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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Overcapacity and dynamics of a tuna fleet facing catch limits and high efficiency: the case of the Indian Ocean tuna fishery

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Abstract The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission expresses concern over the overfished state and susceptibility to the overfishing of yellowfin tuna (*Thunnus albacares*). Acknowledging the challenges of increased fishing effort in a profitable fishery, our study aims to understand factors influencing French purse seine fishing vessel dynamics. Our primary goal is to assess purse seine vessel utilisation with recent catch limits and compliance with the European Union Common Fisheries Policy, which mandates measures to align fishing capacity with opportunities to sustain fish stocks at maximum sustainable yield (MSY). Using Data Envelopment Analysis, we evaluate the relationship between vessel fishing capacity to catch limits and the MSY reference point for yellowfin tuna. Findings indicate that the French fleet could meet catch limits with approximately 21% fewer vessels if fully utilised and 26% fewer if reduced to meet their equivalent MSY share. Aligning capacity with fishing opportunities is crucial for the profitability and preservation of these essential tuna populations, resulting in more sustainable and economically viable fisheries.

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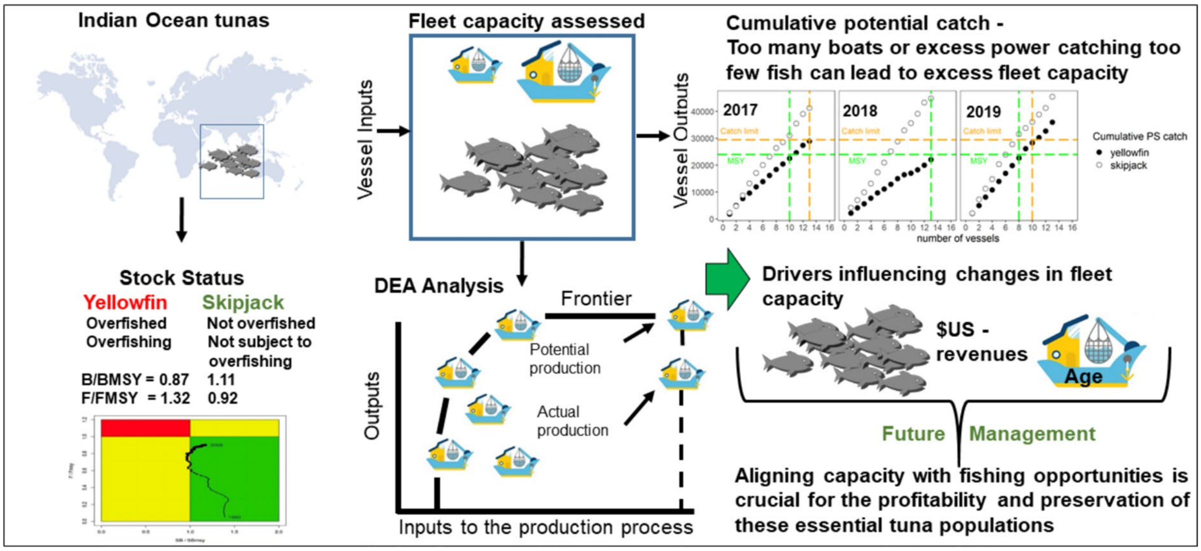
Graphical abstract



Keywords Yellowfin tuna · Purse seine · Excess capacity · Decision-making · Sustainability · Overfishing

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, excessive fishing capacity has surged due to a decade of fleet expansion and technological advancements in the high seas (Newton and Greboval 1999; Watson and Tidd 2018), impacting fisheries globally (Rousseau et al. 2019). This phenomenon is attributed to inadequate management (Ye and Gutierrez 2017), subsidies (Sumaila et al. 2021), and high-seas access to foreign fisheries (Tickler et al. 2018). According to Hilborn et al. (2020), excess fishing pressure results in about a 3–5% loss in potential yields from 50% of the world's potential catch, leading to overfishing in many fish stocks (FAO 2018). A highly efficient fleet facing catch limits (i.e., quotas) may also result in endogenous overcapacity, representing an economic waste of financing resources that could be invested more usefully in other fisheries or other sectors (Rust et al. 2016). Technical efficiency comes from the optimal use of inputs to produce a given quantity of output moving along the production frontier (the maximum level that can be produced using the available inputs–output-based). Alternatively, input-based technical efficiency measures the ability to reduce inputs while maintaining the same output. In contrast, technical change corresponds to a shift of the production frontier (higher output level with the same amount of inputs). The mixture of both, particularly present in high seas fisheries where the digital detection power of fish by larger vessels has increased tremendously, may result in excessive capacity (Tidd et al. 2023). The excessive capacity can appear even more clearly when a total allowable catch is introduced in the fishery (Felthoven 2002). Conversely, well-managed stocks can show significant improvements, highlighting the potential for recovery and thus solving the overcapacity problem (Hilborn et al. 2020).

Managing tuna fisheries is complex due to the migratory behaviour of tunas, which is influenced by environmental conditions, making it accessible to different fishing fleets and countries (Erauskin-Extramiana et al. 2023). This complexity poses political challenges, involving multiple participants with access rights across EEZ frontiers and the high seas, creating intricate interactions among coastal countries and distant water fishing nations (Sinan and Bailey 2020; Sinan et al. 2021). This is particularly true in the Indian Ocean, where the purse-seine fleet catches a

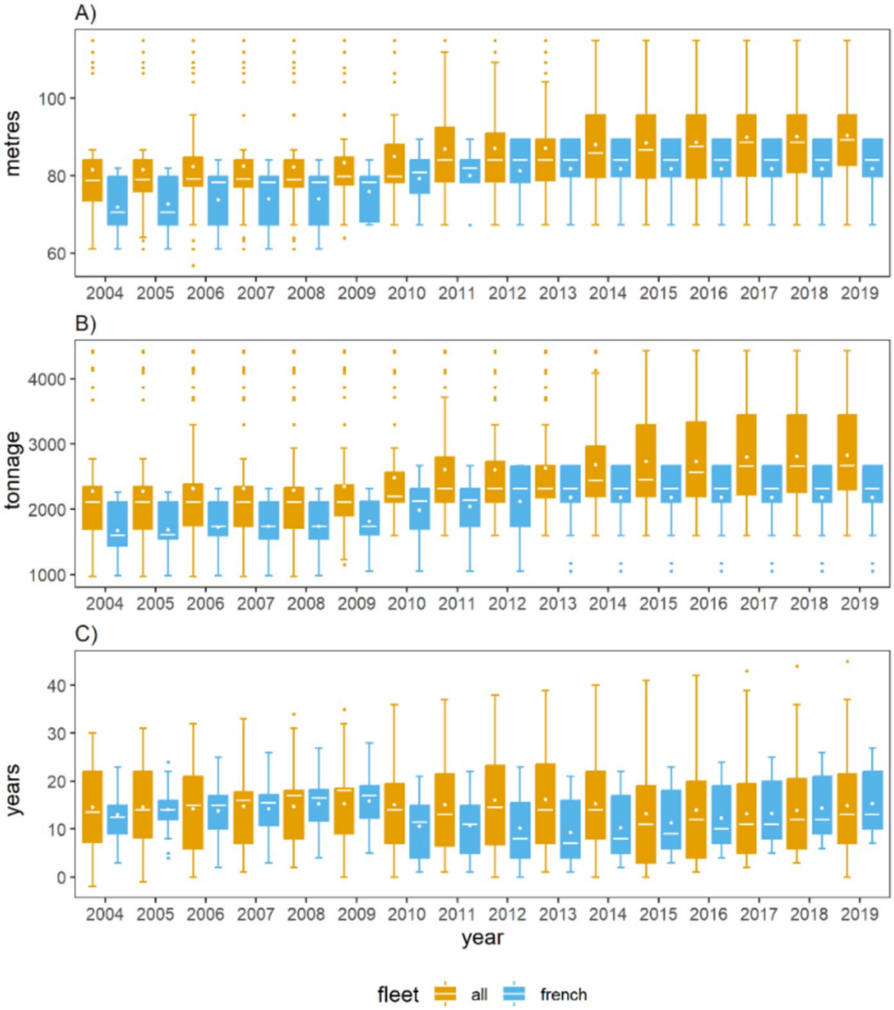


Fig. 1 Box and whisker plot of capacity characteristics **A** length overall (m), **B** gross tonnage (gt), **C** age (years) of the IO PS fleet versus the French PS—the horizontal bar at the 50th percentile, the top of the box at the 75th percentile, and the base of the box at the 25th percentile. Whiskers represent the range of data, and the black dots represent the outliers

significant proportion of tuna in the high seas, potentially affecting the available biomass for other fisheries. The Indian Ocean (IO) stands out as a significant tuna fishery, contributing around 20% of global tuna catches and 30% of the world's yellowfin tuna catch (Lecomte et al. 2017), valued at $US16 billion in 2018 (Pew 2020). This fishery primarily targets skipjack (*Katsuwonus pelamis*), yellowfin (*Thunnus albacares*), and bigeye (*Thunnus obesus*) tuna in tropical and subtropical waters near the equator. The IO industrial purse seine (PS) fleet, dominated by around forty-six vessels, mainly from the European Union (EU, Spain and France), Seychelles, Mauritius, and South Korea, plays a pivotal role. These vessels, averaging around 90 m in length and over 2800 t in gross tonnage (IOTC 2022) (Fig. 1), collectively account for one-third of the IO's tuna catch (Lecomte et al. 2017), 27% of the total yellowfin catch, and 40% of the total skipjack catch in 2020 (IOTC.org, accessed 11/01/24 https://iotc.org/data/datasets/latest/NC/SCI). Specifically, the French PS fleet, a significant contributor, focuses on skipjack (53% of its catch) and yellowfin (43% on average over the past decade) using both free-school and drifting fish aggregation devices (DFAD) fishing strategies, with bigeye making up a smaller proportion (4%) (Floch et al. 2021). This underscores the fleet's crucial role in the IO tuna fishery and the global tuna market.

Most tuna fisheries management organisations use Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) indicators, SB_{MSY} and $F_{MSY,}$ as policy targets, where F_{MSY} is the fishing mortality that provides MSY and SB_{MSY} the reference point of the spawning biomass to achieve MSY. Within the Indian Ocean (IO) tuna fishery, one particularly pressing issue is the decline in yellowfin tuna stock biomass levels (ISSF 2023). In 2023, yellowfin tuna was considered overfished ($SB < SB_{MSY}$) and subject to overfishing ($F > F_{MSY}$) (*Ibid.*) with a 68% probability. In response to these concerns and failed attempts to limit effort and maintain stocks at target levels (Aranda et al. 2012, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) implemented an interim rebuilding plan for yellowfin tuna in 2016. This plan aimed for a 20% reduction in yellowfin catches compared to the 2014 levels (IOTC Resolution 16/01, superseded by Res. 17/01, then by Res. 18/01, 19/01 and 21/01). Resolution 2016/01 introduced the first catch limits concerning Yellowfin tuna: "CPCs whose PS catches of Yellowfin tuna reported for 2014 were above 5000 MT should reduce their PS catches of Yellowfin tuna by 15% from the 2014 levels." No other catch limit had been implemented before this resolution, considering that the stock was not overfished nor subject to overfishing. For France, the catch limit was set at 29,500 MT in 2017 and has not changed in the following resolutions concerning the interim plan for rebuilding IO yellowfin stocks (IOTC Res. 2017/01, 2018/01, 2019/01) until 2021. Resolution 21/01 set the reduction to 21% from the 2014 levels, hence a catch limit of 27,500 MT for France. The catch limit for France is one-fourth of the total catch limit for IOTC PS-caught Yellowfin. The overarching objective was to facilitate the recovery of stocks, ensuring they surpass interim target reference points by 2024 with a 50% probability (IOTC 2015). Scientists consider the catch level at MSY to be 349 kilotonnes, but the current catch level exceeds 430 kilotonnes because the same limits do not bind several countries. Those contracting parties harvesting less than 5,000t or having objected to resolution 21/01 (e.g., India, Oman, Somalia, Indonesia, Iran, Madagascar) are no longer bound to it but refer to previous resolutions.

The status of yellowfin tuna stocks remains a cause for significant concern, characterised by overfishing $F/F_{MSY} = 1.32$ and being overfished $SB/SB_{MSY} = 0.87$ (www.iotc.org, accessed 11/01/24 https://iotc.org/sites/default/files/content/Stock_status/2022/Yellowfin2022E.pdf). This heightened concern has engaged various stakeholders (Sinan et al. 2021), amplifying the urgency for collective efforts and strategic management. The primary apprehensions stem from DFADs and the high efficiency of purse seine (PS) vessels, particularly in capturing the juvenile segment of the yellowfin population (Fonteneau et al. 2013). Recent studies have highlighted shifts in efficiency within the tuna PS fleet, demonstrating how input controls such as a reduction in the number of DFAD sets and a DFAD seasonal closure can positively impact future spawning stock biomass and catch levels (Tidd et al. 2023, 2025; Guillotreau et al. 2024).

The absence of regulatory measures, such as limits on vessel number/power and size adjustments for efficiency, threatens stock sustainability. The distinct status of other tuna species within the same fishery, like skipjack tuna, is not yet subject to overfishing (www.IOTC.org, accessed 11/01/24). This complicates capacity management due to quota limits implemented only on yellowfin and bigeye tunas. Sustaining an efficient management program without constraining capacity is challenging, as the lack of more stringent measures could lead to reduced catch per vessel, economic pressures, and excess fishing capacity. Excess capacity, defined as anything beyond the inputs required to catch a desired quantity of fish, results in economic waste and increases overfishing risks. While excess fishing capacity does not always result in overexploitation, overfishing is more likely to occur when limitations are not well-adjusted or unprofitable. Fishing capacity can become underutilised, making excess capacity more of an economic problem than a resource conservation issue (Pascoe and Gréboval 2003).

This study employs Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) to evaluate the technical efficiency of the fleet, which is a well-known and robust approach in fisheries economics (Kirkley et al. 2001, Felthoven 2002, Pascoe and Greboval 2003, Vázquez-Rowe and Tyedmers 2013, Tidd et al. 2023). Our original contribution lies in estimating the relationship between vessel fishing capacity, the recent catch limit introduced in the Indian Ocean tuna fishery, and the estimated allowable catch if the fleet were to fish at MSY. In line with EU member states' commitment to end overfishing by 2020 (EU 2013), the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) mandates measures to ensure that fishing capacity corresponds to opportunities, with a legally binding objective to maintain fish stocks at MSY levels. Our analysis explicitly examines the link between the French fleet's fishing capacity and MSY, emphasising the alignment between capacity management and sustainable yield goals applicable to EU and third-country waters. Our approach compares the performance of each vessel against others within a given year based on the catch of yellowfin and skipjack tuna relative to the potential output if all vessels operated optimally. The evaluated ratio represents the average level of capacity utilisation for the fleet and a specified set of inputs—the process above accounts for changes in stock productivity, fishing strategies, innovations and fisheries management policies.

Methods

The dataset

The annual data for the French PS fleet operating in the IO between 1992 and 2019 was obtained from the French Observatory of Exploited Tropical Pelagic Ecosystems (Ob7) fleet registry. This registry provides comprehensive information on various vessel characteristics, including age, gross registered tonnage (t), overall vessel length (m), and engine power (kW). The dataset includes logbook details on catches of yellowfin and skipjack tunas and the total number of sets/days at sea per year for each vessel.

Data envelopment analysis

Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) stands as a non-parametric technique (Farrell 1957; Charnes et al. 1978), applicable for gauging the potential output of a Decision-making unit (DMU) for a given set of inputs, DMU being a fishing vessel in this context. The methodology assumes that the production function, delineating how outputs vary with inputs, is unknown. It systematically compares each DMU against all others (Cooper et al. 2000). The fundamental objective is identifying the "frontier" or envelope, which signifies the most efficient combination of inputs to produce the highest output level for the specific DMU (Greene 1993). DMUs with similar characteristics are supposed to achieve an identical output level in a scenario where all else is equal. A DMU positioned on the frontier is assigned a score of one, denoting efficiency. Conversely, a DMU with equivalent characteristics but a lower output is deemed inefficient and gives a score of less than one, indicating inefficiency. The process is deterministic, generating an efficiency score for each DMU.

In the case of fisheries, DMU's inputs are a combination of fixed and variable effort features. Fixed inputs encompass vessel engine power, gross tonnage, and overall length, representing vessel capital stock (only one was selected due to their positive correlation). Variable inputs may include factors like the number of days fished and the number of sets on DFADs and free schools within a year. The two outputs in focus correspond to each vessel's annual catches of yellowfin and skipjack tuna summed separately, measured in tonnes. DEA efficiency scores are computed annually for each vessel within the French purse seine (PS) fleet at that specific time. Therefore, it is unnecessary to include stock biomass or a metric of technological change, as each vessel is essentially fishing on the same biomass using equivalent technology.

Technical efficiency (TE)

Technical efficiency refers to the relative effectiveness of a fisher or vessel in utilising and combining its inputs to produce an output, considering the production frontier, which represents the most efficient vessels (i.e., benchmarks) in the fleet. We evaluated the technical efficiency score scalar, θ_1, describing the extent to which the catch (production) of each vessel (j) can increase for a given specific quantity of inputs ($x_{j,n}$). These inputs (n) include both fixed factors (such as vessel overall length in meters) and variable factors (number of fishing days). The outputs for each species (m) (yellowfin and skipjack), $y_{j,m}$ for each vessel j, referred to as the decision-making unit—DMU, are measured in terms of the efficient combination leading to a maximum output level (catch by species). Here, J denotes the total number of vessels. The calculation of relative efficiency employs an output-oriented distance function (Färe et al. 1993; Tingley and Pascoe 2005):

$$Max\ \theta_1$$

Subject to,

$$\theta_1 y_{j,m} \leq \sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j y_{j,m} \qquad \forall m$$

$$\sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j x_{j,n} \leq x_{j,n} \quad \forall n,$$
$$\sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j = 1 \quad z_j \geq 0 \quad \forall j, \tag{1}$$

The variable z_j is a weighting factor for vessel j, the right-hand side of the first line in Eq. (1), representing a weighted sum of all vessel outputs within the year, including the vessel itself. This factor quantifies the optimal linear combination of frontier observations, determining the optimal performance of the specific decision-making unit (DMU) under consideration or the distance to the frontier. Each vessel is individually assessed for the value of θ_1, where the DMU $\theta_1 y_{j,m}$ outputs, and inputs are denoted by $x_{j,n}$.

The technically efficient output is determined by the production (observed catch of each tuna species) multiplied by a scalar, θ_{1m}, signifying the extent to which each output of the DMU can be increased relative to the efficient frontier of a group of DMUs within a year.

When determining technical efficiency in the context of Data Envelopement Analysis (DEA), certain assumptions regarding 'returns to scale'—whether constant (CRS) or variable (VRS)—are crucial, as they directly impact the efficiency score. CRS implies that an increase in input results in a proportional increase in output.

On the other hand, VRS assumes that vessels operate within a framework of variable returns, which is particularly relevant when all DMUs are not functioning at their optimal size. In our analysis, we adopt the assumption of variable returns to scale (VRS) $\sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j = 1$, acknowledging that the change in output may be more significant than, equal to, or less than the change in input—a perspective widely embraced in fisheries economics, denoting non-constant returns to scale (Cooper et al. 2000).

The calculation of technical efficiency (Eq. 1) for each PS vessel during a given year follows this formulation:

$$\mathrm{TE} = \frac{1}{\theta_1} \tag{2}$$

The vessels that exhibit the highest level of technical efficiency operate precisely along the frontier boundary (TE = 1). Conversely, less efficient vessels operate within this boundary. As a result, they possess a technical efficiency (TE) score value of less than 1.

Capacity utilisation (CU) and unbiased capacity utilisation (UCU)

Capacity utilisation (CU) measures how effectively vessels utilise their fixed inputs in terms of actual output compared to the maximum output achievable with those fixed inputs, I.e., capacity. This metric is valuable for understanding vessels' operational efficiency concerning their fixed production factors in the short run. When estimating TE in (Eq. 2), the assumption is that the variable inputs (days fished) remain constant at their observed levels. Conversely, when calculating the Capacity utilisation CU (Eq. 3), the assumption is that a vessel can adjust its variable inputs, such as the number of days engaged in its activities, to enhance its outputs.

This adjustment allows variable inputs to be fully utilised while keeping outputs constrained by the fixed inputs ($n \in \alpha$) (see Eq. 3), such as the vessel length. In this scenario, the fixed input and vessel length remain constant, and the model calculates the capacity utilisation by employing a structure similar to Eq. 1. However, in Eq. 3, the bounds of the subvector of variable inputs $n \in \hat{\alpha}$ are relaxed, allowing these inputs to vary freely. Here, $\lambda_{j,n}$ represents the input utilisation rate by vessel j of fixed input n. The underlying assumption is that the capacity output (catch level) $\theta_2 y_{j,m}$ remains constant. However, the capacity level can increase through various applications of the variable inputs (Tingley and Pascoe 2005) (see Eq. 3):

$$Max\ \theta_2$$

Subject to,

$$\theta_2 y_{j,m} \leq \sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j\ y_{j,m} \quad \forall m$$
$$\sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j x_{j,n} \ \leq x_{j,n} \quad n \in \alpha,$$
$$\sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j x_{j,n} \ \leq \lambda_{j,n} x_{j,n} \quad n \in \hat{a},$$
$$\sum_{j=1}^{J} z_j = 1 \quad z_j \geq 0 \quad \lambda_{j,n} \geq 0 \quad n \in \hat{\alpha} \tag{3}$$

The scalar $\theta_2 \geq 1$ represents the extent to which each Decision-Making Unit's (DMU) output can be augmented concerning the efficient frontier of a group of DMUs within a year. The calculation of Capacity Utilisation (CU) in Eq. 4 for each PS vessel during a given year is expressed as follows:

$$\mathrm{CU} = \frac{1}{\theta_2} \tag{4}$$

Similar to TE, CU also ranges between 0 and 1. However, the CU measure may exhibit a negative bias because the observed output might not necessarily be produced in a technically efficient manner, as indicated by TE in Eq. 1. Deviations between TE and fishing capacity may occur due to inefficiency or underutilisation. Consequently, it becomes imperative to disentangle these effects and estimate Unbiased Capacity Utilisation (UCU). Correcting this bias involves combining results from the technical efficiency metric (Eqs. 1 and 2) and the capacity utilisation metric (Eqs. 3 and 4) to give Eq. (5).

$$\mathrm{UCU} = \mathrm{CU}/\mathrm{TE} \tag{5}$$

The DEA linear programming analysis, created and executed using the R software benchmarking tool (Bogetoft 2012), was employed to conduct the analysis above.

The DEA analysis calculates the relative performance of vessels compared to the 'optimally performing' vessel within a given year. Recognising that vessels phased out over time are likely to be the least efficient and that newer vessels potentially exhibit better performance, the overall fleet should become closer to its optimal level. The UCU outputs of the DEA were then used to estimate the potential output for a fleet comprised entirely of highly effective vessels, i.e., the ones with the highest unbiased capacity utilisation, thereby pinpointing potential capacity levels concerning the yellowfin catch limit. For each year between 2013 and 2019, we utilise UCU to analyse the annual fleet sizes of French purse seiners (PS) and estimate the corresponding species catch that an 'optimally performing' fleet would attain concerning the yellowfin national catch limit set at 29,501 tonnes which was implemented in 2017 and the equivalent French PS catch share of fishing at MSY ~ 23,943. To illustrate, we examine years before 2017 when no catch limit existed and note that before 2013, the stock remained within safe biological limits ($SB > SB_{MSY}$ and $F < F_{MSY}$). Post-2012 marked the onset of overfishing. A vessel's skipjack and yellowfin catch in a given year is arranged in descending order based on its UCU. The potential catch is calculated as the ratio of yellowfin catch to UCU and skipjack catch to UCU. We track the sequential cumulative catch of yellowfin until it reaches the catch limit 2017–2019 and 2013–2019, the catch at MSY share for the French fleet, summing up the individual vessels identified in the process. This methodology aids in determining the number of optimally performing vessels within the fleet.

Results

DEA efficiency estimates and optimal capacity analysis

The efficiency scores, including UCU, TE, and CU, across all vessels over the study period reveal patterns aligned with the number of vessels exiting the fishery (see Fig. 2A/B). Notably, exit-heavy years like 2001, 2008, 2009, and 2012 exhibit wider dispersions in vessel performance (CU and TE) compared to years with no exit. Despite anomalies like 2018 (no exit with widely dispersed CU) and 1997 (exits with less dispersed CU), TE remains high during exit-heavy years, indicating a consistently high catch per unit effort. In the earlier years (1992–2009), TE scores show wide variations. UCU is highly variable in some exit years (e.g., 2009 and 2012). Throughout the time series, CU, on average, is lower than the metrics TE and UCU, indicating that capacity underutilisation may be influenced by factors other than technical inefficiency. Conversely, in the earlier years (1992–1996), TE was low, CU was low, and UCU was high, suggesting potential inefficiencies and mismatches between actual and potential resource use.

Figure 3 illustrates the cumulative potential catches of yellowfin and skipjack given total UCU, showing a steeper trajectory for skipjack than yellowfin during the catch limit years 2017–2019. This suggests that catch limit regulations influenced changes in fisher targeting behaviour. While only the year 2019 indicates that the catch limit could be achieved with three fewer vessels (about 21% of vessels), years 2017/2018 display low-capacity utilisation (Fig. 2A) due to operational challenges hindering full realisation of available capacity. The potential catch share for MSY could have been achieved with about 26% fewer vessels on average if capacity were fully utilised.

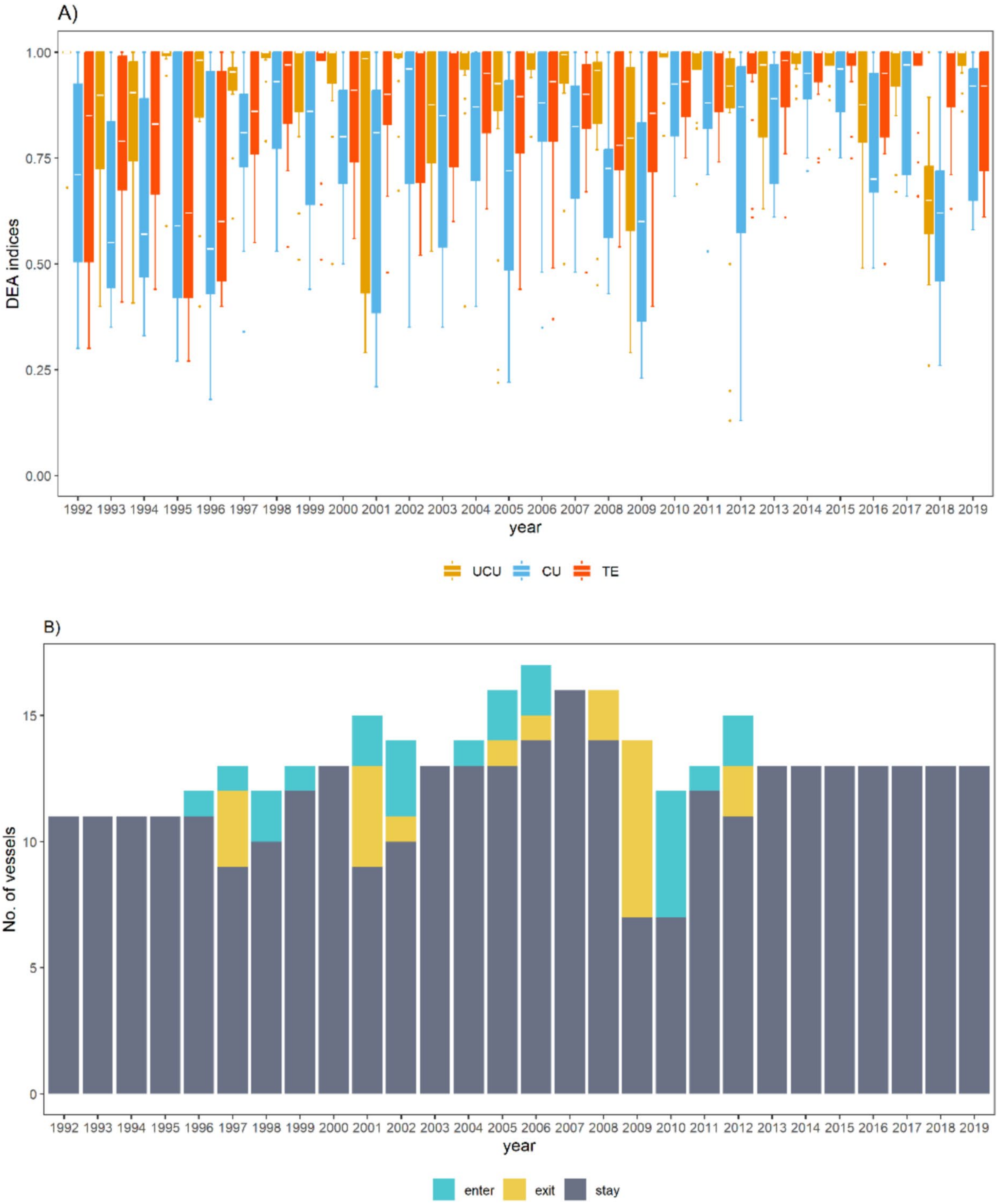


Fig. 2 **A** Box and whisker plot of the results of the DEA analysis—the horizontal bar at the 50th percentile, the top of the box at the 75th percentile, and the box base at the 25th percentile: UCU = Unbiased capacity utilisation; CU = Capacity utilisation; TE = Technical efficiency. Whiskers represent the range of data, and the black dots represent the outliers. **B** Representation of the French-flagged fleet size in the IO and the choices of entry, exit, or stay in the fishery

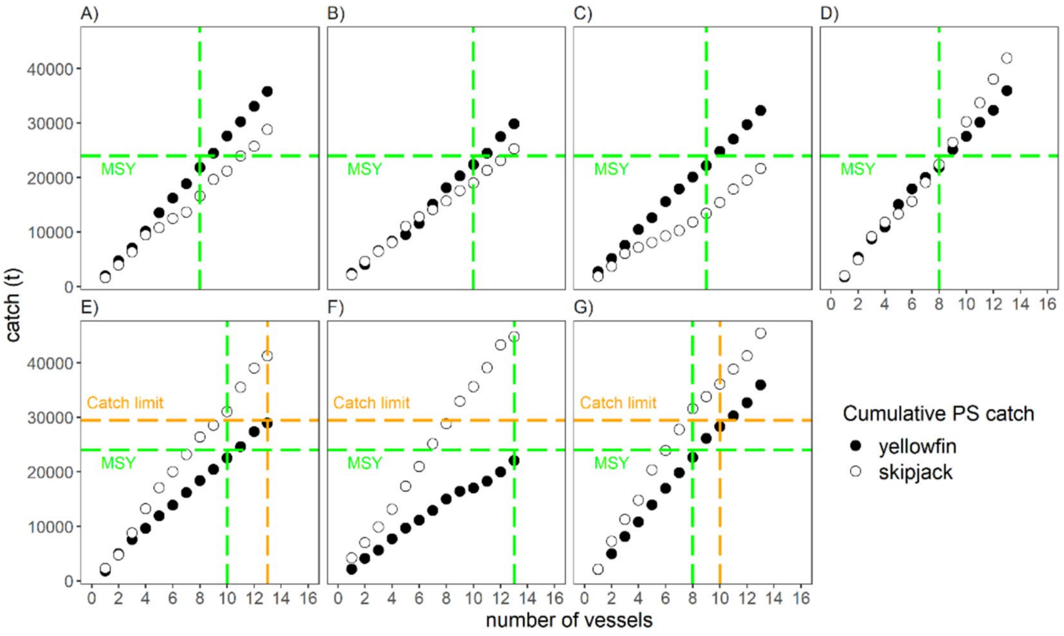


Fig. 3 Each facet represents a year from when yellowfin was deemed overfished and subject to overfishing: **A** 2013, **B** 2014, **C** 2015, **D** 2016, **E** 2017, **F** 2018, **G** 2019. The points represent the cumulative catch of yellowfin (black spheres) and skipjack (white spheres) by vessel (the point) ranked from 1 (most efficient) to the total number of vessels in those years. The orange horizontal line is the yellowfin catch limit of 29,501 tonnes (**E**–**G**) (target, 2017 onwards), and the orange vertical line is the theoretical number of vessels to achieve the catch limit. The green dashed lines would represent the estimated theoretical catch share (23,943 tonnes) and the optimal number of vessels if vessels were to fish at MSY

Discussion

In this investigation, we delved into the fishing capacity of the French Indian Ocean PS fleet. Our first research objective was to understand the evolution of technical efficiency and capacity utilisation of the fleet, particularly after the implementation of catch limits for yellowfin tuna since 2017.

Since the yellowfin catch limit was introduced in 2017 (IOTC Res. 2016/01), our results from the DEA indicate that the fleet could attain the national catch limit (29,500 t) and share associated with fishing at MSY with, on average, three fewer vessels (i.e., between 21 and 26% less capacity), signalling an underutilisation of the existing capacity jeopardising the profitability of the fleet. According to the IOTC catch database, the catch limit has only been exceeded twice (by 2% and 3%) by the French PS fleet for the two first years after its introduction and never since then, the French YFT catch instead standing between 12 to 25% below the limit. Since 2009 and the exit of several vessels from the EU-FRA fleet after the piracy events, the YFT catch was 26,332(±5259) MT on average, against 40,591(±10,100) MT on average between 1984 and 2008. This level of catch standing below the catch limit shows the tactical shift of the PS fleet after 2009 towards a more intensive use of FADs driven by the efficiency of this fishing technique and the fear of fishing beyond the limit (Guillotreau et al. 2024).

Notable changes in PS operations have occurred since implementing the catch limit on yellowfin tuna. To circumvent the catch limit, the fleet has refrained from targeting yellowfin catches (Fig. 3) by fishing more intensively on FADs where skipjack prevails (Tidd et al. 2023; Guillotreau et al. 2024). An analogous behavioural response was observed in the Spanish PS operating in the Indian Ocean (Báez and Ramos 2019). However, in the present study, this avoidance strategy has resulted in highly variable CU levels within the fleet, as depicted in Fig. 2A. This variability underscores that the same catch could be achieved with fewer vessels operating optimally at full capacity.

A noteworthy year exhibiting substantial CU variation was 2012. During 2011–12, there was a significant increase in yellowfin biomass (Tidd et al. 2023), accompanied by a more than 2.5-fold rise in the Bangkok price per tonne, exceeding the annual average trend of approximately $US1500. Simultaneously, skipjack prices doubled from approximately $US750 to $US1500 (Williams and Ruaia 2021). Regarding fishing strategies, there were substantial increases in yellowfin catches using relatively more FSC sets and fewer FAD sets in 2012, after the entry of two new vessels targeting high-value tunas for the fresh fish market (Fig. 2) ("Sapmer to Target U.S., China with High-end Tuna." *IntraFish.com | Latest Seafood, Aquaculture and Fisheries News*, 21 Dec. 2011, accessed 15/01/24). Nevertheless, there was a decline in catch and biomass for skipjack during this period, as documented by Tidd et al. (2023). This decline coincided with a significant increase in fuel prices per barrel due to the Arab Spring (Hsiao et al. 2016). Two decades earlier (1992–1996), there was no exit of vessels from the fishery, although both CU and TE were low, reflecting inefficiencies in the production process, e.g., outdated technology, poor skipper practices and market-related issues such as demand and competition that affect CU. Improvements in TE and overall CU were made possible through addressing operational issues and aligning resource availability with vessel capacity. In 1997, three vessels exited, and one entered, thus improving both TE and CU efficiencies. This latter sequence demonstrates that the relationship between efficiency and entry/exit strategies is dual: lower fishing opportunities induced by catch limits increase inefficiency and trigger exit strategy for vessels, but the lower capacity resulting from exit decisions upgrades mechanically TE and CU (Felthoven 2002; Rust et al. 2016).

In 2008, high interest rates, fuel costs, and the financial crash likely contributed to several vessels leaving in 2009 amid piracy events (Chassot et al. 2012), falling fish prices, and capital risks. Exiting vessels had a median age of 18 years, contrasting with the 12 years of those that stayed. Newer and larger vessels entered the scene by 2010.

Given the already enforced reductions in catch limits outlined in Resolution 21/01, affecting sales revenues, current fishing activities are estimated to exceed further the F/F_{MSY} estimate of 1.32 (accessed 11/01/24 https://iotc.org/sites/default/files/content/Stock_status/2022/Yellowfin2022E.pdf). Considering the French fleet's average age has reached approximately 17 years (Fig. 1), any future reduction in the fleet coupled with increasing operating costs and the identified excess capacity in this study is likely to increase efficiency and capacity use. The exit strategies have dominated since 2008 (-3 vs + 5 prior to this date), as also evidenced by two French PS companies, Via Ocean and Sapmer, which opted to sell off some of their vessels and permanently exit the Indian Ocean fishery in 2023 (www.seafoodsource.com, accessed 11/11/23). The concern extends to where the capacity is transferred and whether it is replaced in the Indian Ocean by newly registered vessels, re-flagging or involvement in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) (Aranda et al. 2012). With the apparent larger size and tonnage of the entire PS fleet compared to the French fleet (Fig. 1), there is still a possibility of over-capitalisation, particularly when extrapolating our results to the entire fleet. Moreover, it is crucial to extend the examination beyond the PS fleet to encompass all other fleets, especially those artisanal fleets engaged in uncapped catch activities which represent half of the yellowfin tuna catch (IOTC, supporting information collated from reports of the working party tropical tuna meeting, updated July 2021). The convergence of these factors emphasises the critical need for implementing adaptive measures to navigate the ever-changing dynamics of tuna fisheries and ensure the long-term viability of tuna stocks (Heidrich et al. 2023).

These limitations also highlight the need for improved data accessibility and transparency within the fishing industry, particularly concerning the socio-economic aspects of the fishery. In that regard, a socioeconomic working group will collect economic data and support the IOTC management decisions. Addressing these data constraints would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing fleet behaviour and facilitate more informed policy recommendations for sustainable fisheries management.

Future research will focus on developing a streamlined age-structured biological operating model for skipjack and yellowfin, integrating a discrete choice fleet behaviour model with biological models (e.g., Tidd et al. 2025). This integrated model will provide insights into the fleet's composition, precisely the number of vessels representing fishing effort. The approach will consider the interplay between effort, fishing mortality, and endogenous model parameters governing the simulated fleet's capacity. Thus, the fleet size dynamically adjusts to variations in the operational environment, constrained by its carrying capacity, while endogenous model parameters shape capacity dynamics. This comprehensive approach enhances our understanding of how the fleet adapts to external changes and the implications for fishing effort and capacity.

Conclusion

Maintaining the existing fishing capacity while setting catch limits in tuna fisheries leads to underutilisation of fleet capacity and waste of economic resources. It also jeopardises the conservation of other species (e.g., skipjack and bycatch species caught with DFADs). In the present study, we describe the evolution of technical efficiency and capacity utilisation throughout the last 3 decades and relate it to fleet dynamics. More specifically, we demonstrated that the fishing capacity of the French PS fleet operating in the Indian Ocean was exceeded by 25% the optimal level required to meet the MSY reference point. We also highlight the dual nature of the relationship between efficiency, capacity utilisation and entry/exit strategies. CU may decrease while efficiency remains high during some exit periods, calling for drivers other than mere efficiency performance to explain investment/disinvestment strategies. In particular, higher interest rates, vessel ageing and poor market conditions tend to favour exit decisions amid other external factors, like the piracy events in 2008–09. Whenever the net balance of registered vessels remains negative for several years (i.e., more exits than entries), TE and CU are more likely to improve again. In the future, having a model that can explain and accurately predict the strategic behaviour of vessels after management decisions represents a useful tool for decision-makers and a potential input for future stock assessment operating models. Aligning capacity with fishing opportunities is crucial for the profitability and preservation of these essential tuna populations, resulting in more sustainable and economically viable fisheries.

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Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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