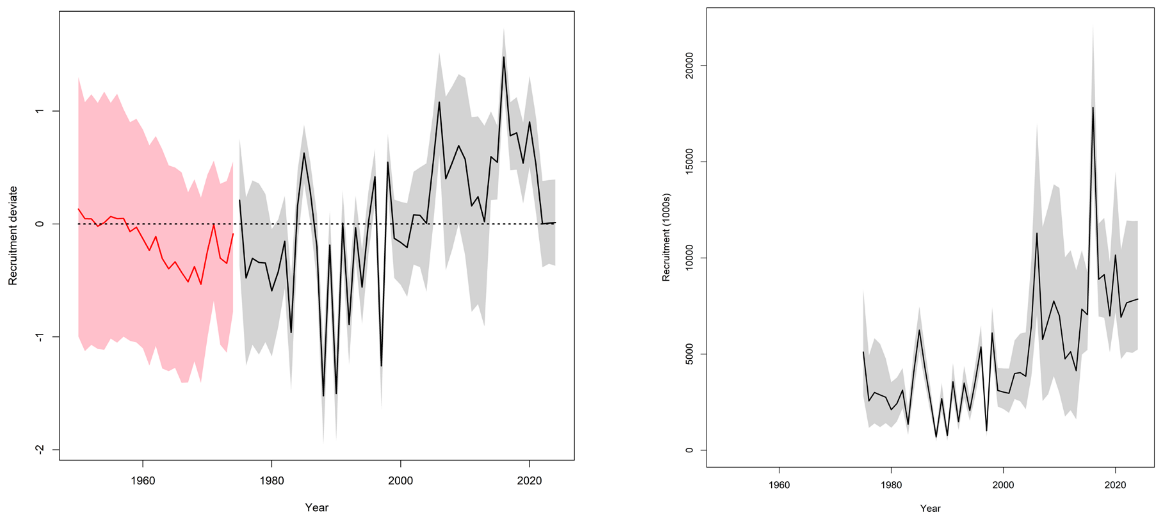


Figure 7: Estimates of annual recruitment deviates (left) and recruitment (numbers of fish, thousands) (right) from the Base Case model (MCMCs). The black line represents the median of the MCMC estimates and the shaded area represents the 95% credibility interval. Recruitment deviates for the initialisation period (1950-1974) are presented in red.

Spawning biomass increased by about 400% from 2009–10 to 2023–24 There was a corresponding decline in fishing mortality over the last 15 years and current (2024) fishing mortality was estimated to approximate the rate that equates to the target biomass level (under equilibrium conditions i.e., $F_{SB40\%}$ or U = 4.8%) (Table 12). The current level of spawning biomass was approximately 50% higher than the biomass in 1975 (the period of peak catch from the fishery).

Sensitivities

A number of key assumptions of the model were investigated as (single change) sensitivities to the Base Case model (Table 12).

The sensitivities investigated the influence of key stock productivity parameters, specifically a lower value of natural mortality of 0.06 (*LowM*), a higher variability (sigmaR 1.1) in the deviations of recruitment deviations (*SigmaR11*), recruitment deviations constrained to zero (*RecruitDev*) and a lower value of steepness (0.85) of the SRR (*Steep085*). The influence of key data sets was also investigated. The trawl CPUE indices from the last five years (2019–2023) were excluded due to concerns regarding the reliability of the indices (*CPUEex5yr*). The selectivity of the commercial fisheries was alternatively configured to fully select the older age classes (*BPTBTlogistic*). The sensitivity of the stock affinity of snapper in the southern portion of SNA 8 was examined by excluding the FMA 8 (STB) commercial catch (*FMA8exclude*). In addition, the base case model was compared to a full catch history model (*start1931*) with simple recruitment deviates estimated from 1950 and a steepness parameter of 0.95.

The model sensitivities yielded estimates of current biomass that are similar to the Base Case, although current (2024) biomass was estimated to be higher for the *SigmaR11* model and lower for the *BTBPTselect* option. The reference fishing mortality rate ($F_{SB40\%}$) was very similar for all model options, with the exception that $F_{SB40\%}$ was slightly lower for the *LowM* and *Steepness85* options. Current levels of fishing mortality approximated the reference level and potential current yields (at $F_{SB40\%}$) were estimated at 3000–4500 t (for 2023–24).

Table 12: Estimates of current (2024 = FY 2023–24) spawning biomass (t) (median and the 95% confidence interval from the MCMCs) and probability of fishing mortality being below the level of fishing mortality associated with the interim target biomass level. The potential yield in 2024 was derived by applying the $F_{SB40\%}$ fishing mortality rate to the current (2024) biomass.

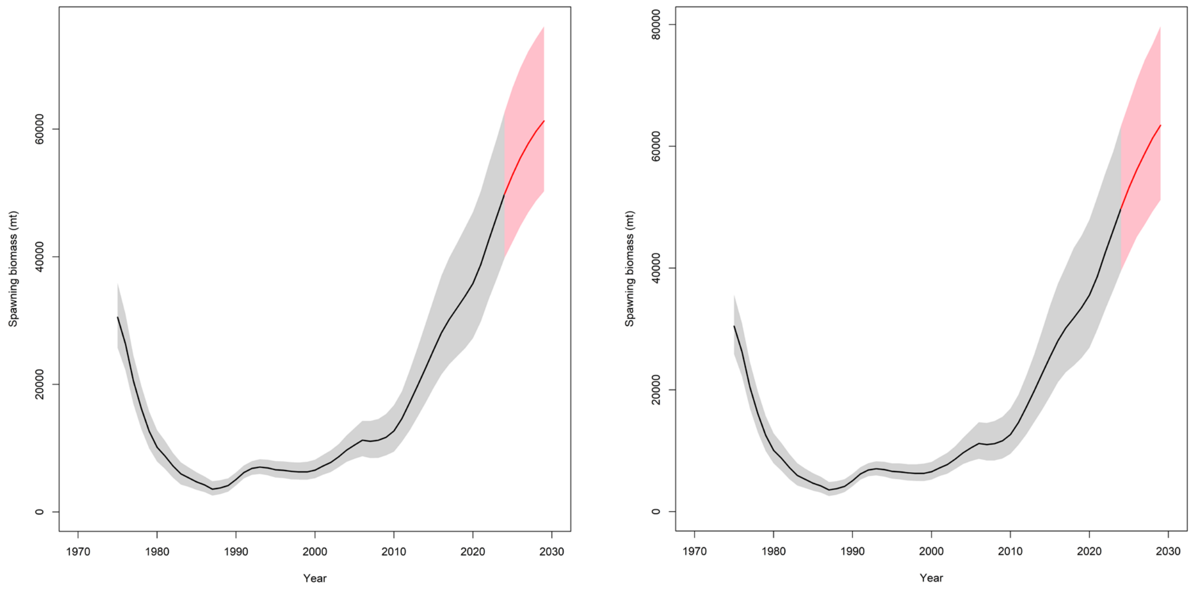
Model	*SB2024*	Ftarget	F2024/Ftarget	Pr(F2024 < Ftarget)	CurrentYieldF40%
Base	49 830	0.0494	0.999	0.508	3 667
	(39 807–62 665)		(0.814–1.204)		(3 043–4 444)
BTBPTselect	40 719	0.0535	1.091	0.190	3 149
	(32 688–50 953)		(0.897–1.317)		(2 614–3 847)
CPUEex5yr	50 818	0.0495	0.98	0.560	3 746
	(38 720–64 827)		(0.800–1.246)		(2 996–4 496)
FMA8exclude	48 932	0.0493	0.99	0.538	3 578
	(38 653–62 240)		(0.805–1.222)		(2 949–4 389)
LowM	53 222	0.0413	1.142	0.119	3 383
	(41 179–68 136)		(0.918–1.435)		(2 705–4 117)
RecDevVector	50 270	0.0494	0.992	0.525	3 688
	(37 002–64 943)		(0.797–1.279)		(2 920–4 521)
SigmaR11	55 184	0.0492	0.911	0.784	4 015
	(41 835–72 683)		(0.717–1.153)		(3 242–5 001)
Steepness85	52 802	0.0461	1.006	0.471	3 674
	(41 374–67 945)		(0.805–1.253)		(2 967–4 505)
start1931	49 491	0.0496	1.008	0.464	3 625
	(38 202–62 104)		(0.824–1.252)		(2 964–4 413)

Projections

Five-year stock projections (to the 2028–29 fishing year) were conducted using the Base Case model assuming a status quo commercial catch; i.e., the current TACC of 1600 t and an allowance of 10% for unreported catches (total 1760 t). Three options were assumed for the recreational catch consistent with the assumptions regarding recreational catch in 2024: recreational fishery mortality rate at the average from 2014–2023 (*RecF*) or a constant catch of 1000 t/y (*RecCatch*), and also a constant catch set at the level of the recreational allowance of 1205 t/y (*RecAllow*).

Annual recruitment deviates for the 5-year projection period were resampled from the recent (2011–2020) average level with the standard deviation equivalent in sigmaR (0.6). The average level of estimated recruitment in the recent period was considerably higher (~87% higher) than the long-term average level of recruitment. Note that recruitment for the first 3 years of the 5 year projection period was informed by the trawl survey estimates of abundance for 1–4 year old fish.

The projections indicated that the stock biomass was expected to increase, and fishing mortality would decrease, during the 5-year projection period due, in part, to the contribution of the recent high recruitment from the 2016 to 2021 year classes. At current levels of catch, the biomass at the end of the period (2028–2029) was projected to be 23% or 27% higher than current (2023–24) biomass respectively under the two recreational catch scenarios (Figure 8, Table 13).



Project *Frec* Project *RecCatch*

Figure 8: Annual spawning biomass estimated from the Base Case model (black) and the five-year projection (red) assuming two options for the 2024 recreational catch and the recreational catch in the projection period: the *RecF* model assumes current commercial catch and a constant harvest rate for the recreational fishery and the *RecCatch* option assumes a constant catch of 1000 t. The solid line represents the median of the MCMCs and the shaded area represents the 95% confidence interval. The horizontal dashed line represents the default target biomass level.

Table 13: Projected spawning biomass relative to current biomass (and 95% confidence interval) and the probability of the fishing mortality being below the interim target level ($F_{SB40\%}$) in 2029 (fishing year 2028–29) for the base case based on three assumptions for recreational catch: the *RecF* model assumes current commercial catch and a constant harvest rate for the recreational fishery, the *RecAllow* model assumes a constant catch of 1205 t, and the *RecCatch* option assumes a constant catch of 1000 t.

Model	Catch (t)	SB_{2029}/SB_{2024}	Pr ($F_{2029} < FSB40\%$)
RecF	1 760 + Rec (Rec ~ 1 465)	1.23 (1.14–1.34)	0.99
RecAllow	2 965 (1 760 + 1 205)	1.24 (1.15–1.36)	0.99
RecCatch	2760 (1760+1 000)	1.27 (1.18–1.39)	1.00

Qualifying comments

For the current assessment, recent trends in stock abundance were strongly informed by the recent CPUE indices from the trawl fishery. The overall trend in these indices was generally consistent with other recent observations from the fisheries. However, it was apparent that the operation of the commercial fisheries has changed considerably in response to the increase in the abundance of snapper over the last decade. These changes were unlikely to have been fully accounted for in the derivation of the standardised CPUE indices. Since these changes in the commercial fishery have been largely directed at reducing the bycatch of snapper while targeting other commercial species due to quota scarcity, this may have led to a CPUE series that was biased low.

Since 1989–90, the area north of Cape Egmont has accounted for 90–95% of the SNA 8 commercial catch. Most observational data included in the model were also derived from the northern area of the fisheries including the CPUE indices, trawl survey indices, and the commercial age composition data. Consequently, the dynamics of the assessment model will be strongly influenced by the data from the northern area of the fisheries.

Prior to the mid-1980s, the southern area of the fisheries accounted for approximately 30% of the commercial catch. The 2002 tagging programme estimated that 21% of the SNA 8 biomass resided in the southern area (Gilbert et al 2005) and while most movements of tagged fish were relatively limited, there were northward movements of tagged fish from the South Taranaki Bight and reciprocal movements of fish from the areas north of Cape Egmont.

Previously, similar patterns in the age structure of snapper from South Taranaki Bight and northern areas of the SNA 8 fisheries were apparent from commercial catch-at-age data (Walsh et al 2006b). However, the results of the recent *Kaharoa* trawl surveys and catch sampling have identified some differences in the age structure of the snapper population between the two areas, including differences in the relative strength of individual year classes. There are some similiarities in the age compositions of snapper recently sampled from the South Taranaki Bight and Tasman Bay/Golden Bay from both *Kaharoa* trawl surveys and the commercial fishery. Snapper from the South Taranaki Bight also grow significantly faster than those found further north, but not as fast as those from SNA 7. This may indicate some degree of spatial structure in the SNA 8 population and possible linkages between the southern area of SNA 8 and the SNA 7 (Tasman Bay/Golden Bay) stock.

Productivity of the SNA 8 stock appeared to have varied considerably over the history of the fisheries, with variable levels of recruitment and variation in growth rates (that appeared to be related to stock abundance). Recent recruitment was estimated to be at an historically high level, suggesting that the stock was currently in a phase of higher productivity and that there was a degree of non-stationarity in the assumed nature of the relationship between spawning biomass and recruitment that violated the assumption of equilibrium conditions. Further consideration is required to develop stock status indicators that accounted for variation in the productivity of the SNA 8 stock.

The higher potential yields estimated for the stock are attributable to the higher recruitment estimated for the recent period (10–15 years). These recruitments have the potential to support higher catches over the short term (5 years), although future catch levels would need to be determined based on ongoing monitoring and assessment.

Derivation of Reference Points

Substantial increases in annual recruitment suggested an increase in productivity, and possibly a regime shift, for SNA 8. Owing to the complexities associated with estimating SB_0 under these circumstances, the Inshore Working Group made the decision to base the target reference point on exploitation rate instead of biomass as a proportion of SB_0. Consistent with international best practice the hard and soft limits were based on absolute biomass.

The default target accepted for SNA 8 was the exploition rate that, if applied perfectly over the long term and assuming equilibrium recruitment, would produce a spawning biomass of 40% of that in the absence of fishing ($F_{SB40\%}$; U=4.8%).

The hard limit was selected as the average spawning biomass estimated for the period 1992 to 2000. This was a relatively stable period that was close to the default Harvest Strategy Standard hard limit of 10% SB_0 when estimated in previous assessments, particularly the 2005 assessment (Davies et al 2013), which did not include the period of increased productivity. This period was preceeded by a period of very high catch from which it took the stock a long time to rebuild, possibly due to impaired recruitment. The soft limit was assumed to be twice the biomass of the hard limit.

Future research considerations

Abundance indices

Trawl surveys: The variability in the catchability of adult snapper in the recent west coast North Island (WCNI) trawl surveys has limited the utility of the trawl surveys to monitor the overall magnitude of the increase in the abundance of snapper. The limitations of the trawl survey are partly attributable to variability in the timing of the survey relative to the main spawning period and the restriction from sampling within the Māui dolphin trawl exclusion zone. Further, the distribution of snapper appears to have expanded (into deeper water) as the abundance of snapper has increased over recent years. A longer time series of trawl surveys may enable a more thorough evaluation of the factors influencing the variability in catchability of adults (> 5 y) and, thereby, increase the utility of the trawl surveys to monitor stock abundance. In the interim, subsequent trawl surveys would continue to provide additional estimates of the abundance of recent year classes (surveyed as 2- to 5-year old fish).

A change should be considered in the timing of the survey to coincide with the survey off the WCSI and jointly monitor snapper in both SNA 7 and SNA 8 during the summer period when the availability of snapper may be less variable. The South Taranaki Bight area could be included with the WCSI trawl survey.

Investigate alternative methods for sampling abundance of fish within the dolphin areas.

CPUE indices: The trawl CPUE indices represent an important index of abundance within the current assessment model. However, there have been considerable recent changes in the operation of the inshore trawl fishery to minimise snapper catches. These changes in fishing operation are not fully accounted for in the standardised CPUE analysis and, consequently, the CPUE indices are likely to underestimate the extent of the increase in snapper abundance, especially in recent (5–10) years. This limits the utility of the CPUE indices to monitor current and future trends in stock abundance. Investigate splitting the vessels with long time series into two or more pseudo vessels.

Changes in fishing behaviour: A project to document past and ongoing changes in gear and fishing behaviour should also be undertaken to help interpret CPUE data. This should be considered as two phases: (i) developing ongoing relationships with fishers, and (ii) working together to ensure relevant information is identified and provided. Note that this is generic across snapper and other fisheries.

Given the possible breakdown of the bottom trawl CPUE series in recent years, and difficulties encountered with including the estimates of adult biomass from the trawl survey in the stock assessment, a review of future monitoring of SNA 8 biomass is recommended.

Other methods for developing abundance indices: Such a review should also consider other potential methods for monitoring abundance such as another traditional mark-recapture experiment (in association with SNA 7) or a genetics-based estimate of stock size.

Stock structure and biological parameters

Stock structure: Age compositions from recent inshore trawl surveys should be examined to further investigate stock relationships between SNA 8 and SNA 7 and the spatial structure of the snapper population within sub areas of SNA 8.

Extend whole genome sequencing analysis by including additional samples to resolve stock relationships between SNA 1 and SNA 8, and SNA 8 and SNA 7.

Biological parameters: Further refinement to the maturity ogive should be made, incorporating the entire time series of trawl surveys in the analysis, and weighting according to biomass in each stratum. Estimates of several other biological parameters also rely on old analyses and should also be revisited and revised if necessary. In particular, estimates of growth by eras should be evaluated.

Catch and age

Catch sampling: The current assessment highlights the utility of regular (currently two years in five) sampling of the age composition of the commercial catch, particularly to provide information regarding the relative strength of recruited year classes. The current assessment estimates an exceptionally strong 2016 year class based on observations of the year class from the three recent trawl surveys (at ages 3, 4, and 5 years). This year class is likely to have recruited to the commercial fisheries over the last few years and age composition data from the fisheries will refine model estimates of the relative strength of the year class. The next catch sampling programme for SNA 8 is scheduled for 2025–26. Sampling should be conducted year round because of the extension of the snapper fishery into the autumn and winter months. This sampling should adopt a random age frequency approach as the age-length key approach currently used is not appropriate over such a long period.

Recreational fisheries
The increase in the catch from the recreational fishery highlights the importance of this component of the fishery, which currently accounts for approximately 30–40% of the total catch. Consequently, it is important to routinely monitor the level of recreational catch to determine total removals from the stock. The next national panel survey to estimate recreational catch is scheduled for 2027–28, depending on budgets and priorities. Indices of recreational fishing activity developed from web cam observations at key boat ramps within SNA 8 have also been incorporated in the current assessment. The 2022–23 survey harvest estimate appears to be anomolously low and should be further evaluated via data collected from the monitoring of recreational fishing activity at selected boat ramps.

Other

Environmental considerations: Recruitment variation is undoubtedly linked to variation in the prevailing environmental conditions (including sea temperature) associated with the spawning period and/or larval phase. Further investigation should be conducted to identify correlations between snapper recruitment estimates and key environmental variables to improve understanding of snapper recruitment dynamics. Consideration should be given to examining SNA 7 and SNA 8 together with a view to understanding the drivers of productivity changes.

Density-dependent processes: Projections indicate a continued increase in population biomass at current catch levels. The potential for density-dependent processes to curb such large increases should be considered and possibly modelled.

Other sources of fishing-related mortality: The default assumption is that Other Sources of Fishing Related Mortality added 20% to catches prior to the introduction of snapper into the QMS in 1986 and 10% thereafter. The basis for this assumption should be revisited, particularly for the latter period. In particular, it is important to identify whether there are any regulations or changes in fishing behaviour that could have resulted in step changes.

Harvest Control Rule: Develop a harvest control rule that requires the exploition rate to decline below the target as the spawning biomass approaches the soft limit, e.g., akin to the Harvest Strategy Standard default.

Overfishing Threshold: Develop an overfishing threshold that is higher than the exploitation rate target or consider changing the nomenclature to refer to a fishing target rather than an overfishing threshold.

Model Structure: Develop one or more spatially structured models that include SNA 7 and relevant parts of SNA 8. Explore sensitivities to dome shaped selectivity and report non-vulnerable biomass.

6. STATUS OF THE STOCKS

Stock Structure Assumptions

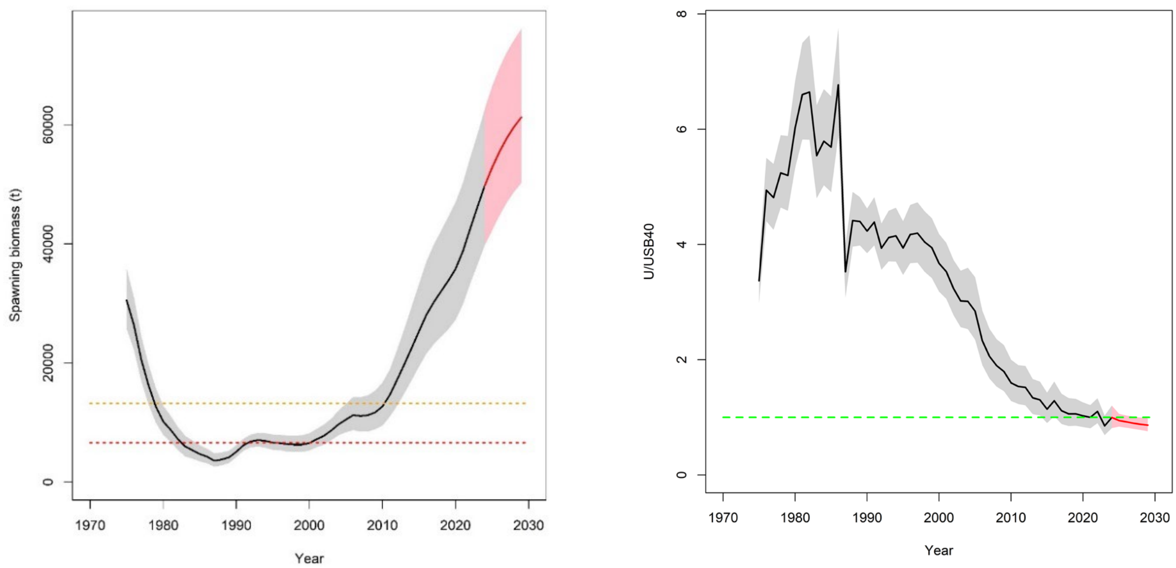
New Zealand snapper are thought to comprise either seven or eight biological stocks based on the location of spawning and nursery grounds, differences in growth rates, age structure, recruitment strengths, and the results of tagging studies. These stocks are assumed to comprise three in SNA 1 (East Northland, Hauraki Gulf, and Bay of Plenty), two in SNA 2 (one of which may be associated with the Bay of Plenty stock), two in SNA 7 (Marlborough Sounds and Tasman/Golden Bay/west coast South Island), and one in SNA 8. Tagging studies reveal that limited mixing occurs between the three SNA 1 biological stocks, with the greatest exchange between the Bay of Plenty and Hauraki Gulf.

- **SNA 8**

Tagging, genetic, and morphological studies have revealed that snapper off the northern west coast of the North Island (i.e., FMA 9) are likely to comprise a separate biological unit. Snapper within FMA 8 (southern SNA 8) may be composed of an increasing proportion of snapper from the SNA 7 biological stock. There is increasing evidence to support the hypothesis that the area of SNA 8 south of Cape Egmont (FMA 8) represents an area of mixed snapper from SNA 7 and SNA 8.

Stock Status		
Most Recent Assessment Plenary Publication Year	2024	
Catch in most recent year of assessment	Year: 2023–24	Catch: 2 965 t (TACC 1 600 t, additional mortality 160 t, recreational allowance 1 205 t)
Assessment Runs Presented	Base Case model	
Reference Points	Interim target: $U_{SB40\%}$= 4.8% Soft Limit: twice the biomass of the hard limit Hard Limit: average spawning biomass between 1992 and 2000 Overfishing threshold: $U_{SB40\%}$	
Status in relation to Target	About as Likely as Not (40–60%) to be at or below	
Status in relation to Limits	Soft Limit: Very Unlikely (< 10%) to be below. Hard Limit: Exceptionally Unlikely (< 1%) to be below	
Status in relation to Overfishing	$U_{2023–24}$ was estimated to be near $U_{SB40\%}$. Overfishing is About as Likely as Not (40–60%) to be occurring	

Historical Stock Status Trajectory and Current Status



Base model *SSB* (left) and $U_{SB40\%}$ status (right) trajectories for the period since 1975 (green dotted line indicates target $U_{SB40\%}$ fishing mortality rate). Projections are in red. The line represents the median and the shaded area represents the 95% credible interval. The red and orange dashed lines represent the hard and soft limits, respectively.

Fisheries and Stock Trends	
Recent Trend in Biomass or	Spawning biomass was estimated to have increased gradually during

Proxy	the 2000s followed by a more rapid increase in biomass from 2009 (in response to above average recruitment since the mid 2000s).
Recent Trend in Fishing Mortality or Proxy	Fishing mortality is estimated to have declined by around 75% since 2000.
Other Abundance Indices	The increase in the trawl survey adult (> 6 y) biomass indices between 1989–1999 and 2018–2022 corroborates the recent increase in biomass.
Trends in Other Relevant Indicators or Variables	Estimates of recreational catch have increased 3-fold since 2006. The increase in catch is likely to be related to an increase in stock abundance.

Projections and Prognosis	
Stock Projections or Prognosis	Abundance is Very Likely (> 90%) to increase over the next five years at projected levels of catch (3187 t compared to a TAC of 3065 t) and is Likely (> 60%) to increase at higher levels of catch corresponding to $U_{SB40\%}$ (in 2024 = 3667 t). Exploitation rate is Likely to decline over the next five years at projected catch levels (including plausable levels of recreational harvest).
Probability of Current Catch or TACC causing Biomass to remain below or to decline below Limits	Soft Limit: Very Unlikely (< 10%) Hard Limit: Exceptionally Unlikely (< 1%)
Probability of Current Catch or TACC causing Overfishing to continue or to commence	Unlikely (< 40%)

Assessment Methodology		
Assessment Type	Level 1 – Full Quantitative Stock Assessment	
Assessment Method	Age-structured Bayesian stock assessment implemented with Stock Synthesis software and uncertainty estimated by MCMC	
Assessment Dates	Latest assessment Plenary publication year: 2024	Next assessment: 2029
Overall assessment quality rank	1 – High Quality	
Main data inputs	- Proportions at age data from the commercial fisheries	1 – High Quality
	- Estimates of biological parameters (e.g., growth, age-at-maturity and length/ weight), including temporal variation in growth	1 – High Quality
	- Standardised single trawl CPUE index of abundance	1 – High Quality (less reliable CPUE indices for the last 5–8 years)
	- Estimates of recreational harvest (recent levels)	1 – High Quality
	- Estimates of recreational harvest (pre-1990)	2 – Medium or Mixed Quality: level of catch is assumed
	- Commercial catch (from 1983 onwards)	1 – High Quality
	- Commercial catch (prior to 1983)	2 – Medium or Mixed Quality: less reliable reporting of catches prior to 1983
	- Two tag-based biomass estimates	1 – High Quality (second estimate)
	- Trawl survey age specific	

	indices	1 – High Quality
Data not used (rank)	- Trawl survey total biomass indices	2 – Medium or Mixed Quality: variable catchability of older age classes for the three most recent trawl surveys
Changes to Model Structure and Assumptions	Relative to the 2021 assessment: - Initialise stock in 1975 under exploited conditions; estimation of initialising *F* and recruitments (1950–1974). - BH SRR with an assumed value of steepness and recruitment deviates estimated (from 1975) as simple deviates (i.e. not constrained to an average of one). - Updated recreational catch history incorporating recent recreational catch estimate (2022/23) and boat ramp indices of fishing activity. Alternative assumptions for future recreational catches. - Revised maturity ogive.	

Major Sources of Uncertainty	- There have been considerable changes in the operation of the trawl fisheries during the assessment period related to the extent of targeting/avoidance of snapper. The CPUE analysis has endeavoured to account for some of these changes; however, the CPUE indices are considered to under-estimate the increase in abundance during the more recent years. - The shift in the overall level of recruitment is likely to be related to environmental conditions. Non-stationarity of the relationship between spawning biomass and recruitment is not represented by the stock-recruitment relationship and the assumed value of steepness. - The trawl survey has been excluded from key inshore areas in recent years.

Qualifying Comments
The stock structure relationship between the northern and southern areas of SNA 8 is unclear. The current assessment is primarily based on data from the northern area of the fisheries and the population dynamics may differ in the southern area. Domed selectivity for bottom trawl and bottom pair trawl results in cryptic biomass.

Fisheries Interactions
The primary species caught in association with snapper in bottom trawl fisheries are trevally, red gurnard, John dory, and tarakihi. Since 2010–11, most (> 80%) of the commercial catch of snapper has been taken as a bycatch of trawls targeting trevally and red gurnard.

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