



Torres Strait sea cucumber (Beche-de-mer) survey 2019/20

Mer Island Workshop

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2019/20 Survey objectives

Determine stock size and density trends for:

- Current target species:

- White teatfish (high priority)
- Prickly redfish (high priority)
- Curryfish (medium priority)



- Closed or reopening species:

- Black teatfish (high priority)
- Surf redfish (medium priority)



- Other species (low priority)

- Deeper water populations:

- White teatfish (high priority)
- Burrowing blackfish (low priority)
- Other species (medium priority)

Other objectives and outcomes

- Habitat trends and mapping

- Seagrass, coral
- Crown of thorns starfish
- Clams, other species

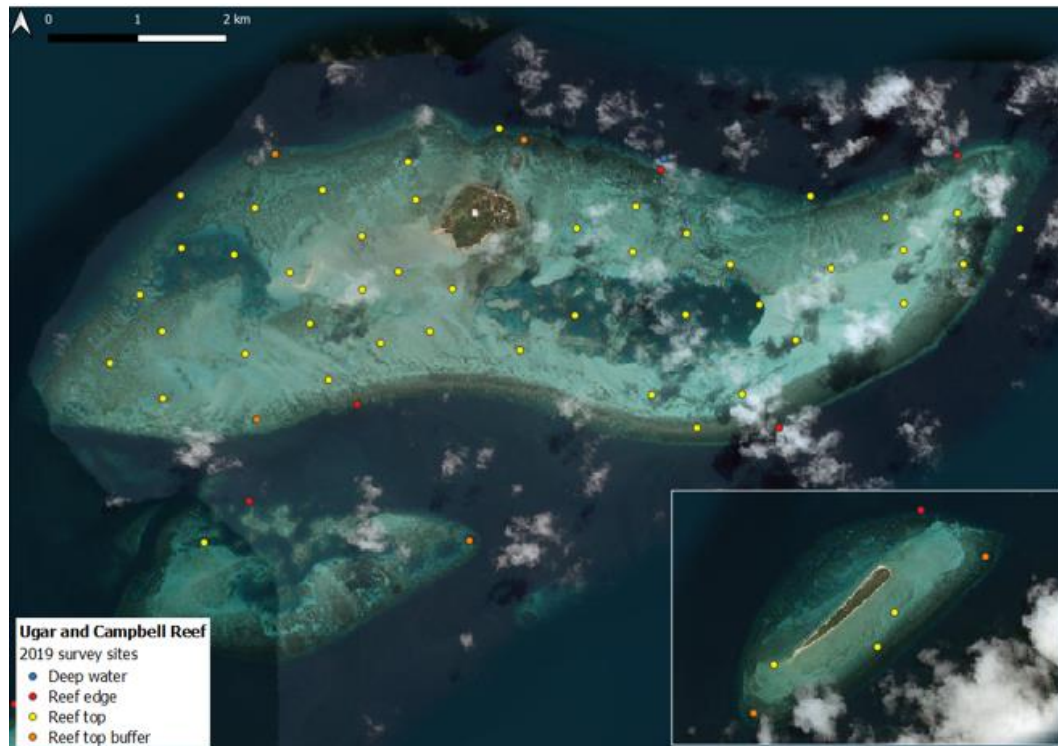


- General reef mapping

- Reef mapping ground truthing (of new NERP reef map)
- Better understanding of reef area and structure in Torres Strait

Ugar survey

- Sea cucumber survey and reef mapping of Ugar and Campbell Reefs
- To support development of community sea cucumber aquaculture project
- Results provided to community



Study area - Zones



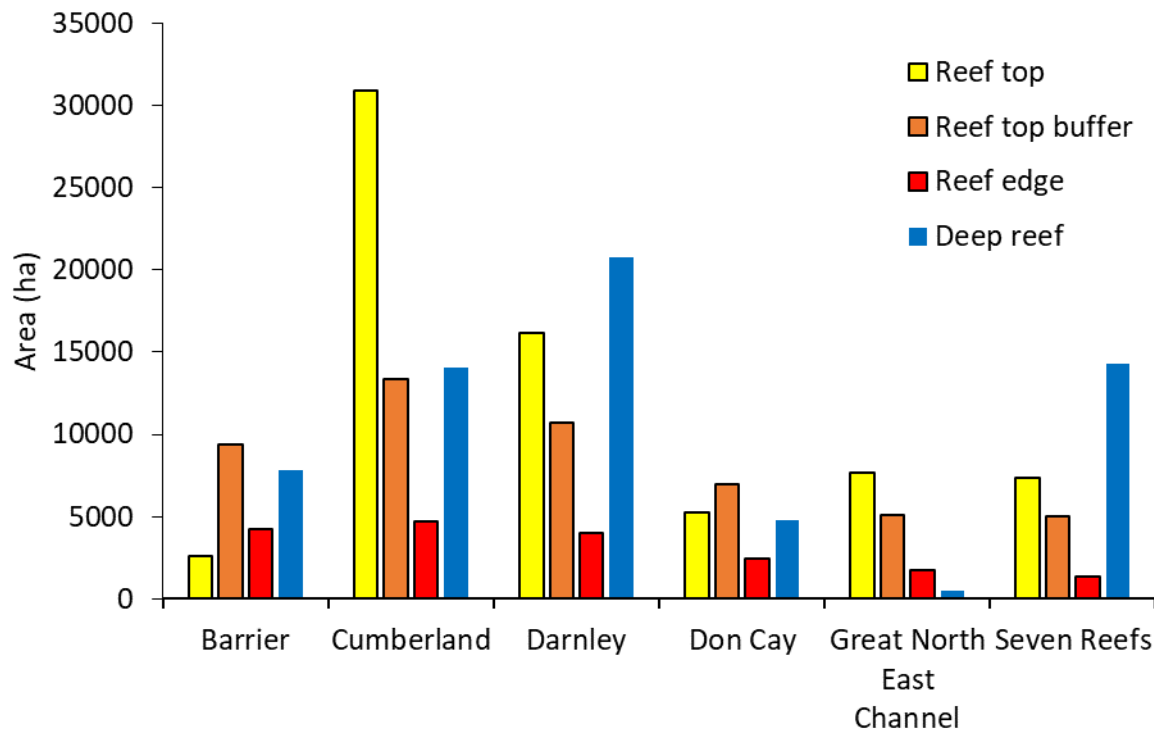
Study area - strata



Study area - strata

- 3 shallow reef strata
 - Reef top
 - Reef top buffer (200 m)
 - Reef edge (<20 m)
- Deep reef (20-50 m)
- Inter-reefal (20-120 m)

Strata	Area (km ²)
Reef top	700.1
Reef top buffer	503.9
Reef edge	184.5
Deep reef	622.0
Inter-reefal	14,969.5
Total area	16,980.0

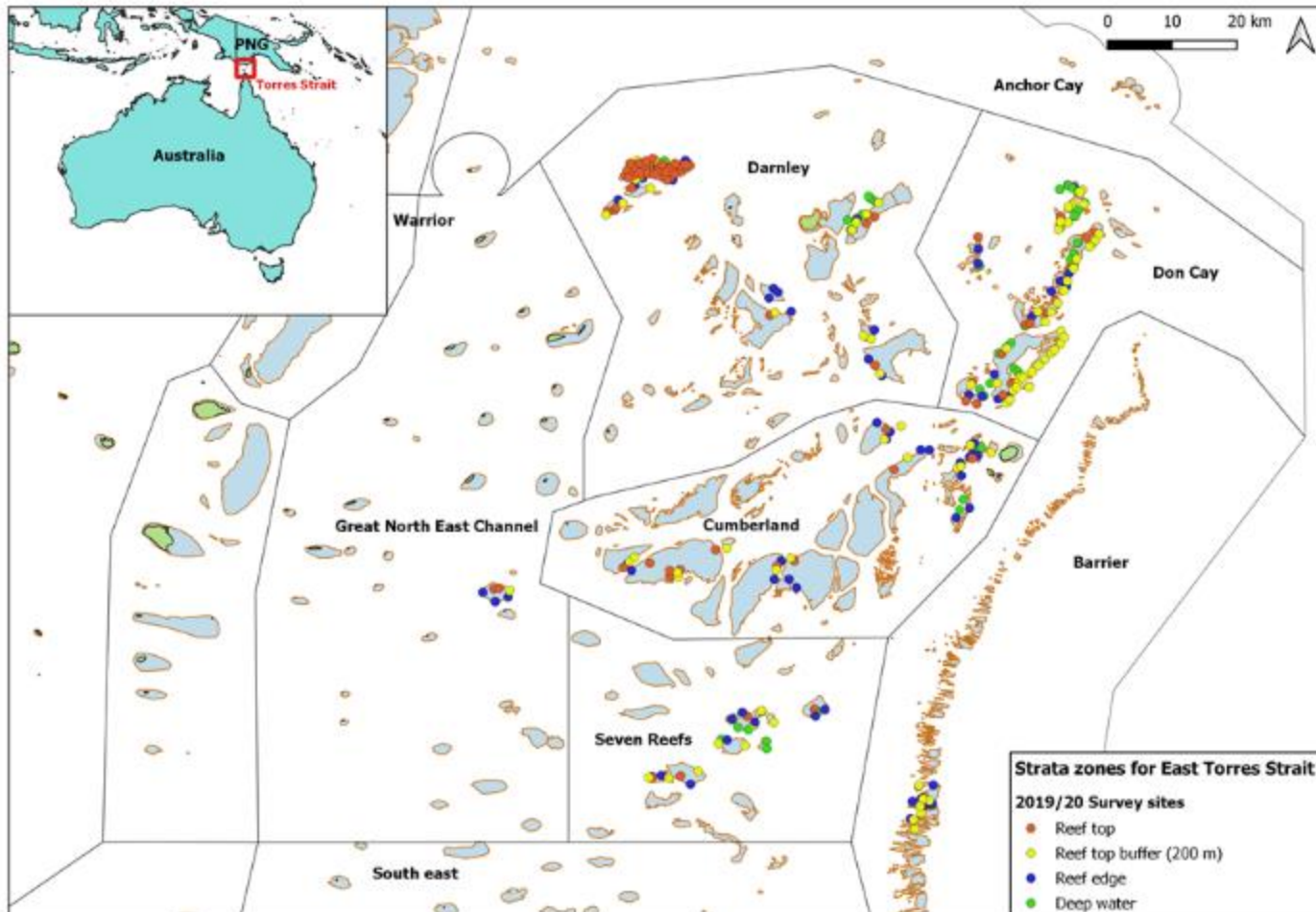


Study area – Deep reef

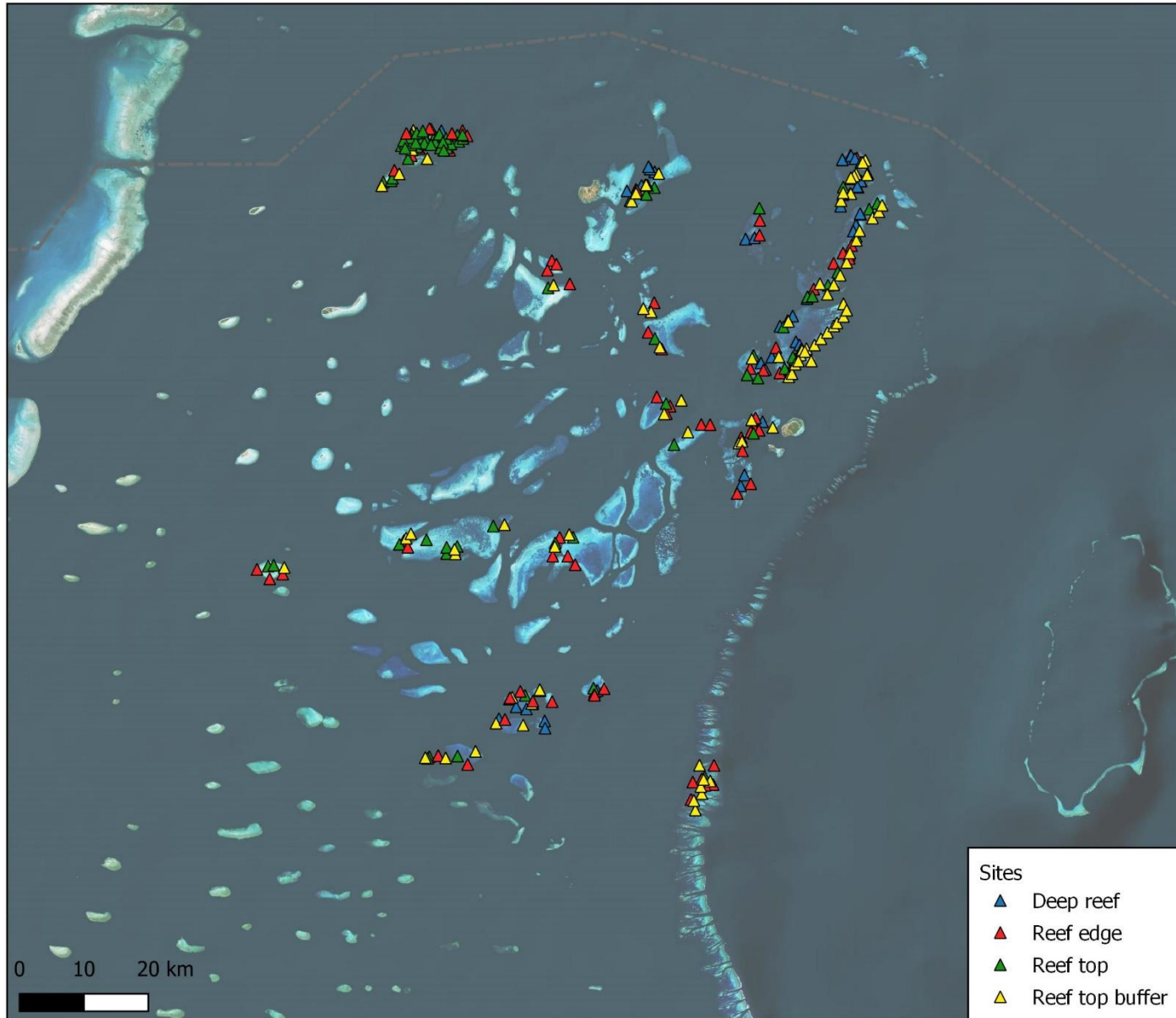


Survey sites

Year	Zones	Top	Buffer	Edge	Deep	Total
1995/96	14	1089	164	365	0	1618
2002	6	136	139	159	0	434
2005	5	35	52	40	0	127
2009	5	33	25	45	0	103
2019/20	6	88	86	70	53	297

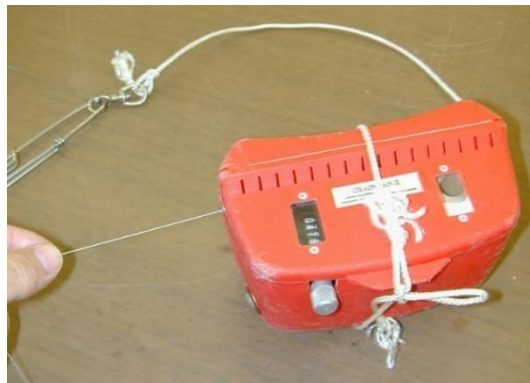


Survey sites – 2019/20



Survey methods – shallow reef (<20 m)

- Same methods used in all previous surveys
- 40 m to 100 m transects – snorkel or scuba
- Use GPS and chainman distance device
- Counted and collected sea cucumbers
- Recorded habitat and other biota
- Measured length and weight
- All sea cucumber returned to sampled habitat

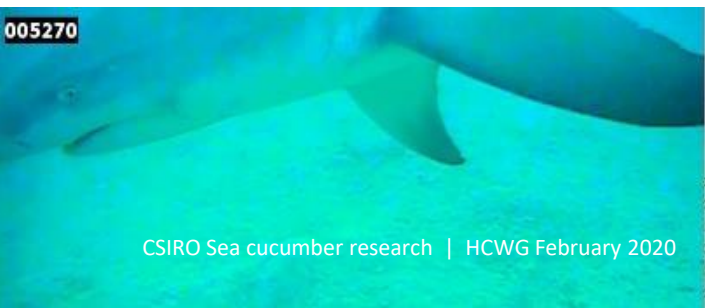


Deep reef survey

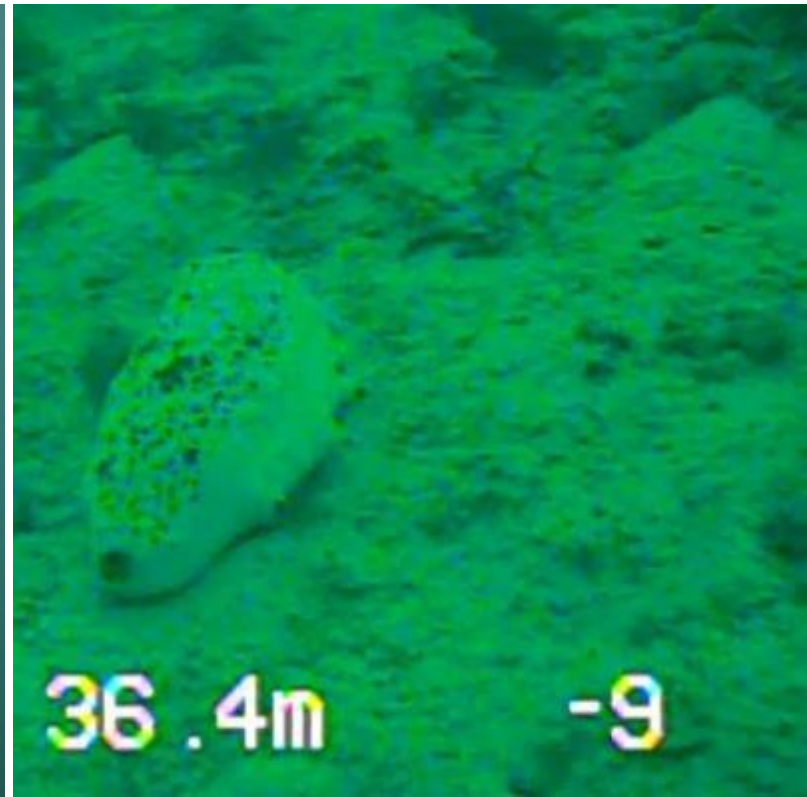
- 20 m - 50 m deep
- 10 min drifts, 40 – 600 m
- TSRA camera system – *Thanks!*
- Deepest White teatfish 37 m



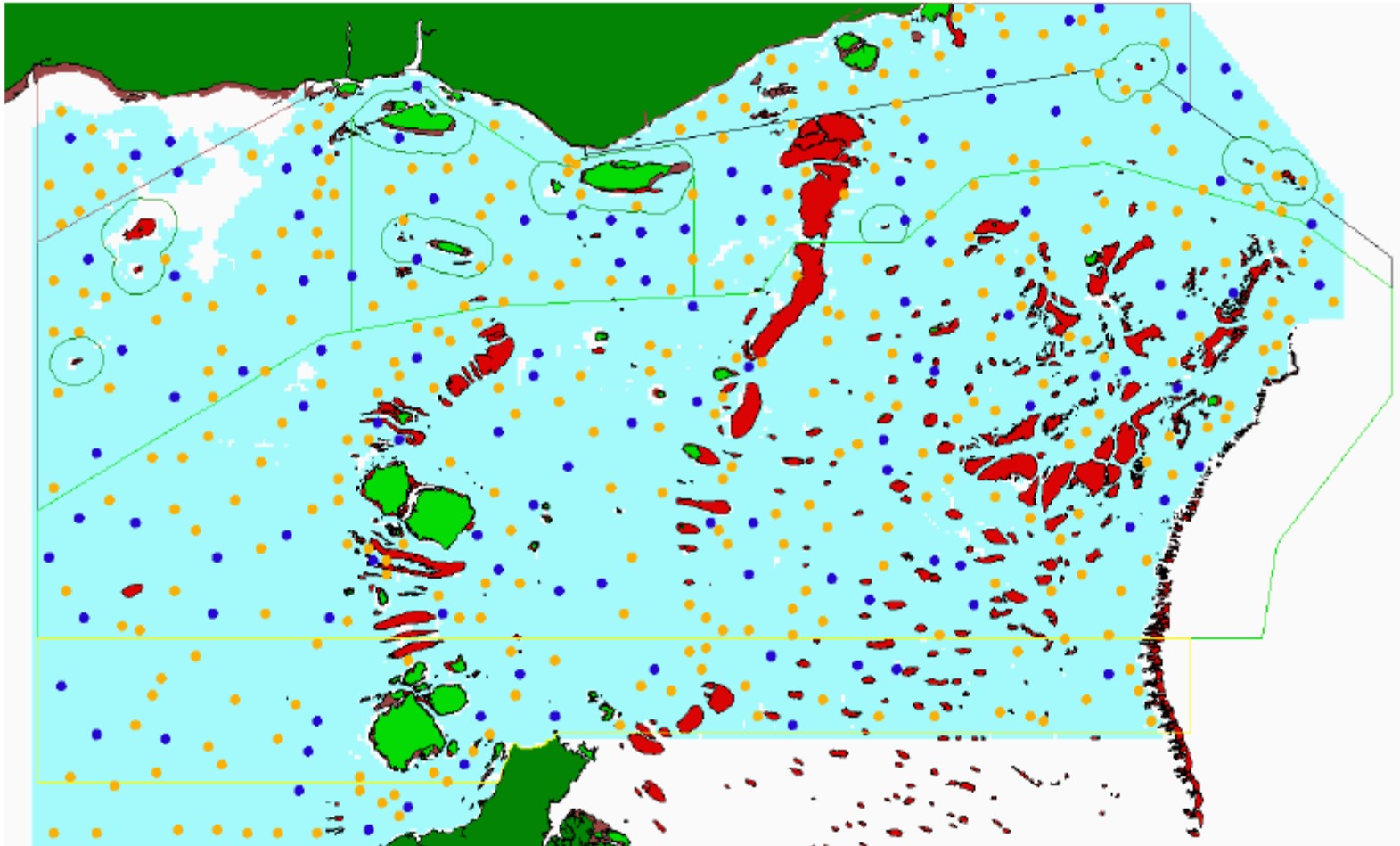
Thank you Madeina! (David)



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Inter-reef habitat



Inter-reef habitat

Species	Sites observed	Biomass (t)
<i>Actinopyga lecanora</i>	1	-
<i>Cercodemas anceps</i>	37	19.3
<i>Cladolabes perspicillum</i>	2	-
<i>Cladolabes schmeltzi</i>	2	-
<i>Holothuria edulis</i>	1	-
<i>Pentacta australis</i>	17	-
<i>Cladolabes perspicillum</i>	2	-
<i>Pseudocolochirus violaceus</i>	17	929.8
<i>Stichopus horrens</i>	21	314.1
<i>Holothuria ocellata</i>	50	69.8
<i>Stichopus herrmanni</i>	2	-
<i>Holothuria atra</i>	1	-
<i>Holothuria lessoni</i>	7	-
<i>Stichopus ocellatus</i>	1	-



Analyses

Stratified density

- Estimates of mean density - counts per hectare
- Used zones (logbook areas) and reef strata
- Represents physical size differences of different habitats for the surveys
- *Note: Strata by Zone combinations – Great North East Channel + Deep reef and Barrier + Deep reef are not sampled*

Density trends

- Compared survey sites within zones and strata sampled in previous years
- Four zones were sampled in 1995, 2002, 2009 and 2019/20: Cumberland, Darnley, Don Cay and Great North East Channel

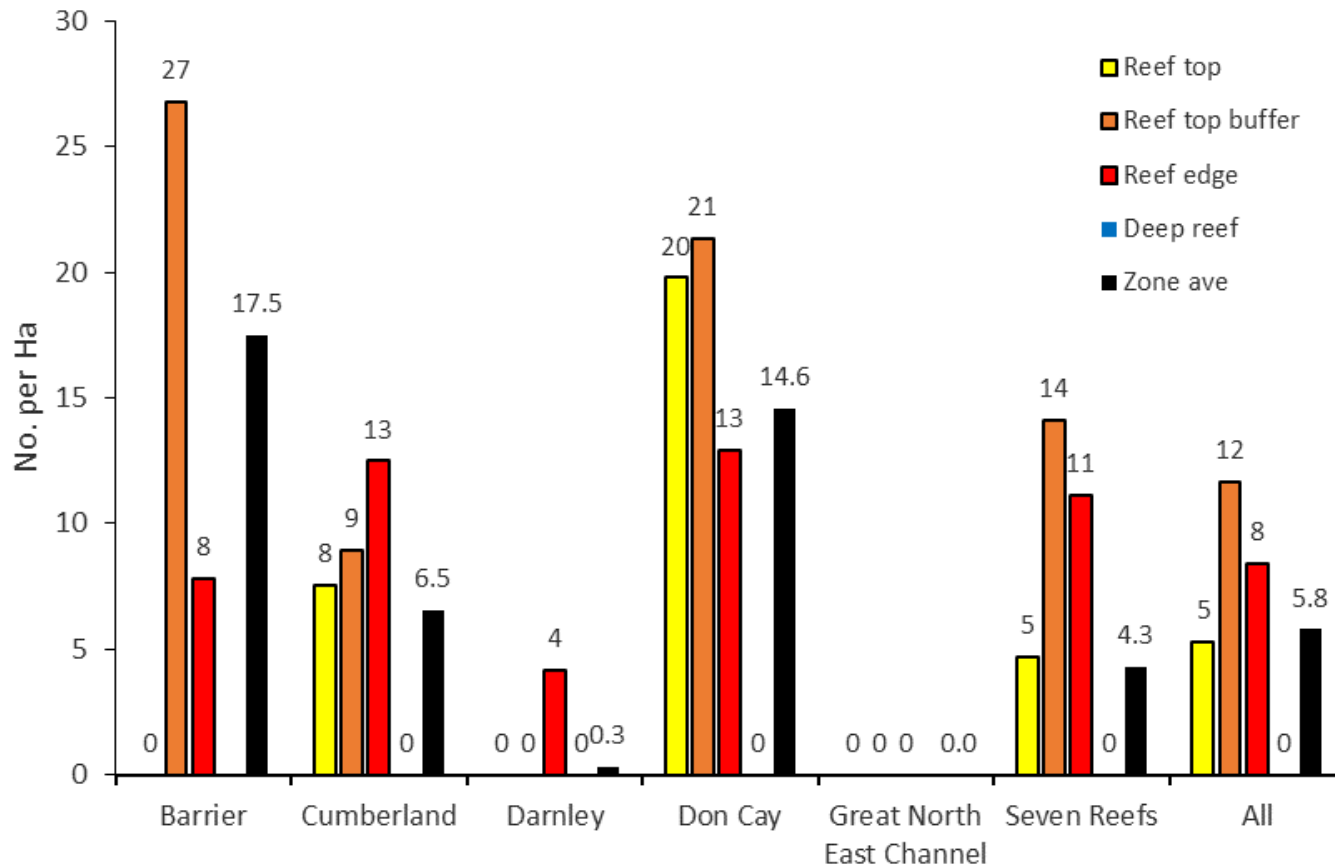
Standing stock

- Calculated from estimates of density, reef area and average weight from size frequency data collected during the survey
- Suitable for calculating standing stock for the surveyed areas, but not for direct comparison between survey years

Mirror-match bootstrapping

- Conservative stock estimate for formulating TAC recommendations
- Calculated bottom 90th percentile of the bootstrapped mean estimate of the distribution
- Assumes real estimate would be 90% certain of being greater than this value
- Approach is consistent with the new Harvest Strategy specification that the “Trial opening TAC needs to be set at a demonstrably conservative level” (AFMA, 2019)

Black teatfish 2019/20



Fishery biomass estimate = 787 t
 >MLS = 172 t

Black teatfish – stock 2019/20



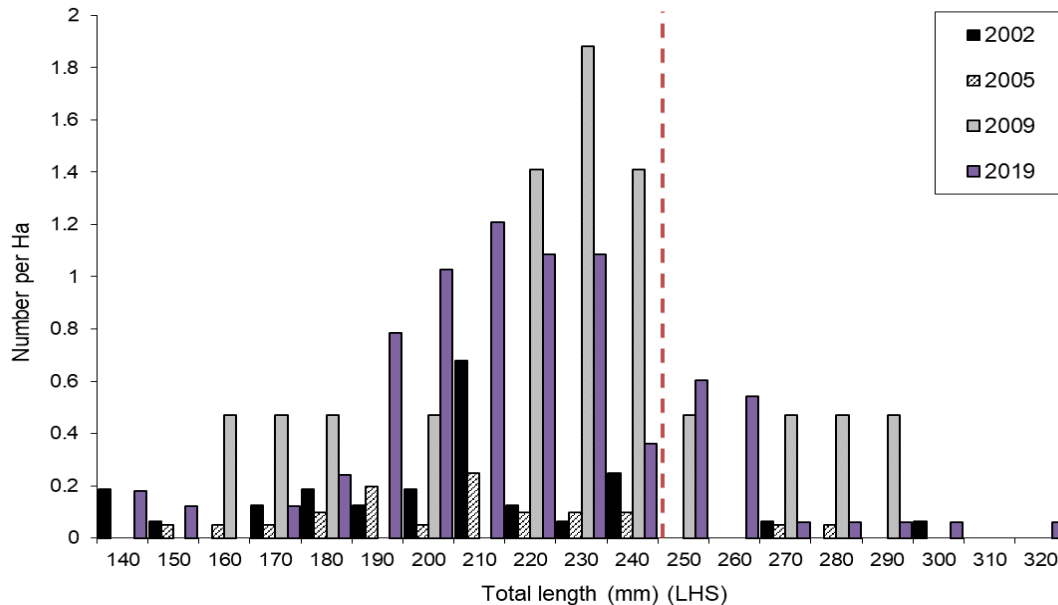
- Estimated fishery biomass 1,238 t (gutted wt)
- Bootstrapped lower 90th percentile of the fishery biomass was 787 t
- Bootstrapped lower 90th percentile of the fishery biomass >MLS was 172.3 t

Zone	Sites	Mean density)	Var (st)	Stock (n)	Live wt (t)	B (t)	Live wt (t) L90th	B (t) L90th	B >MLS (t) L90th
Barrier	15	17.8	118.3	288,273	470.5	318.5	-	-	-
Cumberland	50	6.5	17.7	412,235	672.8	455.5	-	-	-
Darnley	89	0.3	0.1	16,534	27.0	18.3	-	-	-
Don Cay	104	14.6	16.2	282,963	461.8	312.7	-	-	-
GNE Channel	6	0	0	0	0	0	-	-	-
Seven Reefs	33	4.3	3.4	120,489	196.7	133.1	-	-	-
ETS	297	5.8	3.0	1,120,493	1828.8	1238.1	1162.5	787.0	172.3

Black teatfish - size



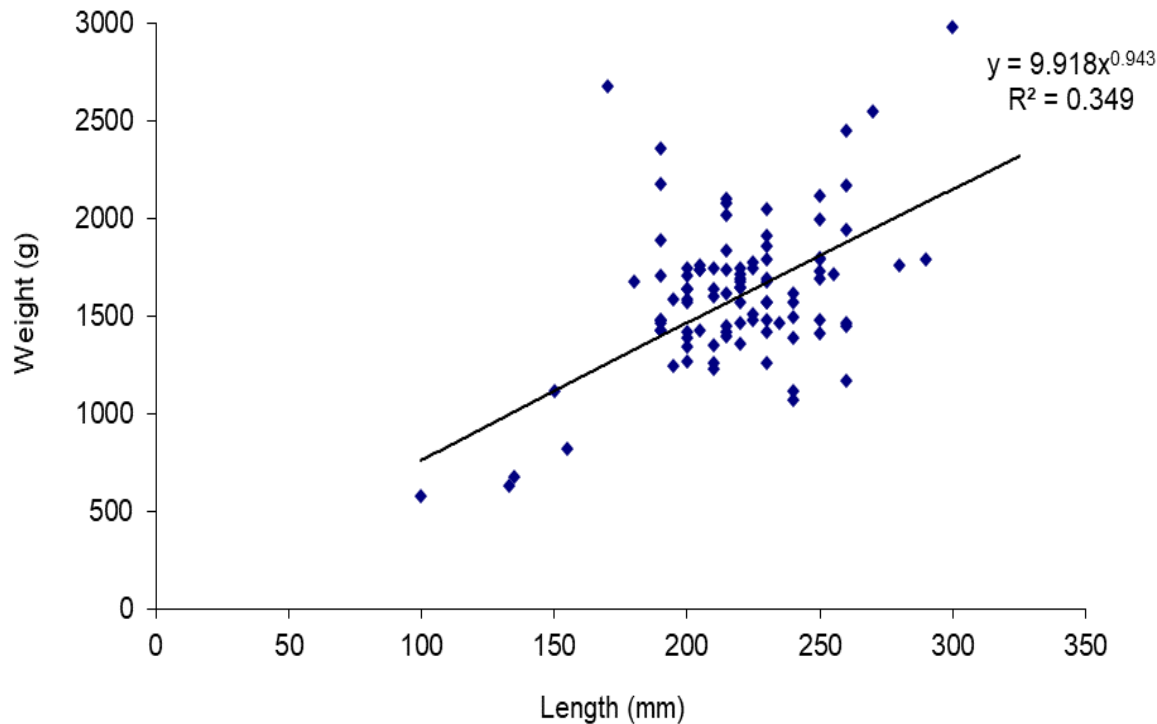
- Average size in 2019/20 was 219 mm (slightly smaller than 2009, but larger than other surveys)
- Slightly lower proportion of legal size animals compared to 2009
- Size at maturity: 220 - 260 mm
- Minimum legal size: 250 mm



Black teatfish - weight



- Weight range: 580 g – 2,980 g (live wt)
- Average weight: 1,632 g
- Comparison - GBR survey (2015) average weight 1820 g and weight range 500 – 2900 g (Knuckey and Koopman, 2016)

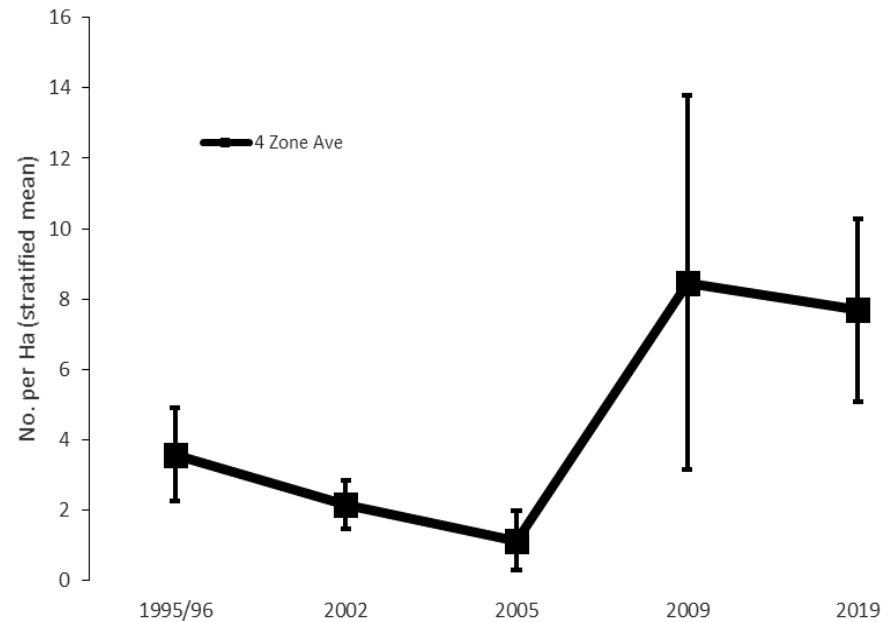
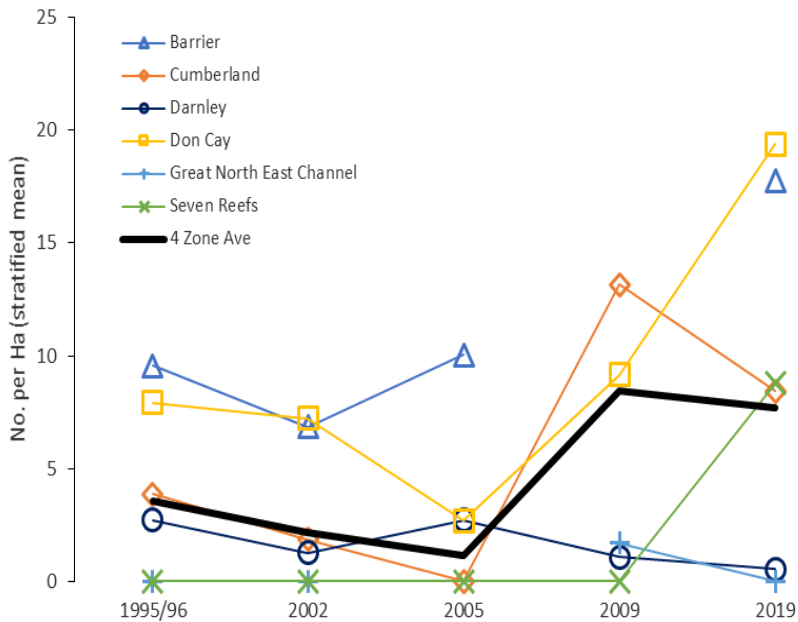


Black teatfish – stock trends



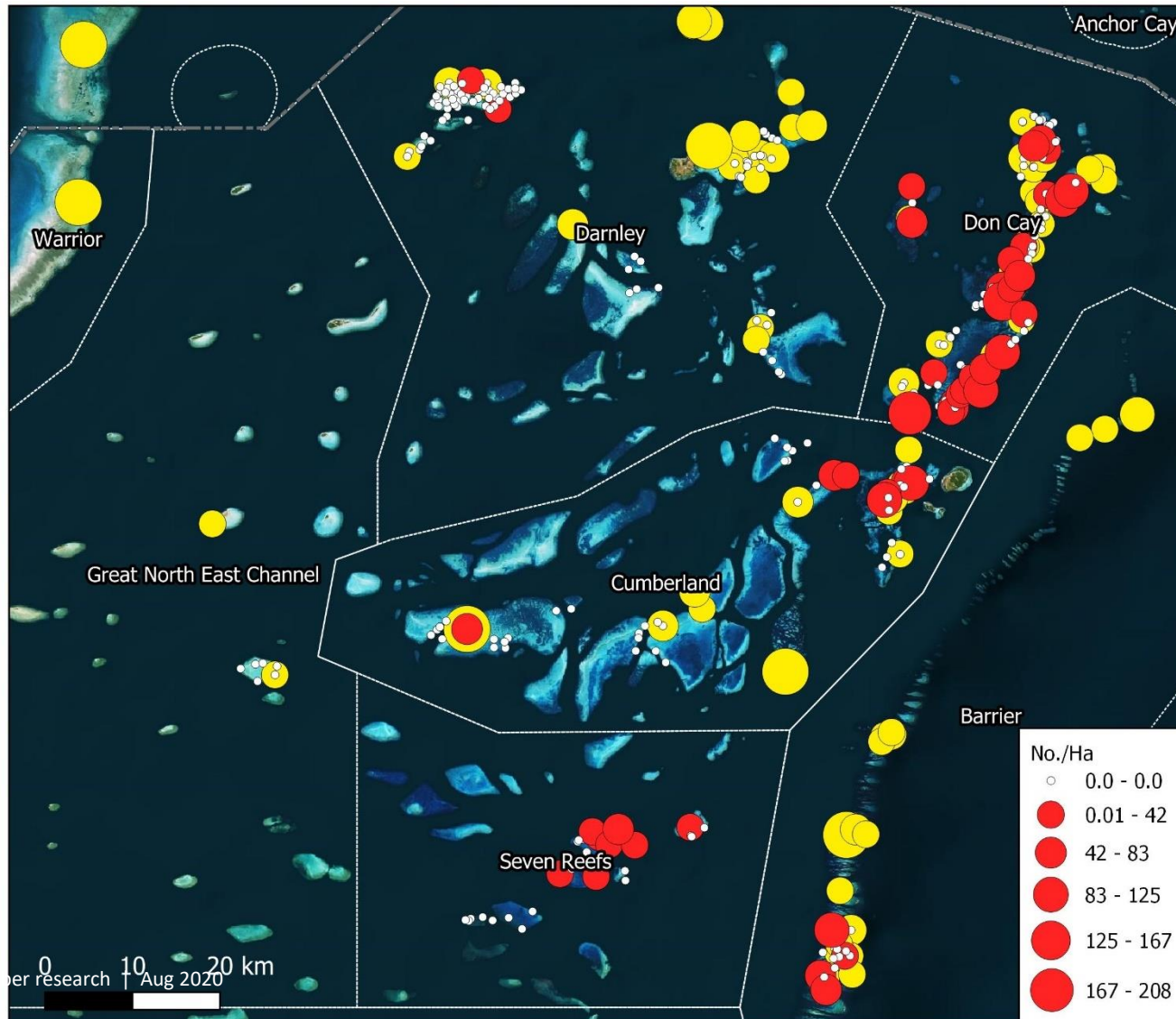
Density trends 1995 - 2019/20

- 4 zones consistently sampled (Cumberland, Darnley, Don Cay and Seven Reefs)



Black teatfish – stock trends

Site density 2019/20 v previous



Black teatfish – distribution

- Modelled from survey data 1995-2009 and biophysical correlates



Comparisons with other surveys

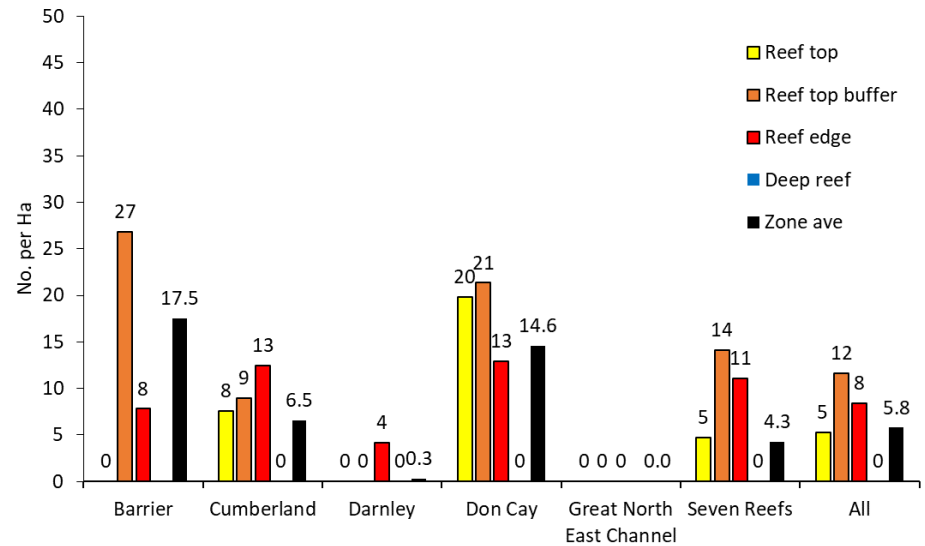
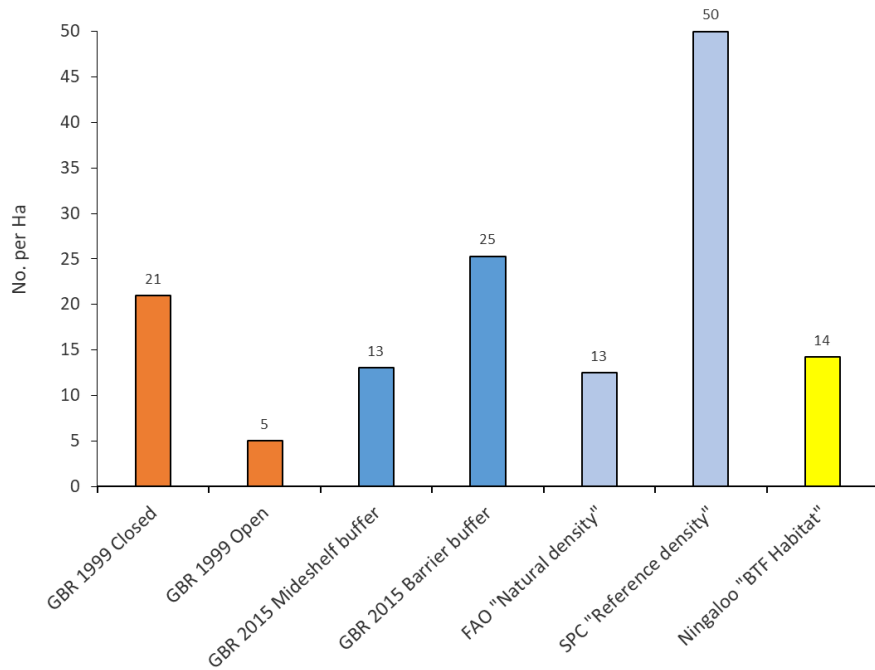


- Unbiased comparisons between locations is difficult
- Sea cucumber density varies across reef habitats and in relation to distance from terrigenous influence (across shelf)—and likely several other lesser known gradients
- Comparison depends on a clear delineation of the surveyed habitats
- Historic surveys in Torre Strait have been carried out using the same sample design and survey approach
- Sometimes survey delineations are poorly defined

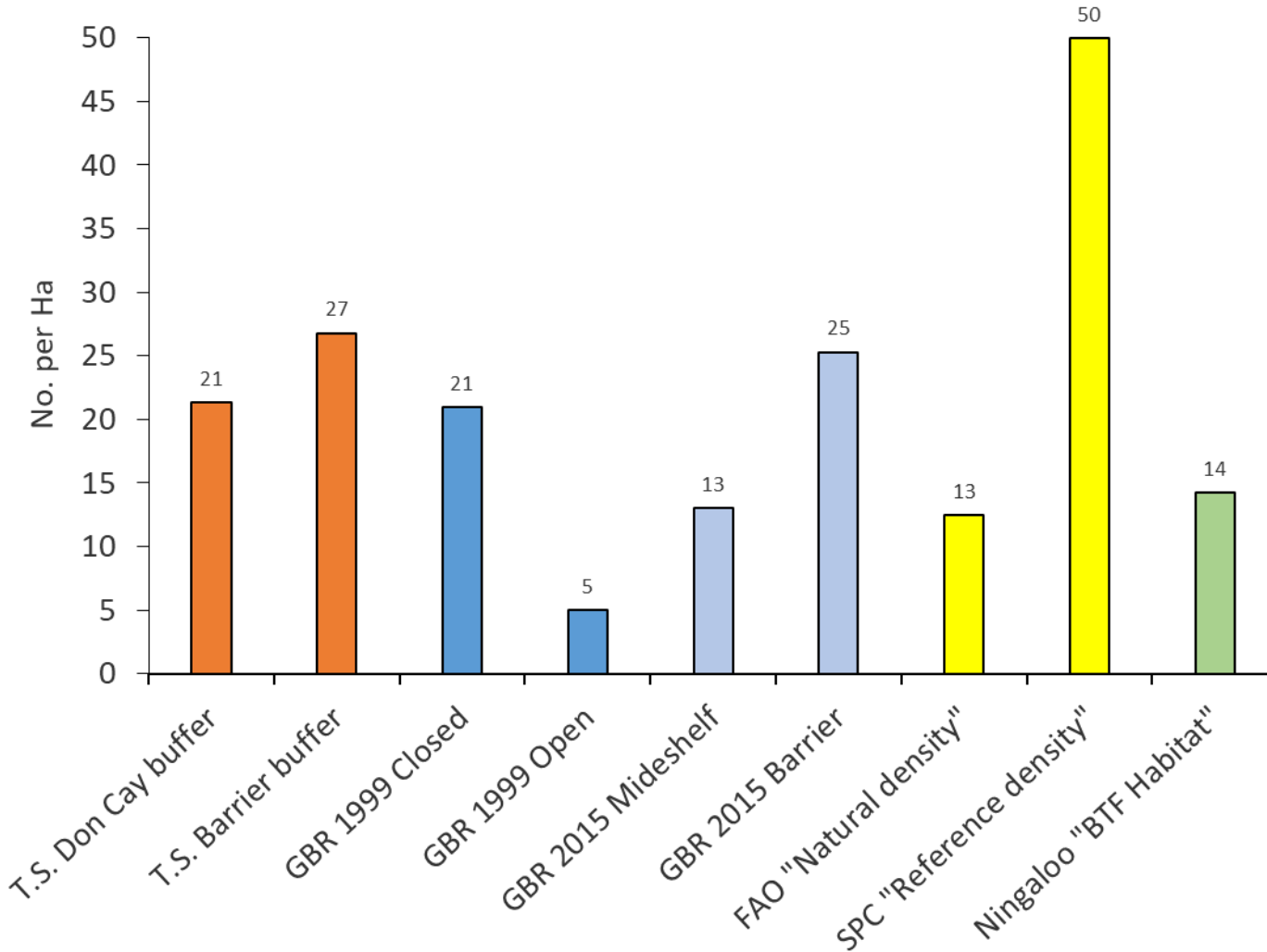
Black teatfish – stock status



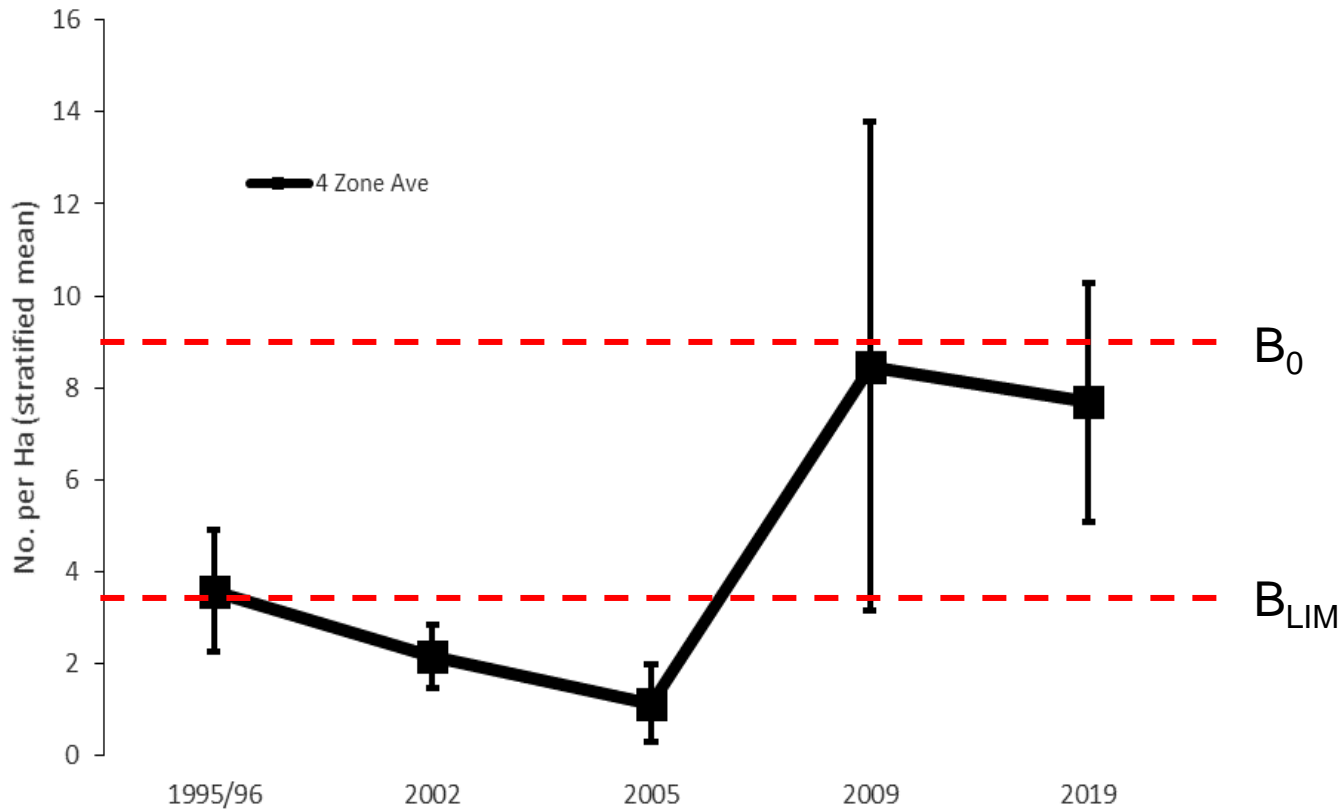
Comparison to other studies



Black teatfish – stock status



Black teatfish – Reference levels



Black teatfish – Stock Modelling

- Objective way to explore population dynamics
- Provides a dynamic (i.e. changing over time) picture of a species and hence informs on not just standing biomass but also what the likely productivity (i.e. turnover rate) is to help inform on sustainable fishing levels

$$N_{t+1} = N_t + r N_t \left(1 - \left(\frac{N_t}{K} \right)^\mu \right) - C_t$$

Diagram illustrating the Stock Modelling equation for Black Teatfish (BTF) population dynamics:

- N_{t+1} : Total biomass of BTF per year
- N_t : Total biomass of BTF per year (at time t)
- r : Intrinsic growth rate
- K : Carrying capacity (pristine biomass)
- μ : Shape parameter
- C_t : Total annual catch

Model limitations

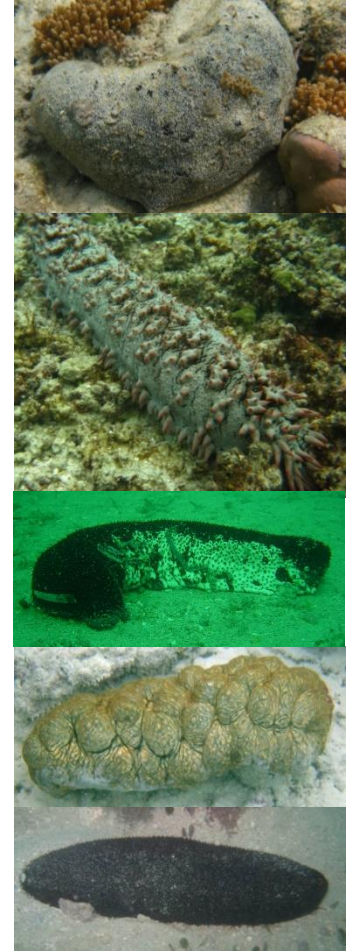
- As with any model, model outputs are only as good as the data that are used
- If we have less data then assessments need to be simpler and the harvest strategy needs to be more precautionary
- There are relatively few values in the BTF time series (i.e. 5 survey points) hence there is limited information to inform a model
- There is some contrast in the time series (i.e. a downward trend followed by a recovery) to estimate productivity
- Biomass dynamic models -> simple models (current)
- Age-structured spatial models -> better (future)
- MSE: Management Strategy Evaluation -> best (potential)

How does the modelling relate to the new Harvest Strategy (HS)

- The modelling is used to corroborate or shed additional light on analyses of the survey data to provide insights into stock status and sustainable yield
- Consistent with the HS philosophy of using a precautionary starting TAC to re-open a fishery, the modelling can explore a range of alternative scenarios with different levels of precaution added
- Consistent with the HS philosophy of being able to improve and refine management advice as more data become available, models will also be able to refine and improve their estimates as more data become available

Reminder: How does it work for different stocks with more or less information and data

- If we have less data then assessments need to be simpler and the harvest strategy needs to be more precautionary
- With better information and data for a stock, a stock assessment model that uses all the information can be used
- But stock assessments also differ – can be high quality vs more uncertainty in stock assessment:
 - when more certain can approach more robustly
 - but when less certain about stock status then need to be more precautionary as you have less certainty about stock status



Total Biomass vs Available biomass

- The biomass of a fishery that is “available” to be caught is calculated as the biomass above the MLS (minimum legal size)
- If possible, this is the best quantity to use to calculate the sustainable yield, and is the biomass measure used in age-structured and size-structured fisheries models such as for TRL
- The biomass dynamics model used here can only consider total biomass but more complicated models can refine this
- Available biomass is a better measure than total biomass for stocks that are recovering because it takes into account the lag time for recovery to occur and hence for sufficient animals to grow larger than the MLS and be available to the fishery. If the age-structure is skewed towards incoming recruits, total biomass can overestimate the sustainable yield.

Pella-Tomlinson equation

$$N_{t+1} = N_t + r N_t \left(1 - \left(\frac{N_t}{K} \right)^\mu \right) - C_t$$

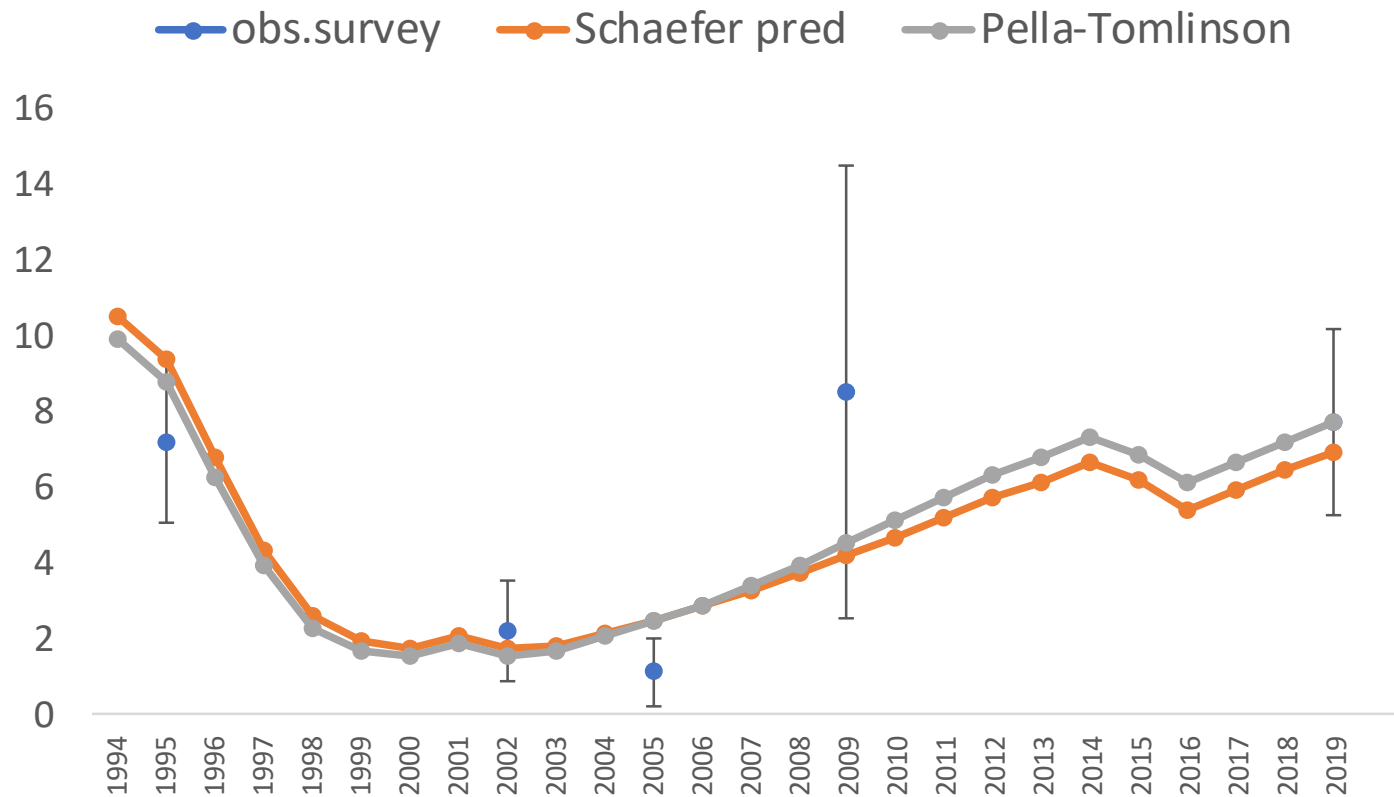
Diagram illustrating the Pella-Tomlinson equation with parameter annotations:

- N_{t+1} : Total biomass of BTF per year
- r : Intrinsic growth rate
- K : Carrying capacity (pristine biomass)
- μ : Shape parameter
- C_t : Total annual catch

- Lumped biomass model
- Assumes growth is density-dependent
- The combination of r and K is more robust than these parameters on their own and informs on sustainable/replacement yield
- Implemented in ADMB

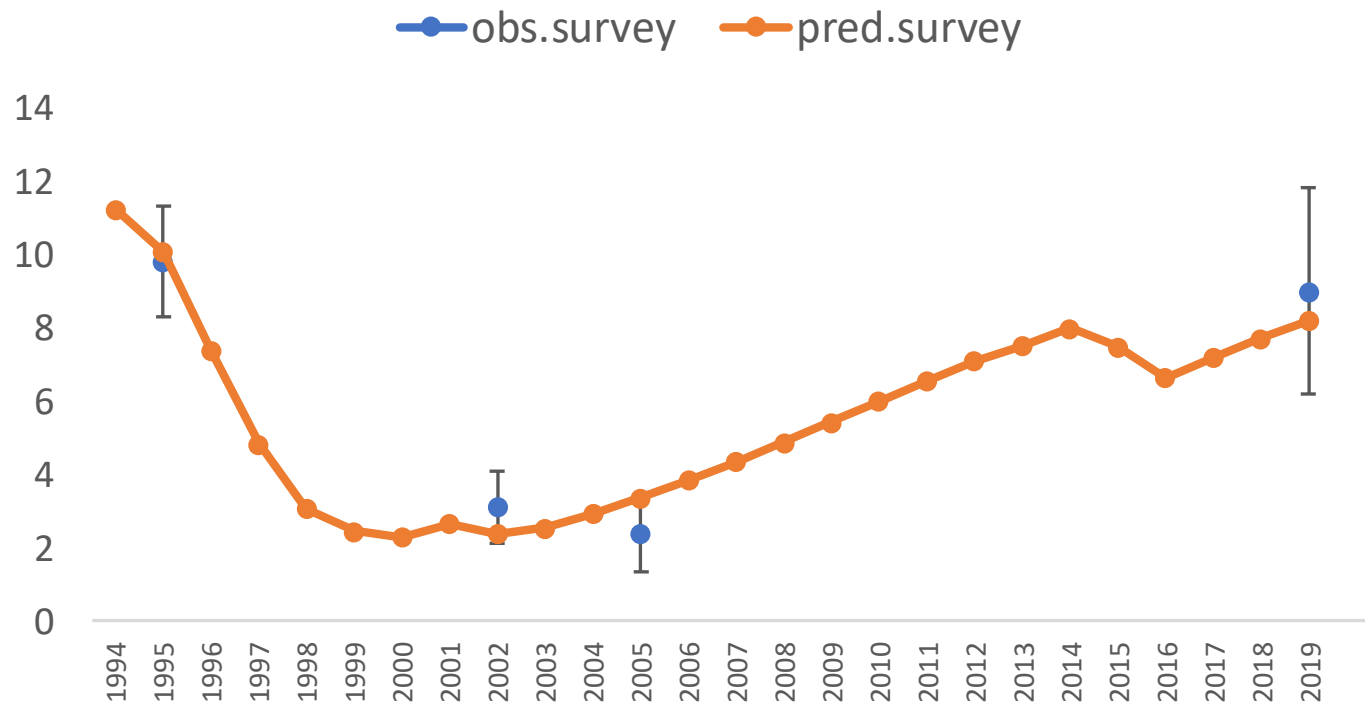
Model fit to survey data

Model fit to survey data : $r=0.2$; double surv(95)

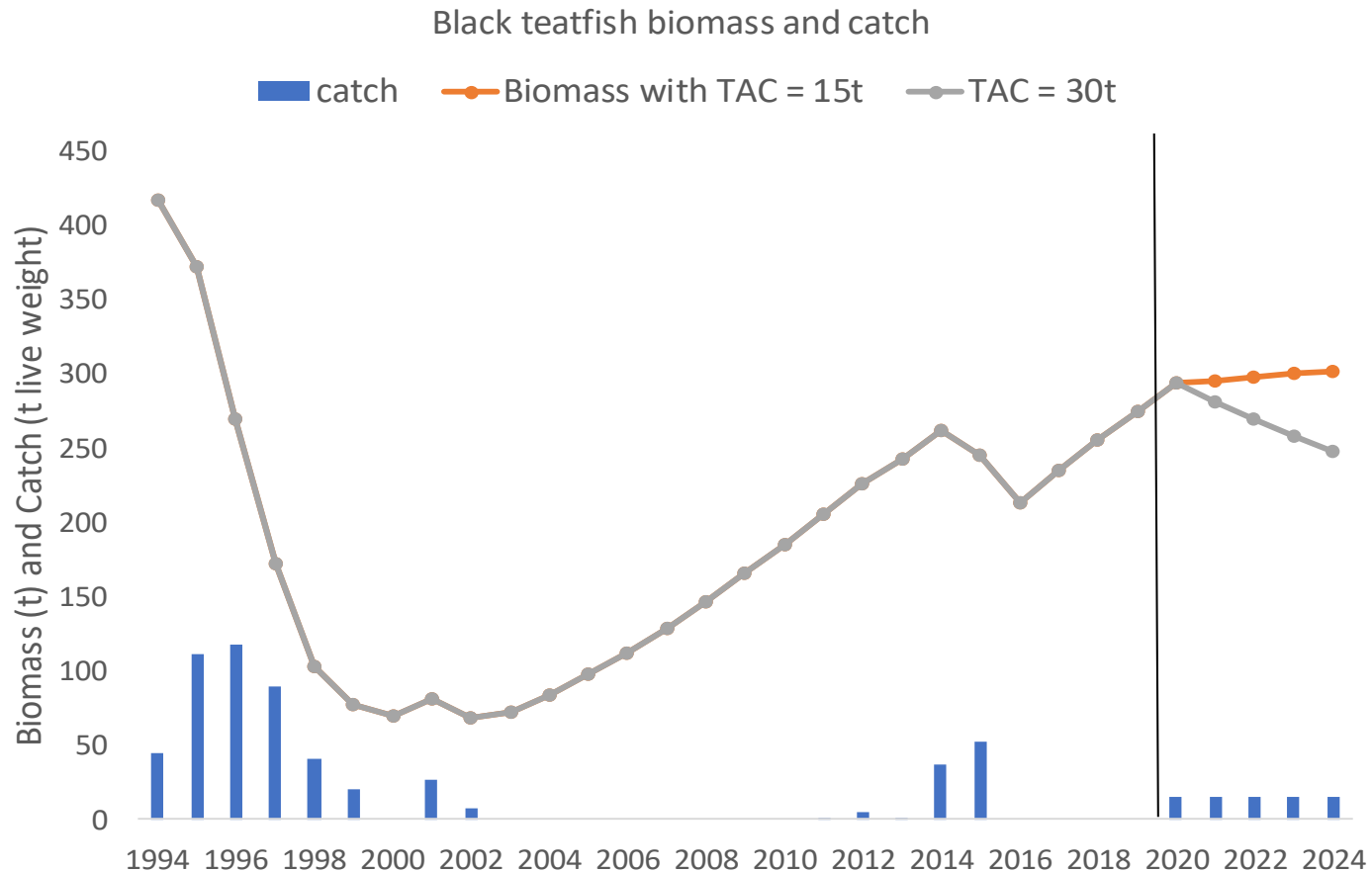


Use survey series that includes outer barrier (less variable as less fishing there, but no data for 2009)

Model fit to "barrier" survey data : $r = \text{fix } 0.2$; $K = 430 \text{ t}$
[STD 87]; $\text{MSY} = 21.5 \text{ t}$



Base-case model estimated biomass trajectory and forward projection



Model Results Summary: MSY

	Description	MSY (t)	BMSY (t)	B(2019) (t)	B2019/BMSY
Model 1	S; fix r	18.5	245.4	336.9	1.37
Model 2	double surv(95)	16.9	225	242.3	1.08
Model 3	S; fix r	15	300.5	385.7	1.28
Model 4	S; fix r; dbl	20.8	208.3	274.7	1.31
Model 5	S; est r,K	28.5	195.8	344.3	1.75
Model 6	S; est r,K; dbl	24.6	197.8	308.2	1.56
Model 7	P; est r,K,mu; dbl; mu=3.5	49.7	257.4	308.2	1.19
Model 8	Fix K, est r	19.9	410.2	647.8	1.57

Summary

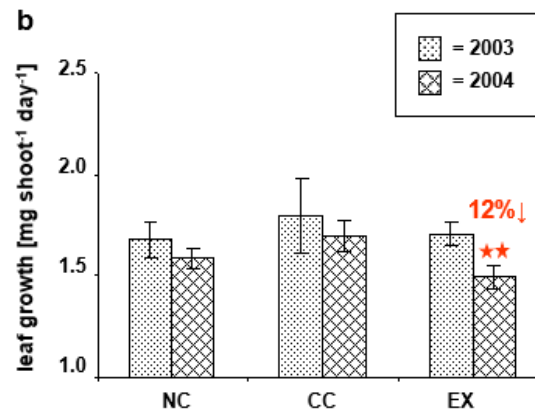
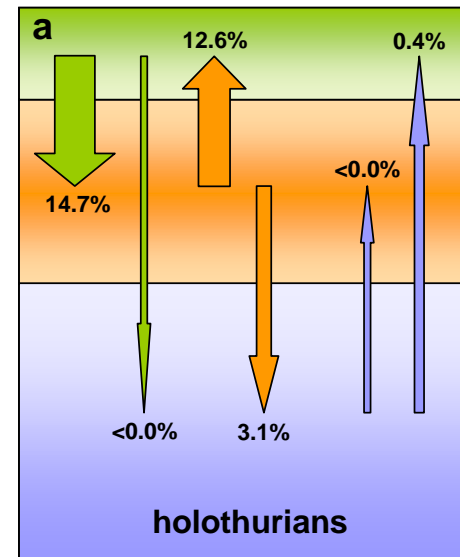
- Across most model versions, projections suggested that a constant annual TAC of 30t may not be sustainable, whereas a TAC of 20 t was sustainable across all model versions run.
- The base-case model estimate of MSY was 21 t, which is slightly higher than the 15 t precautionary TAC that is currently recommended by the Harvest Strategy.
- As more data become available, it will be possible to refine and substantially improve modelling results.
- It wasn't possible to reconcile the absolute biomass estimates with the trends in the survey data, suggesting e.g. that spatial aspects need to be accounted for in the modelling

Sustainable fishing – ecosystem role

- Important benthic environmental role

- Bioturbation

- Nutrient cycling



- Environmental MSY may be smaller than stock MSY due to adverse environmental impacts

GBR Black teatfish



1999

- “Area of the fishery” (12-19° S—Princess Charlotte Bay to Lucinda)
- Focused on the “main habitat for Black teatfish” on reef flat with <40%
- Density on ‘closed reefs’ was **20.97** per Ha
- Density on ‘open reefs’ was **5.01** per Ha

- The fishery was closed in 1999

- The biomass estimate for the “fishery area” was **5,585** t.

(Benzie and Uthicke, 2003; Uthicke and Benzie, 2000)

GBR Black teatfish



2015

- Similar area (14-19° S—Cape Melville to Lucinda) as the 1999 survey
- Focused on the 200 m reef edge buffer on the weather (SE facing) side of reefs > 1km²
- Mid-shelf reefs
 - **13.5** per Ha (closed reefs) and **12.5** per Ha (open reefs)
- Barrier reefs
 - **27.0** per Ha (closed reefs) and **23.6** per Ha (open reefs)
- Population deemed to have recovered to >70% B₀
- The biomass estimate for the surveyed area was **379** t
- The fishery was opened in 2019 with a 30 t TAC

(Knuckey and Koopman, 2016; Koopman and Knuckey, 2020)

Qld E.C Fishery (GBR)

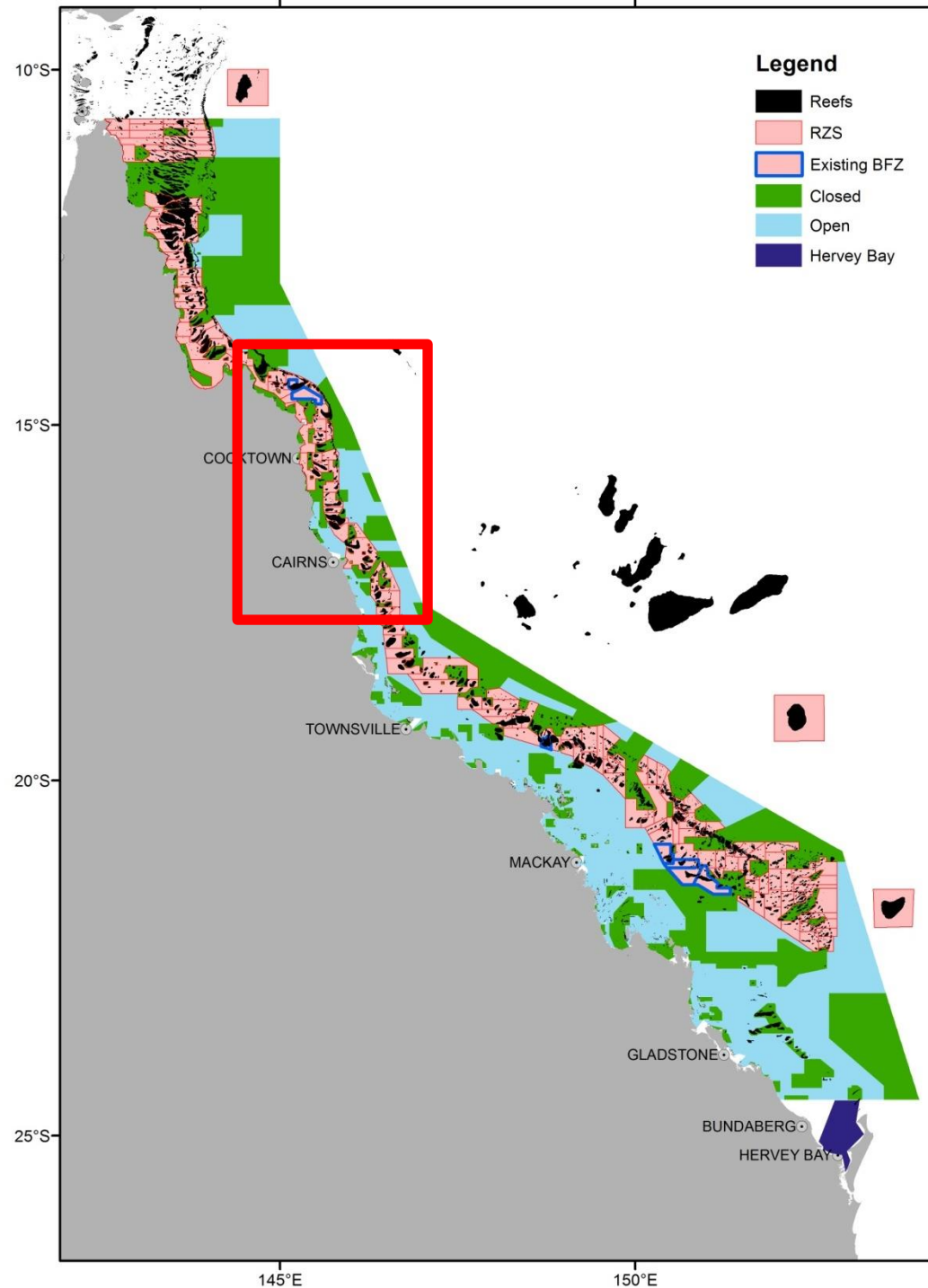
Total reef area 26,373 km²
 Total “dry reef” area 6,363 km²

1999 survey area 2,242 km²
 (5,585 t)

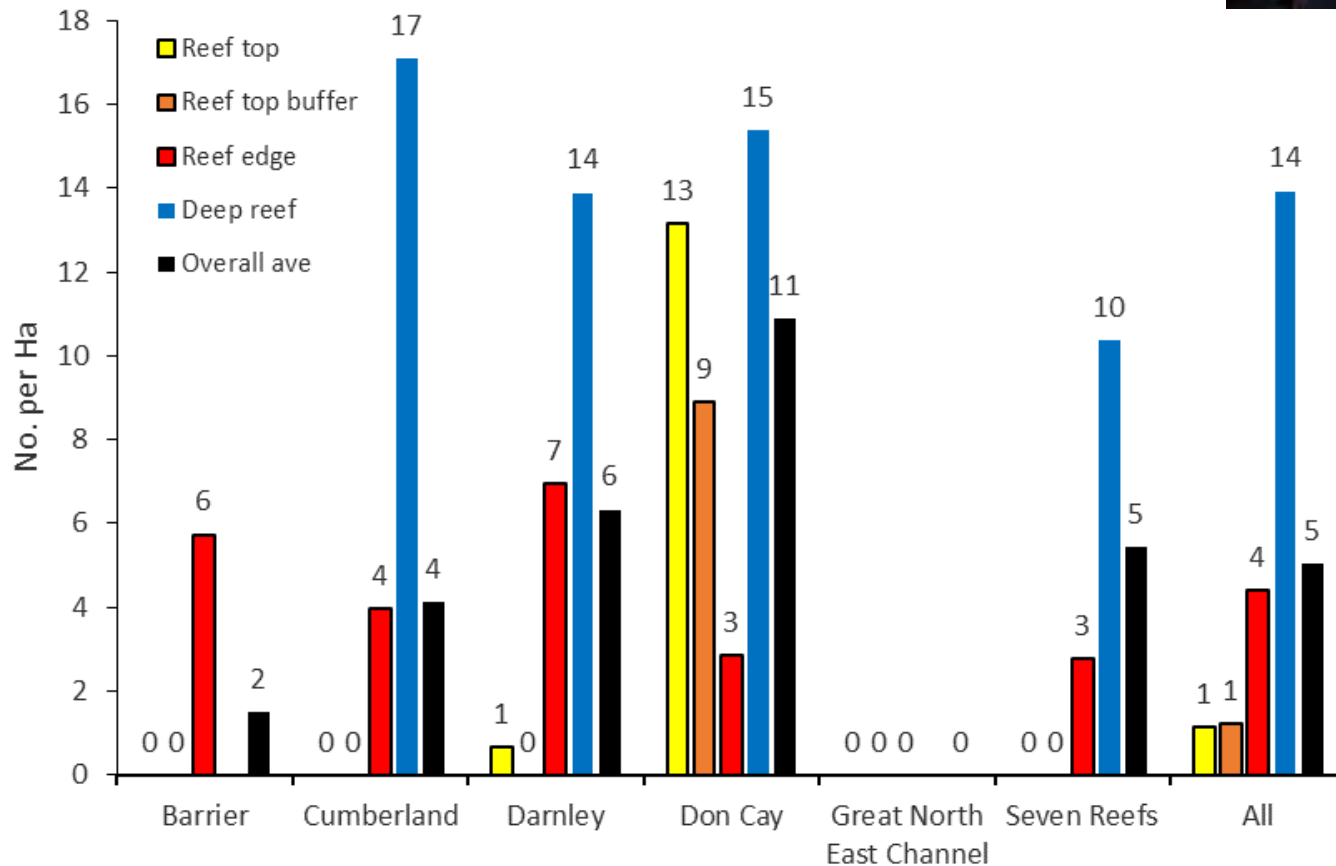
2015 survey area 184 km²
 (379 t)

Closed to fishing 36%

Torres Strait
 Reef area 2,426 km²
 (1,238 t) (9.2%)

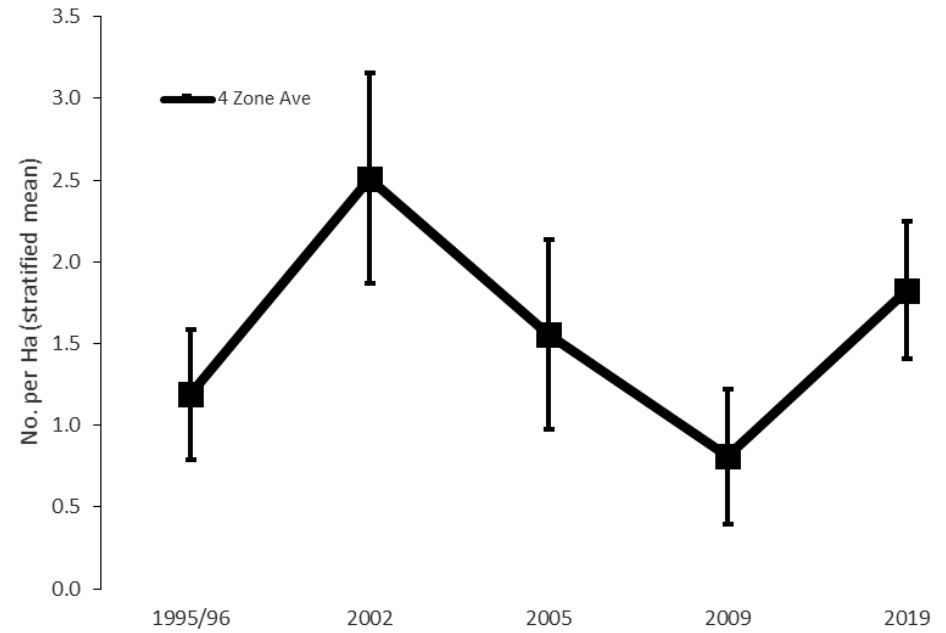
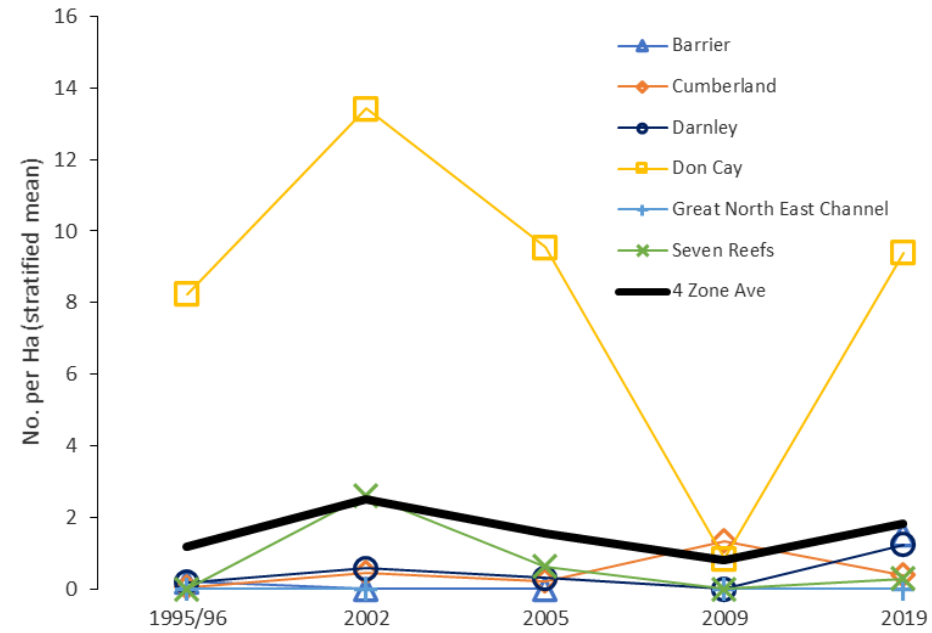


White teatfish



Fishery biomass estimate = 871 t
 >MLS = 141 t

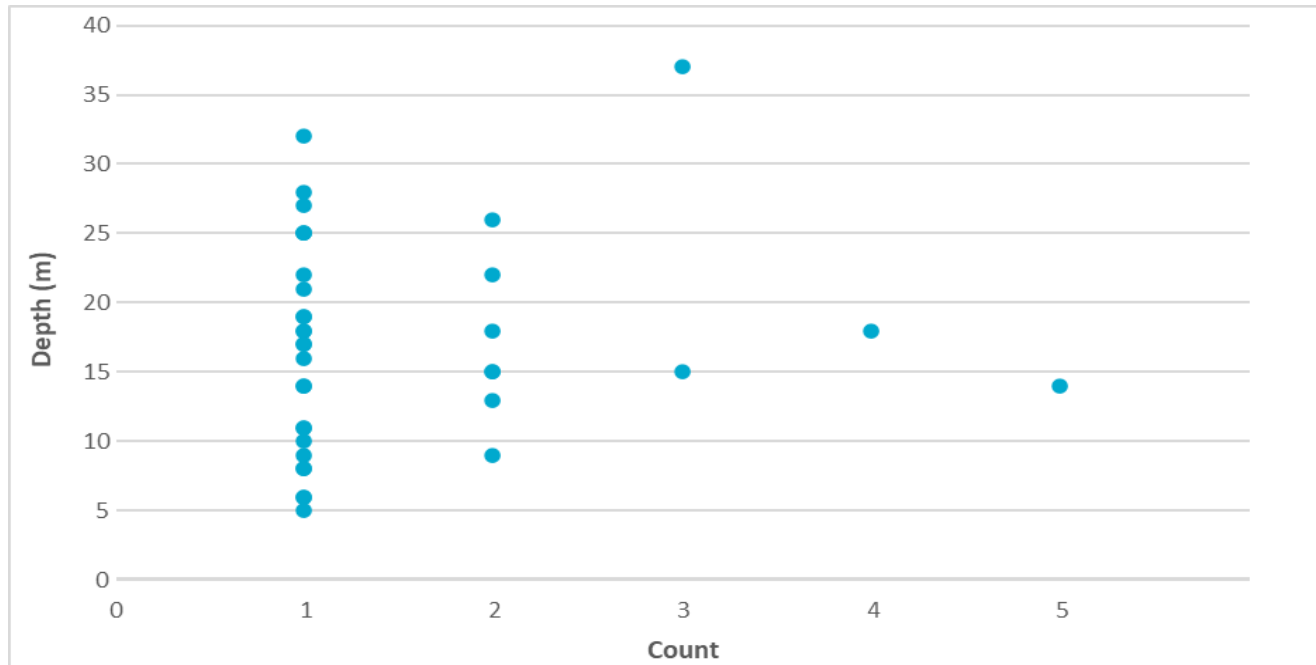
White teatfish



White teatfish

Depth profile

- Majority found between 5 m and 30 m depth
- Typically one teatfish found on a survey transect

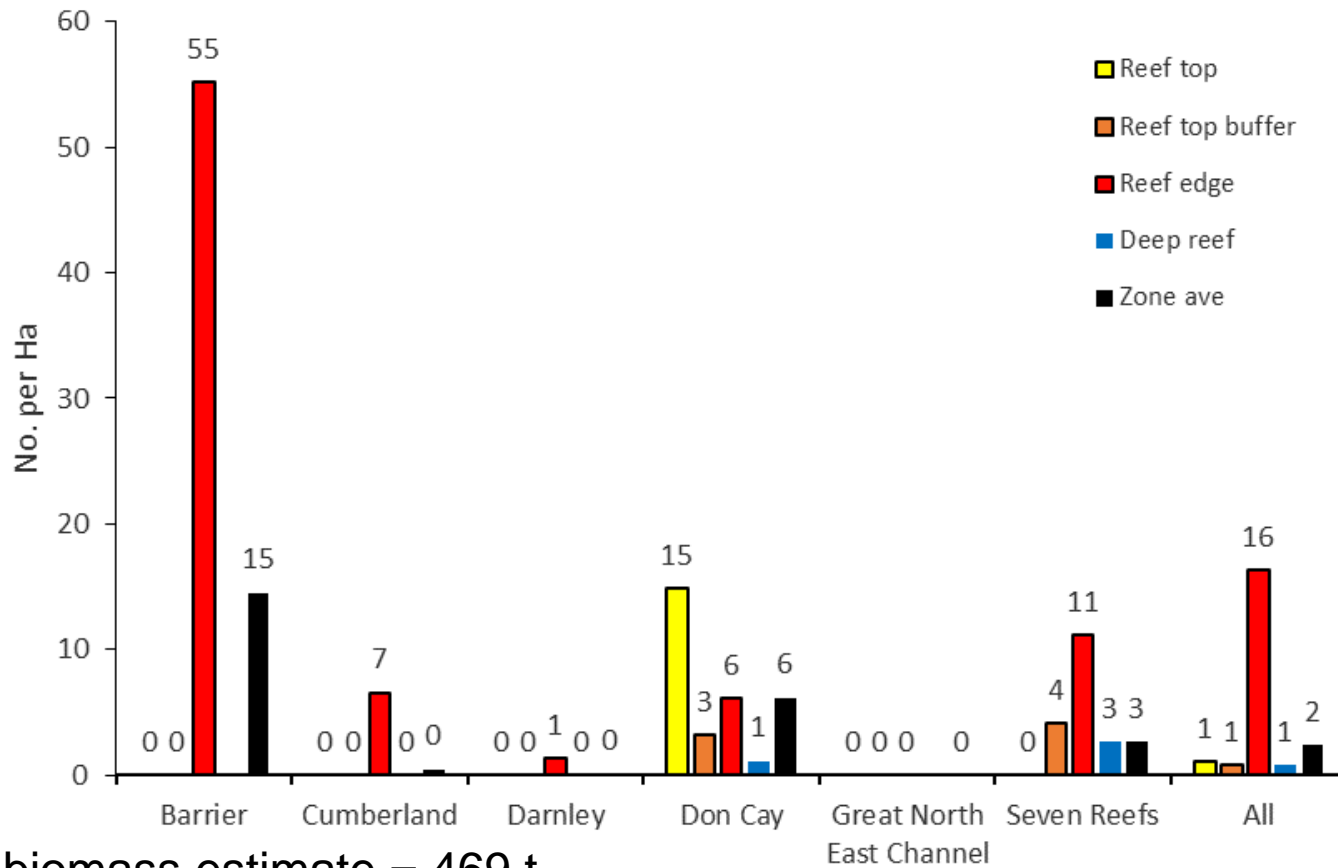


White teatfish – distribution

- Modelled from survey data 1995-2009 and biophysical



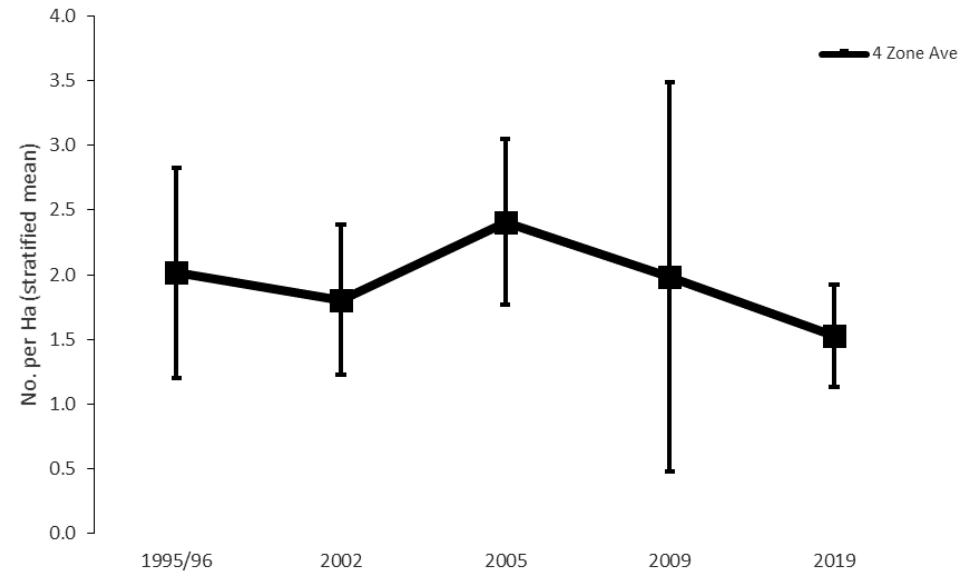
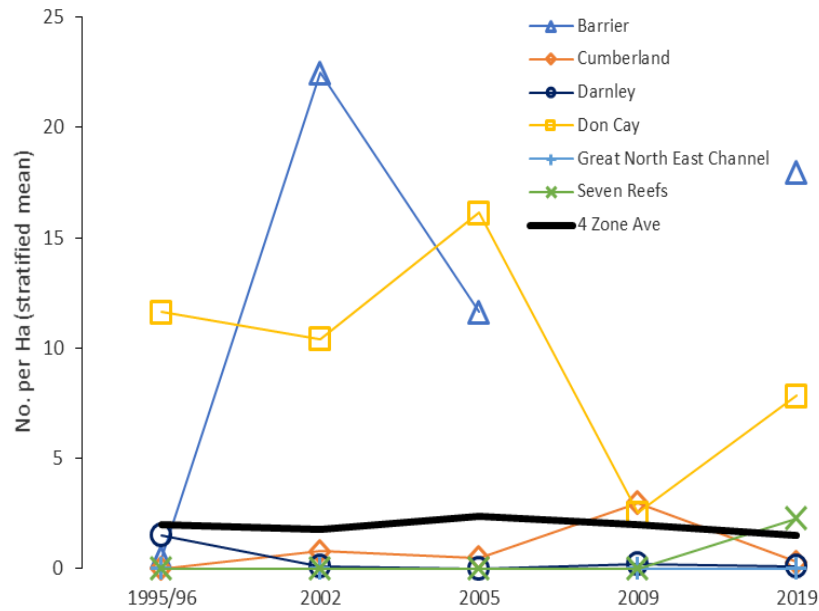
Prickly redfish



Fishery biomass estimate = 469 t

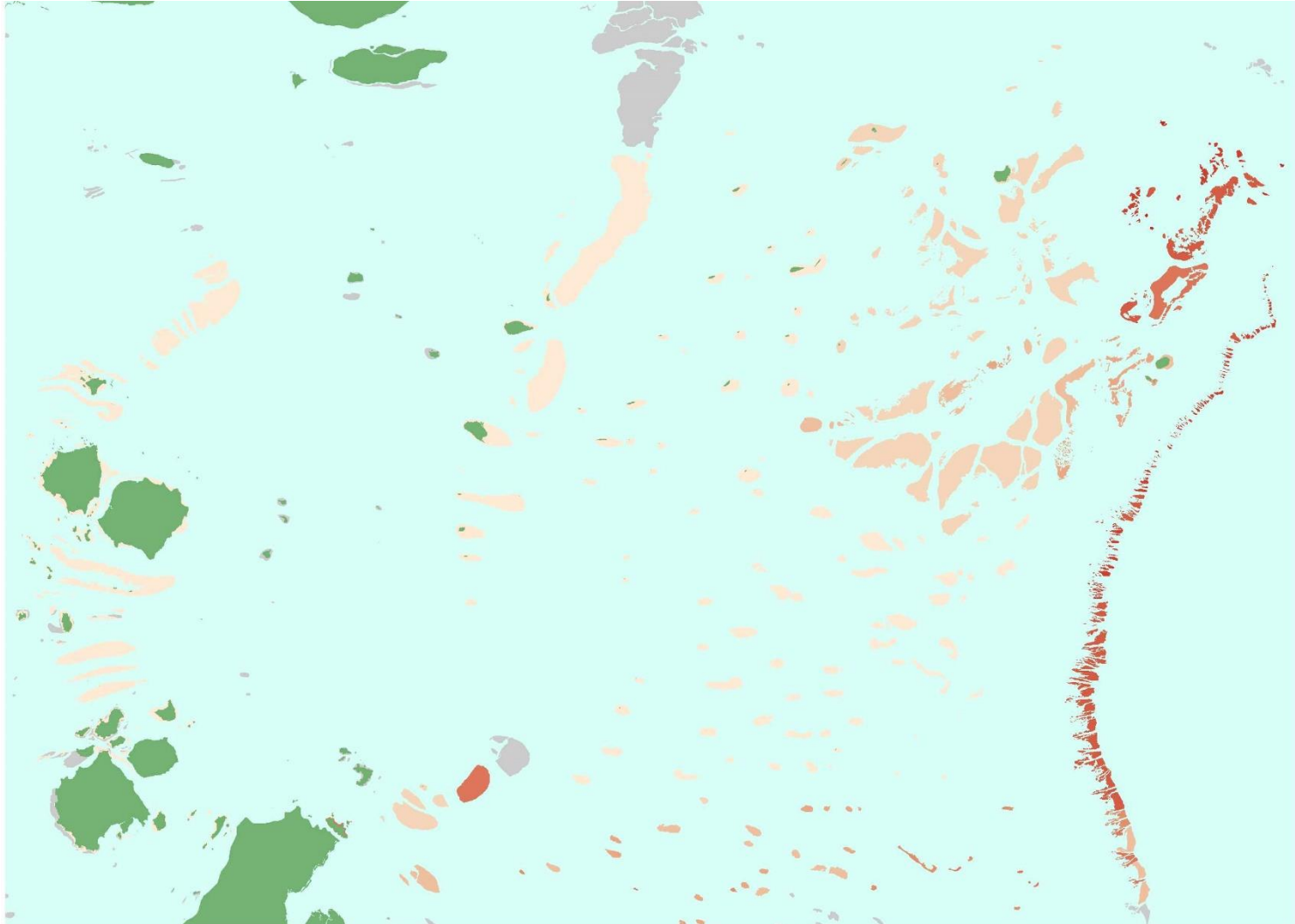
>MLS = 257 t

Prickly redfish

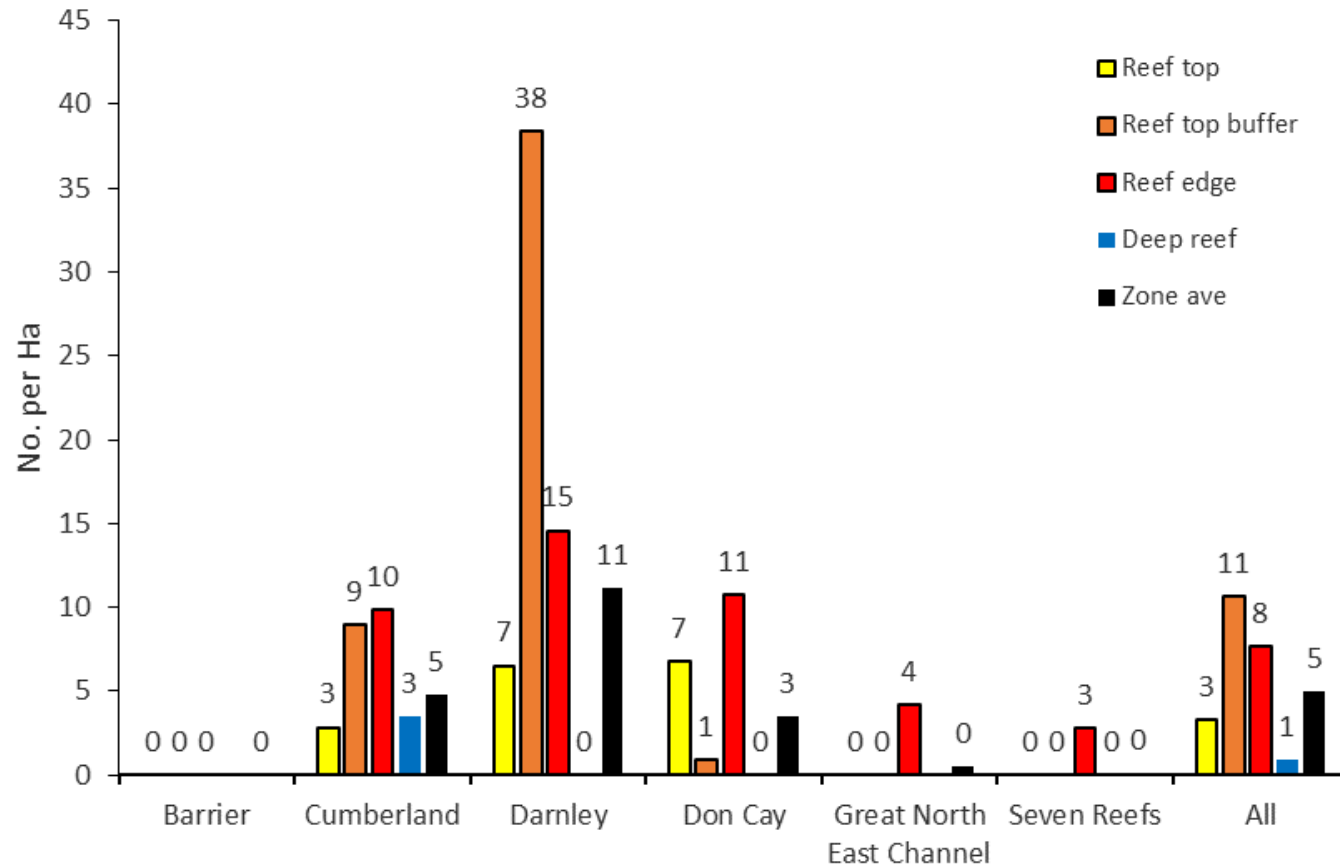


Prickly redfish – distribution

- Modelled from survey data 1995-2009 and biophysical correlates

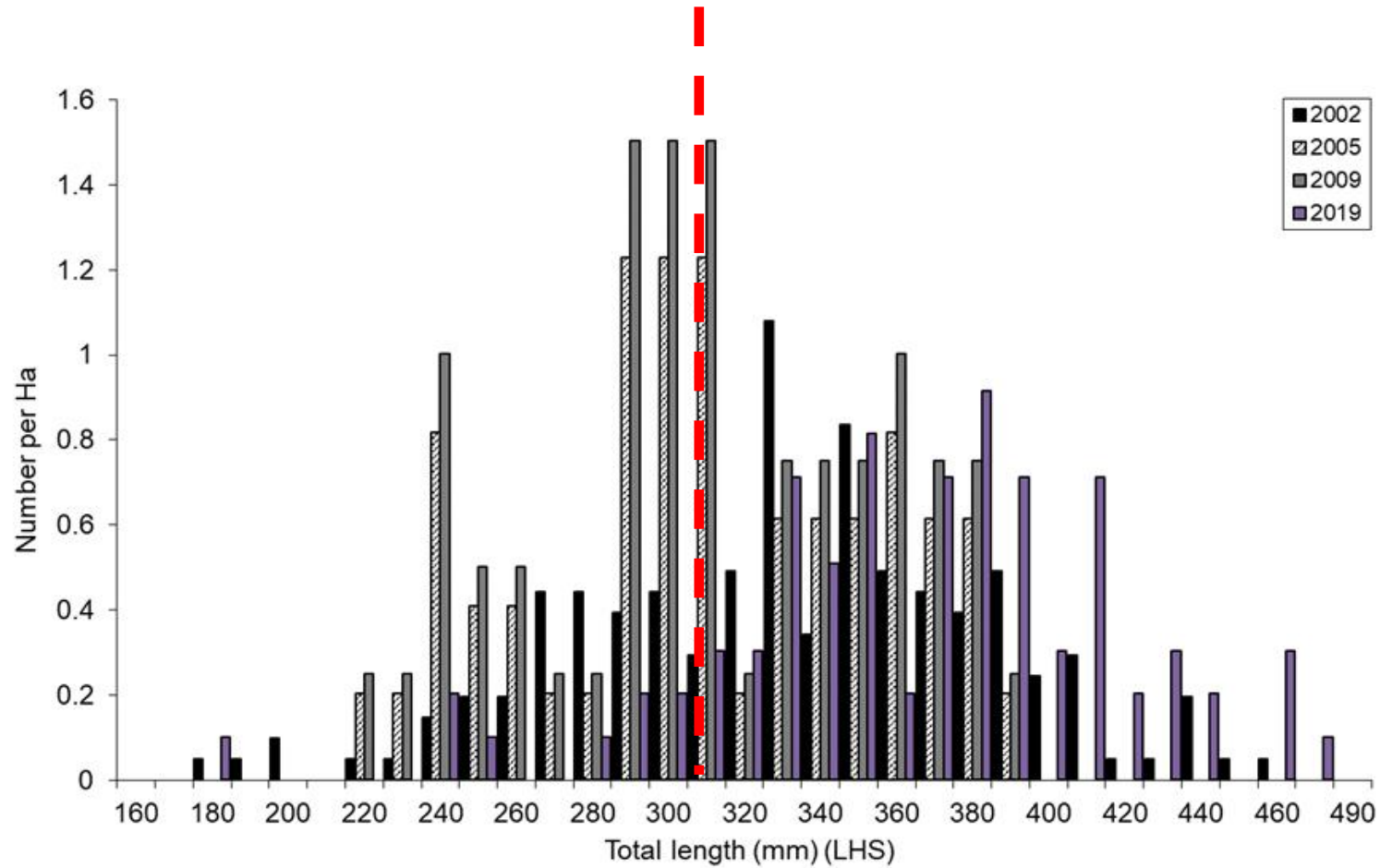


Curryfish (common)

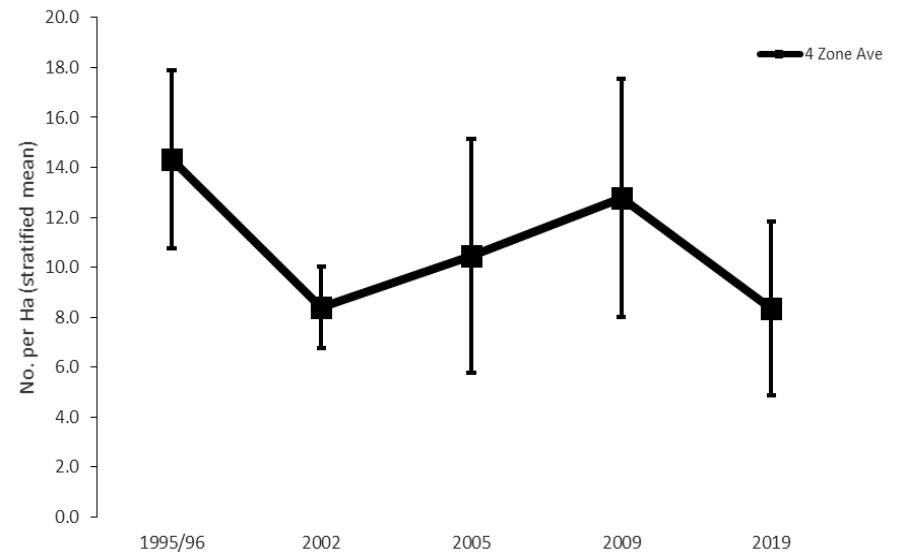
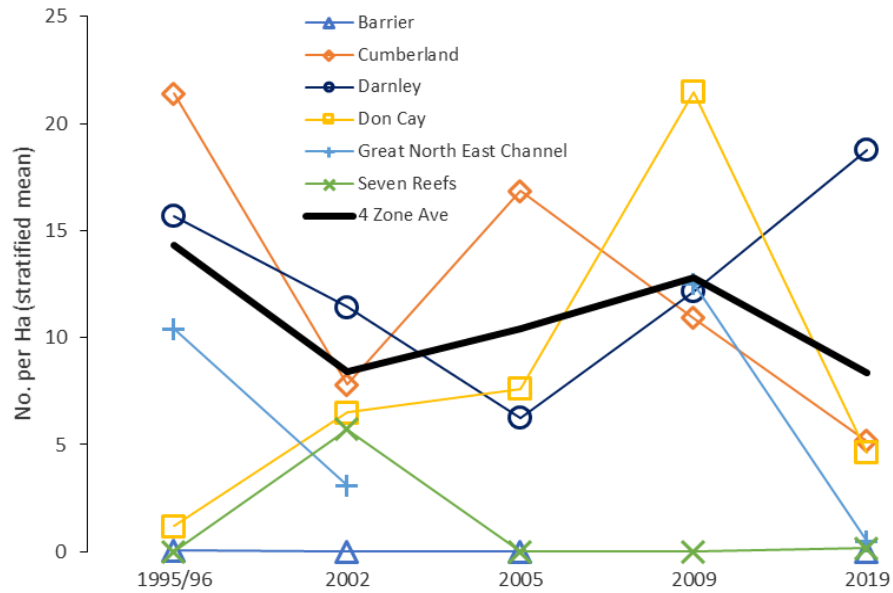


Fishery biomass estimate = 682 t
>MLS = 647 t

Curryfish (common)



Curryfish (common)

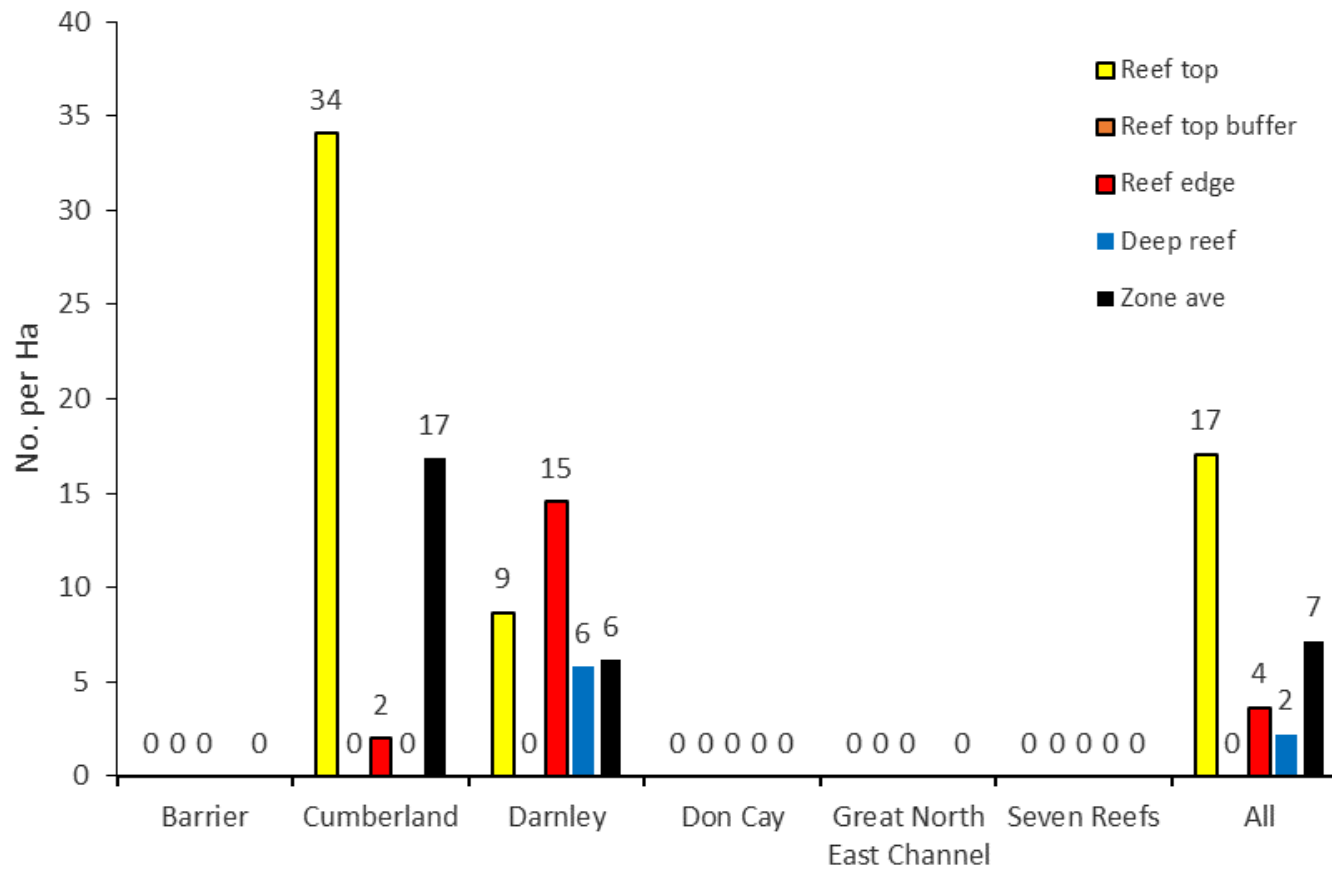


Curryfish (common) – distribution

- Modelled from survey data 1995-2009 and biophysical correlates

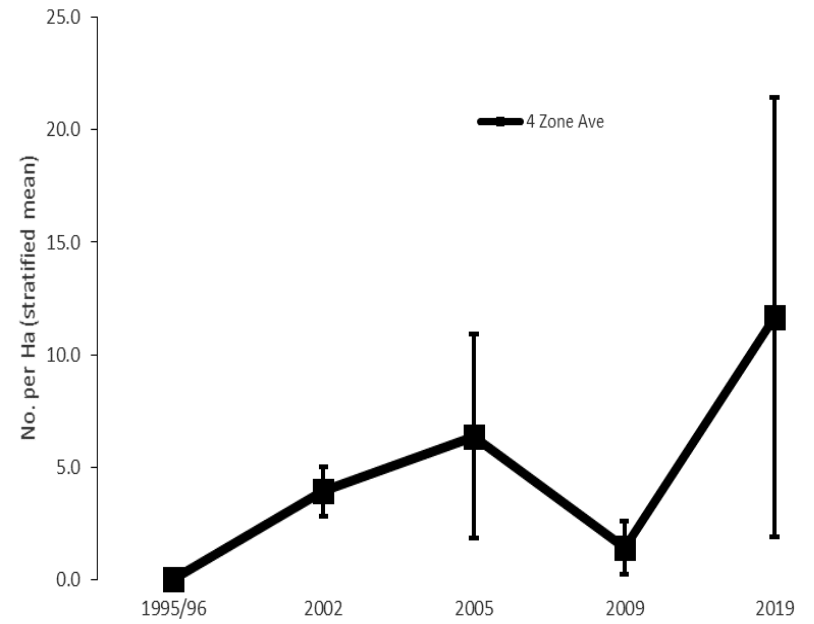
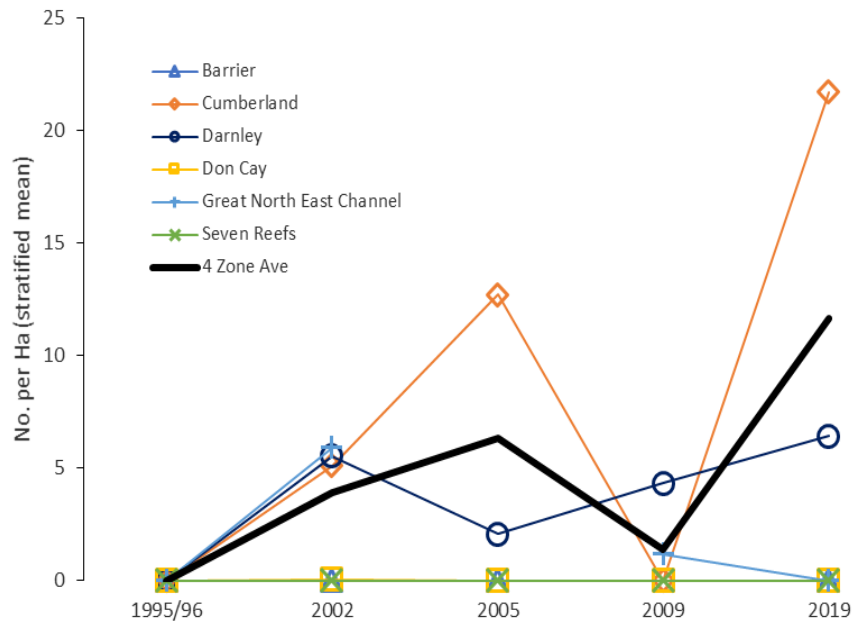


Curryfish (vastus)



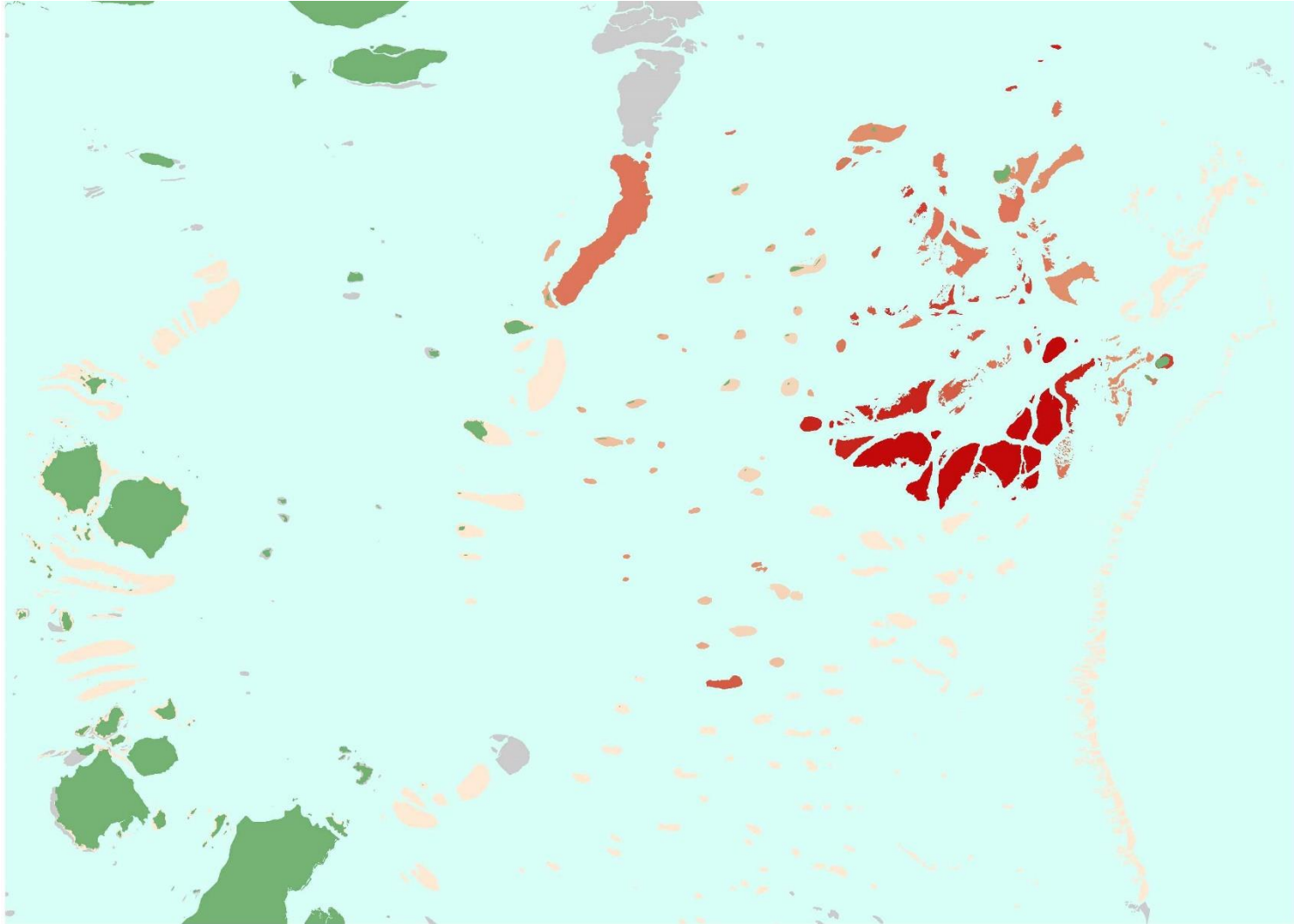
Fishery biomass estimate = 171 t
>MLS = 171 t

Curryfish (vastus)

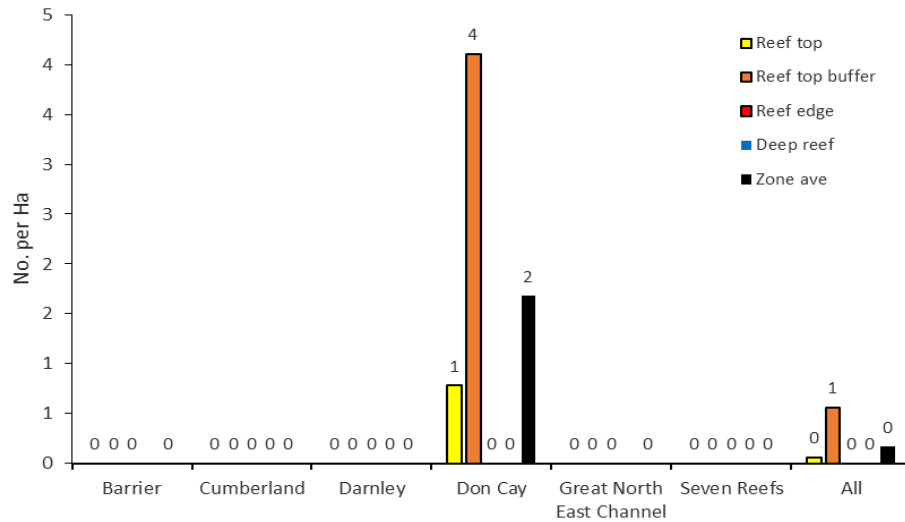


Curryfish (*vastus*) – distribution

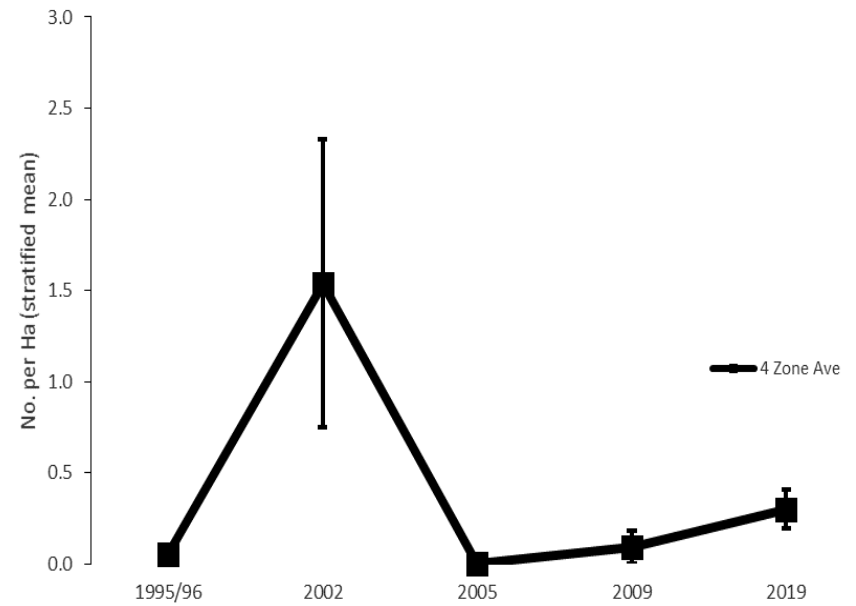
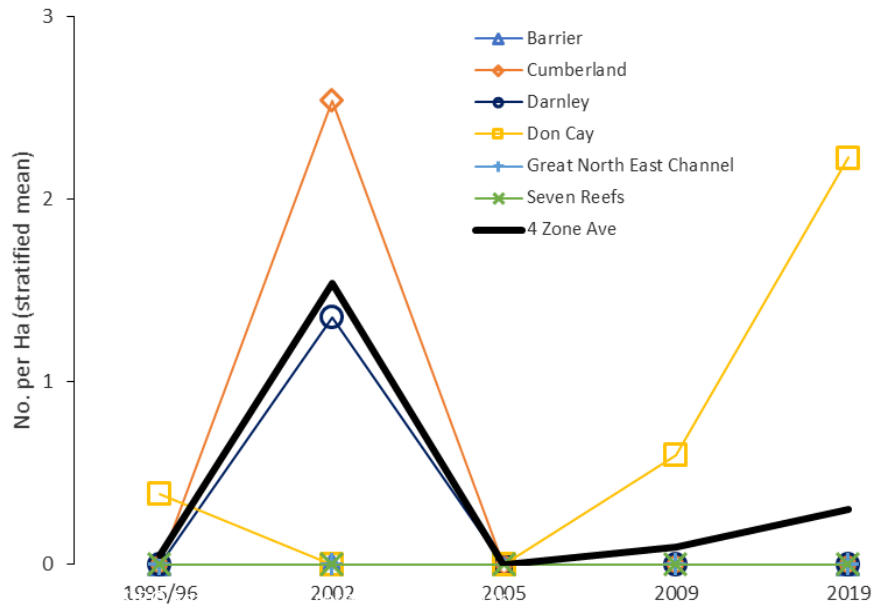
- Modelled from survey data 1995-2009 and biophysical correlates



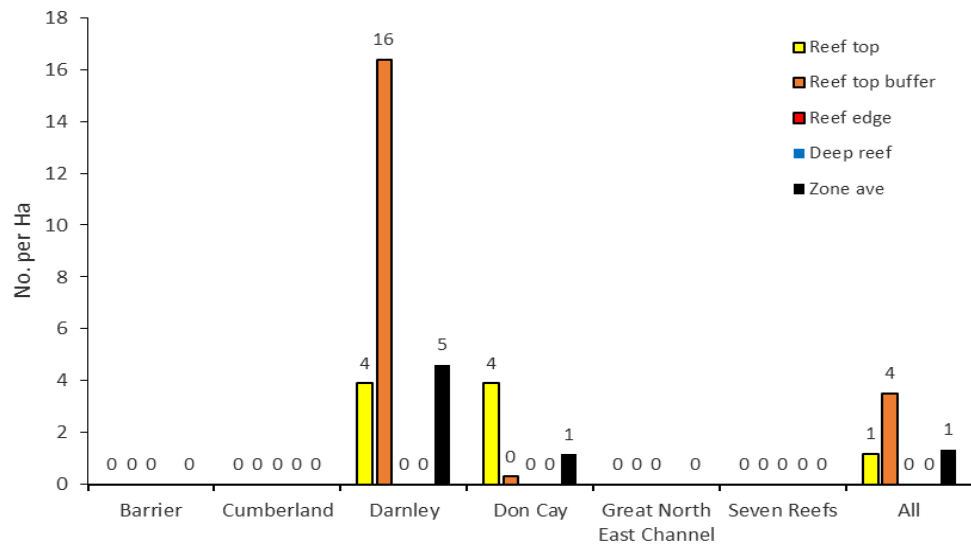
Surf redfish



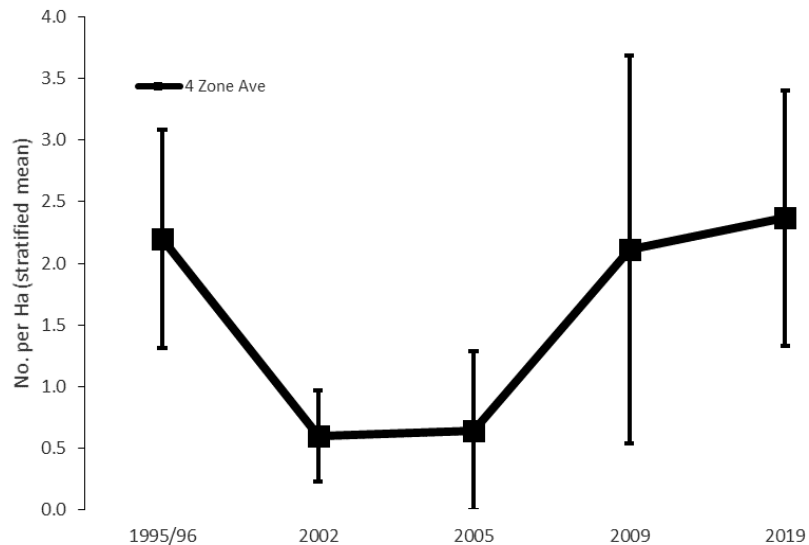
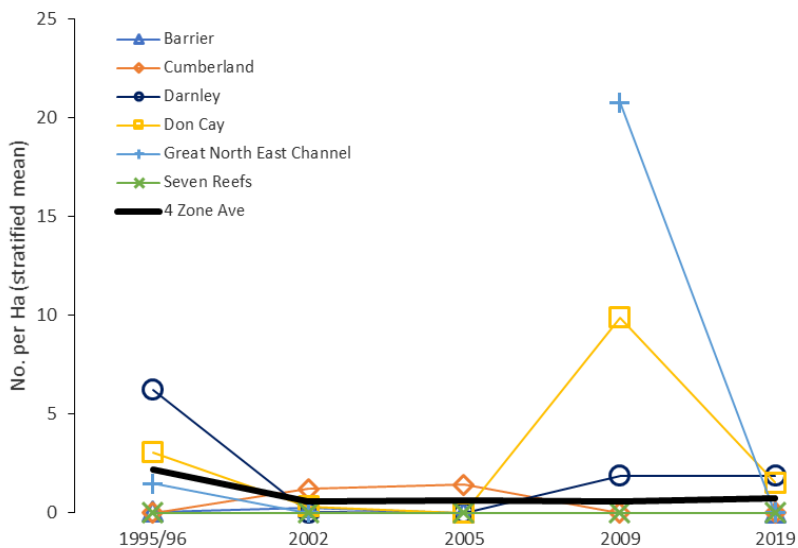
Fishery biomass estimate = 14 t
 >MLS = 7 t



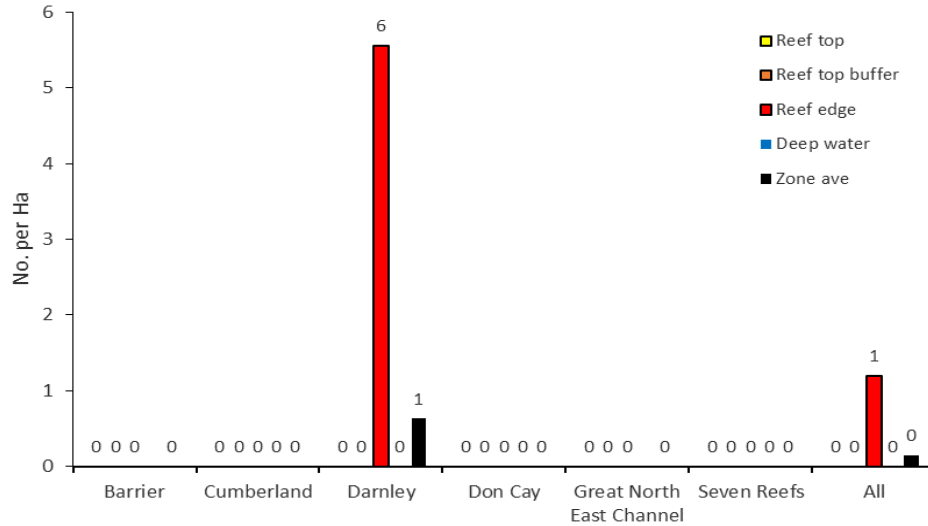
Deepwater redfish



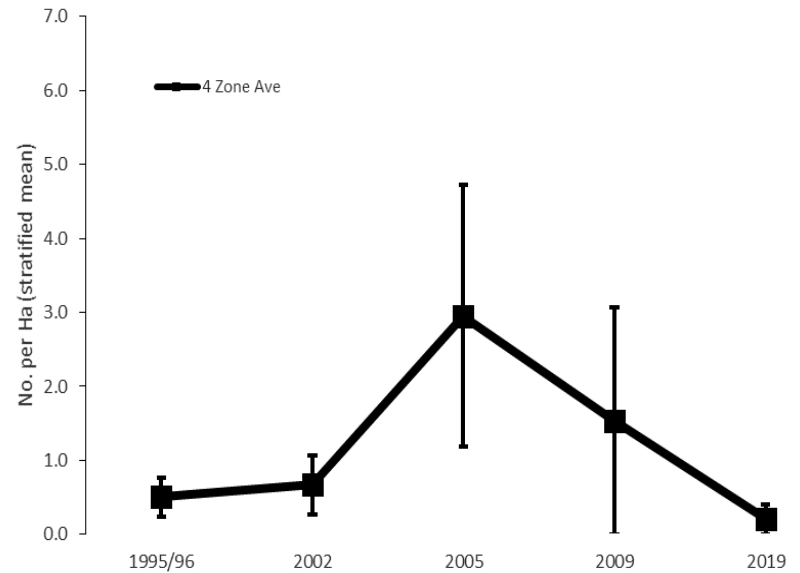
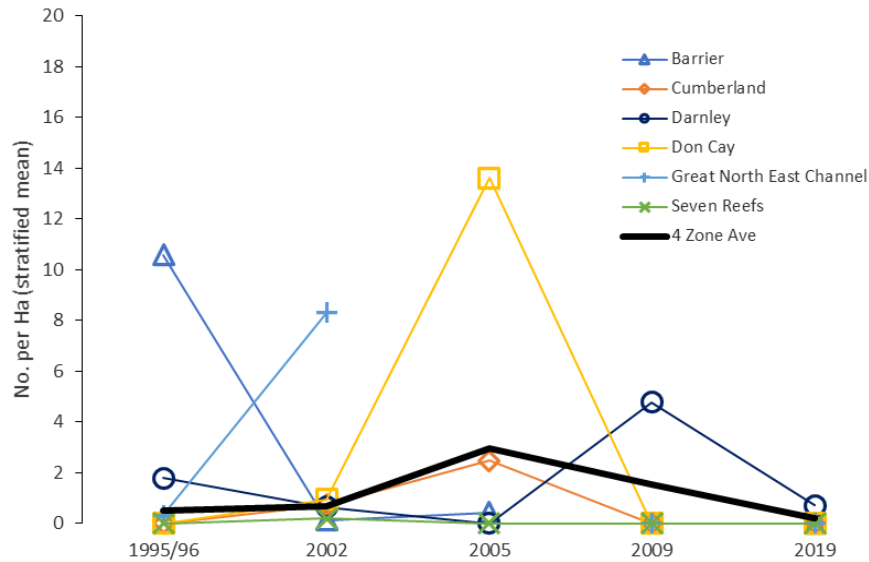
Fishery biomass estimate = 66 t
 >MLS = 55 t



Hairy blackfish

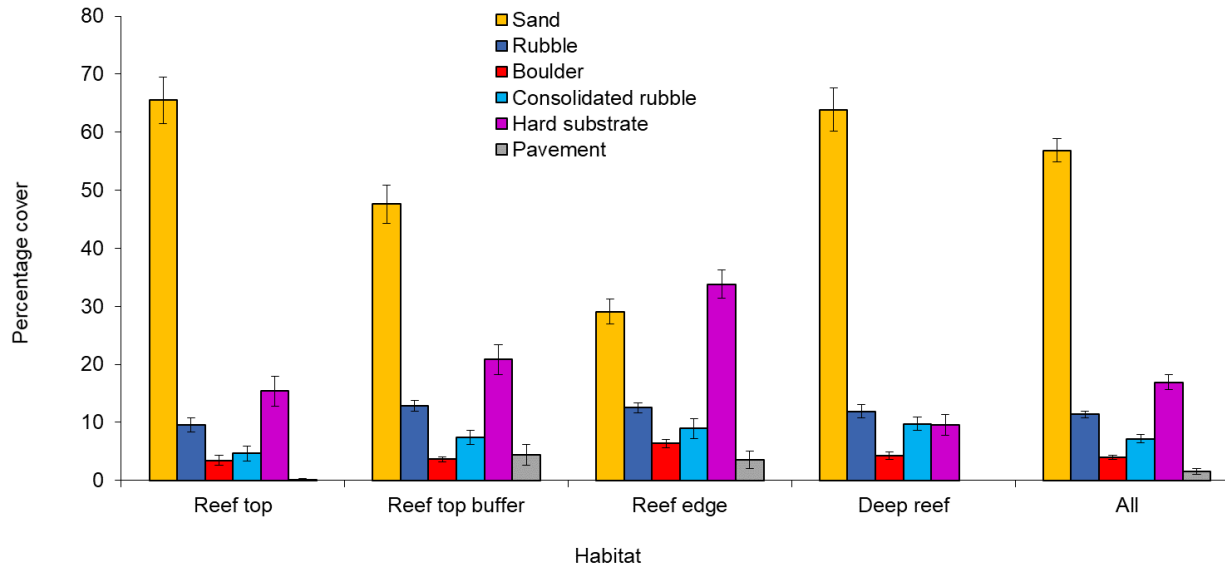
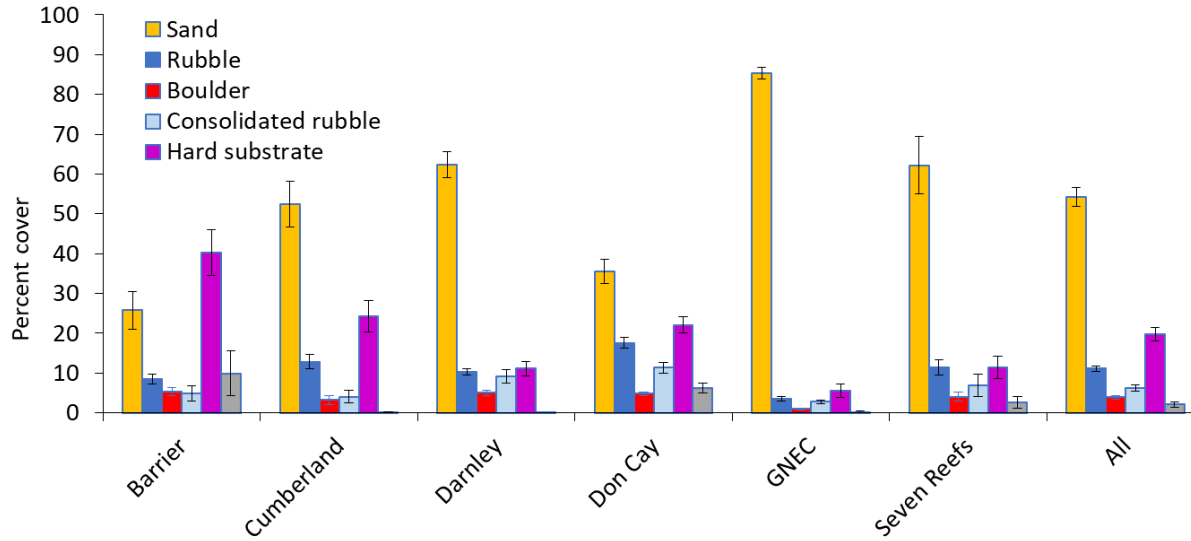


Fishery biomass estimate = 15 t (gutted weight)



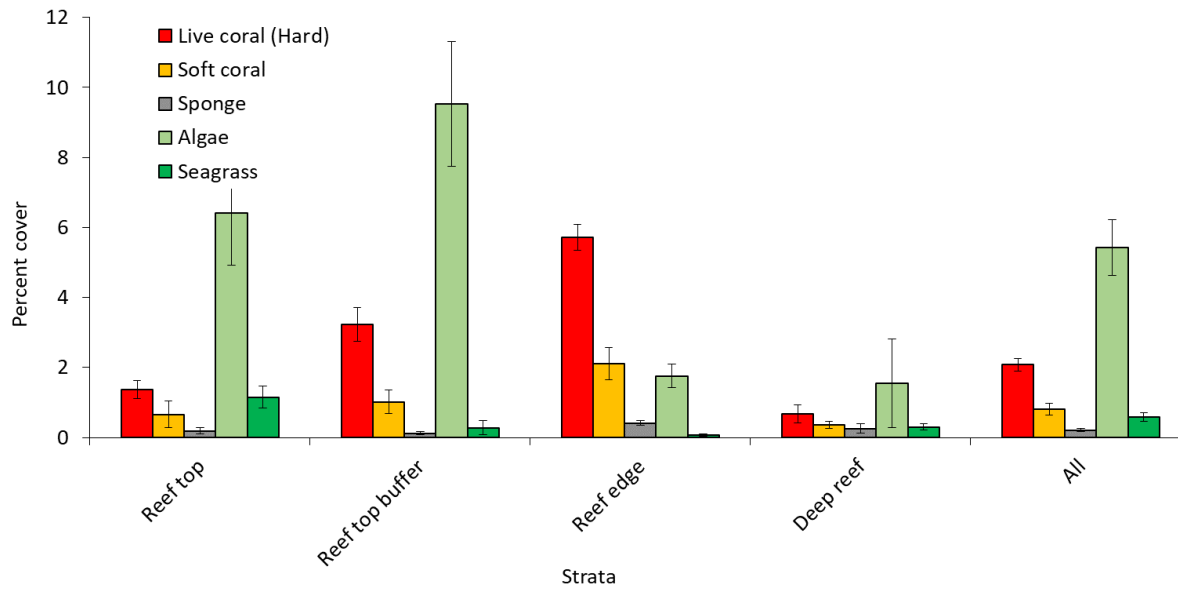
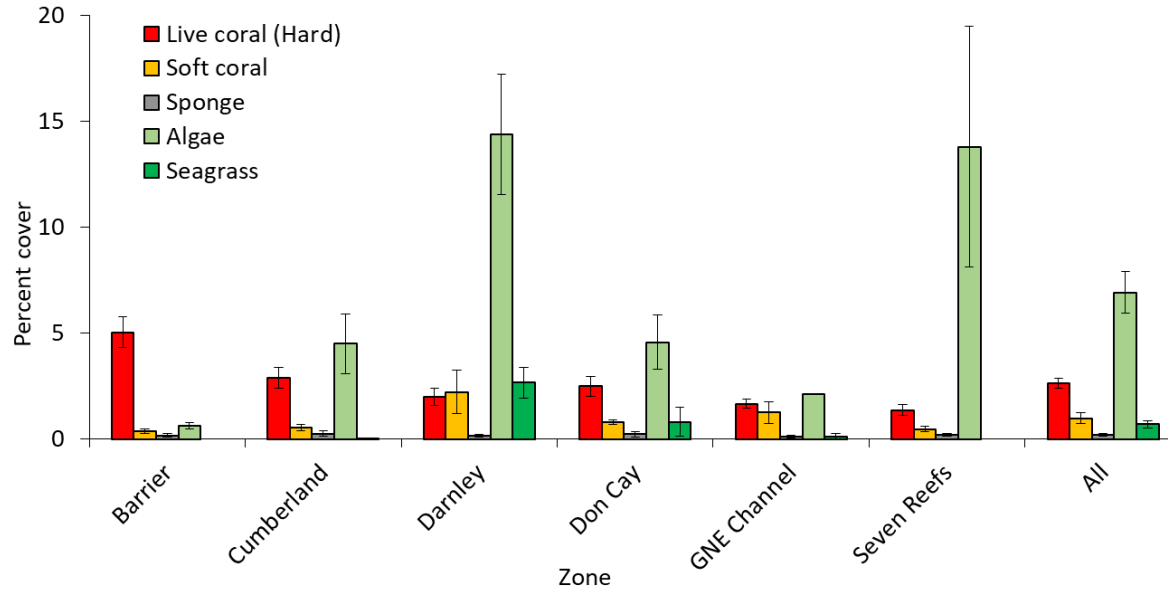
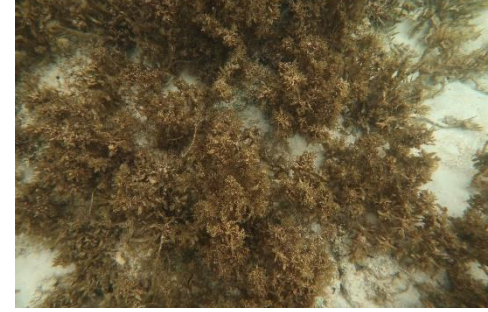
Environmental

Substrate

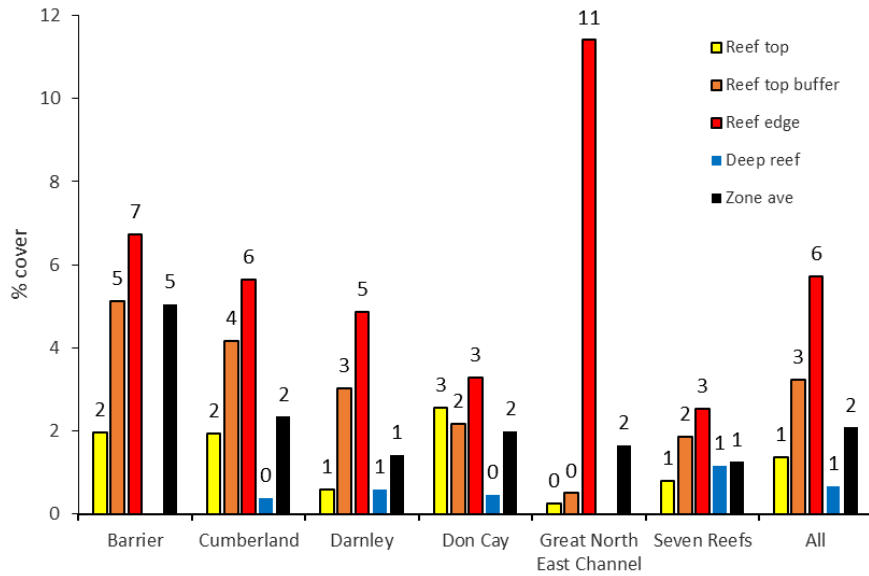


Environmental

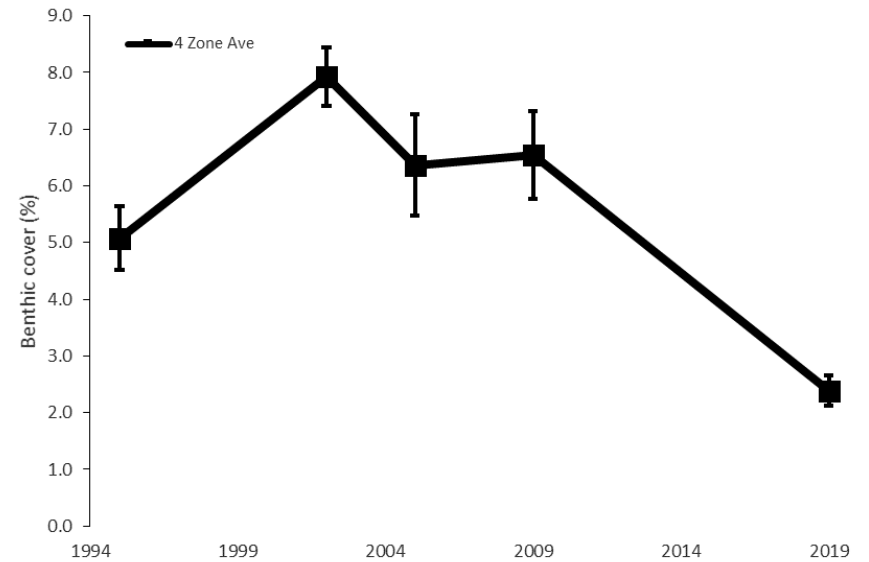
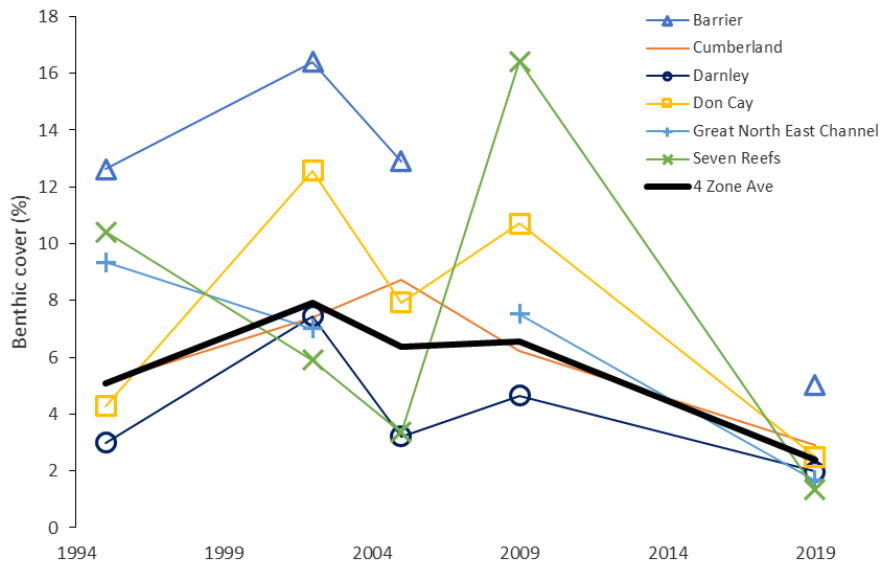
Biota



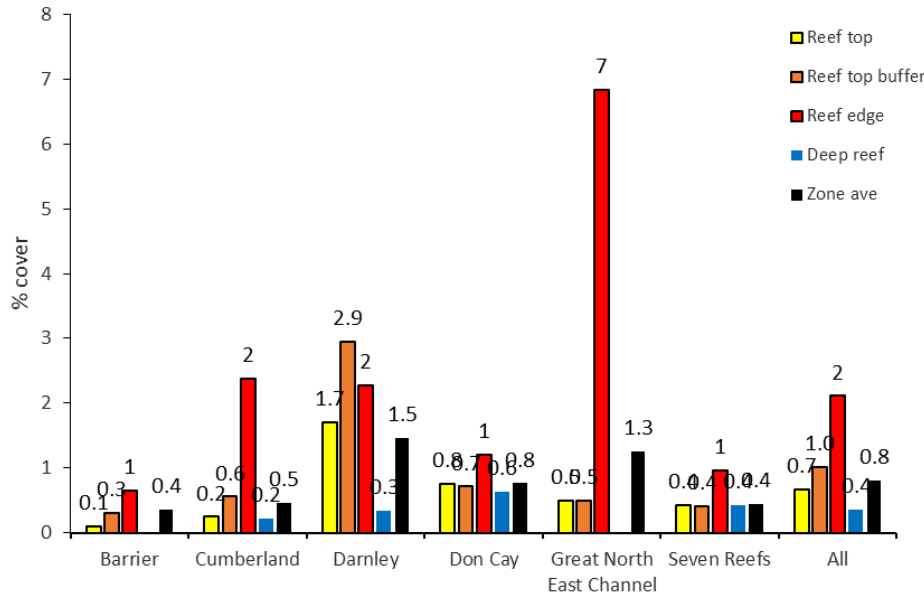
Environmental – Coral



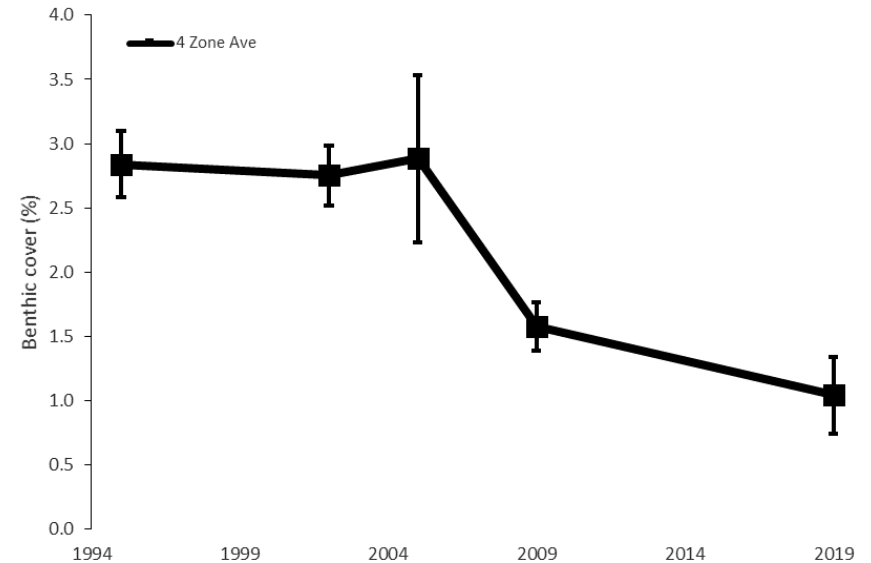
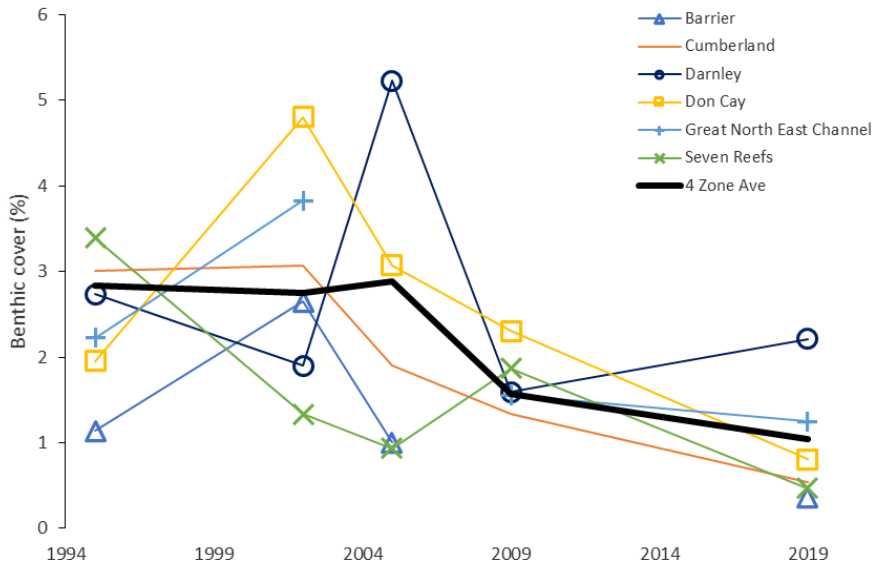
Total area = 4005 Ha



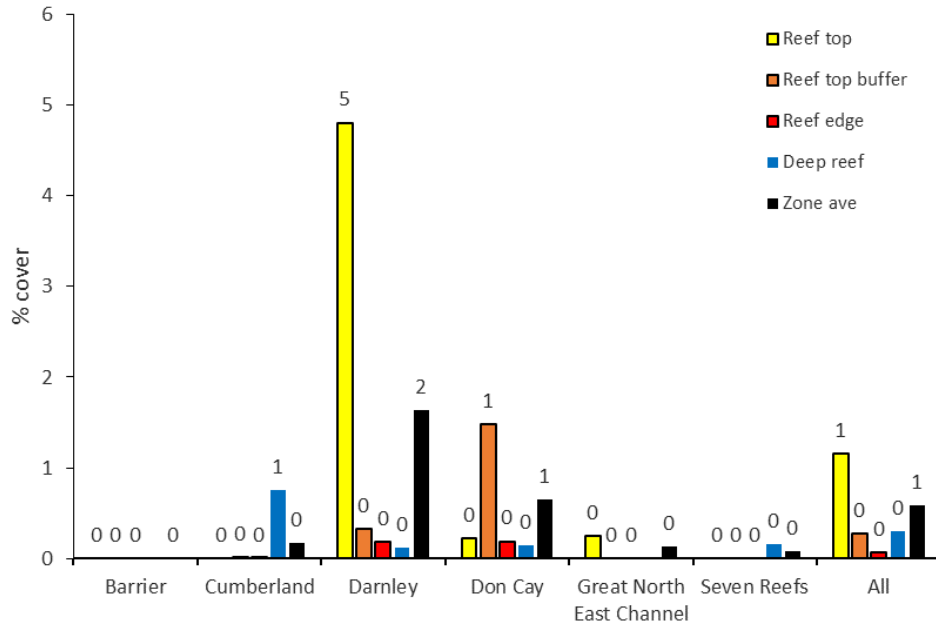
Environmental – Soft Coral



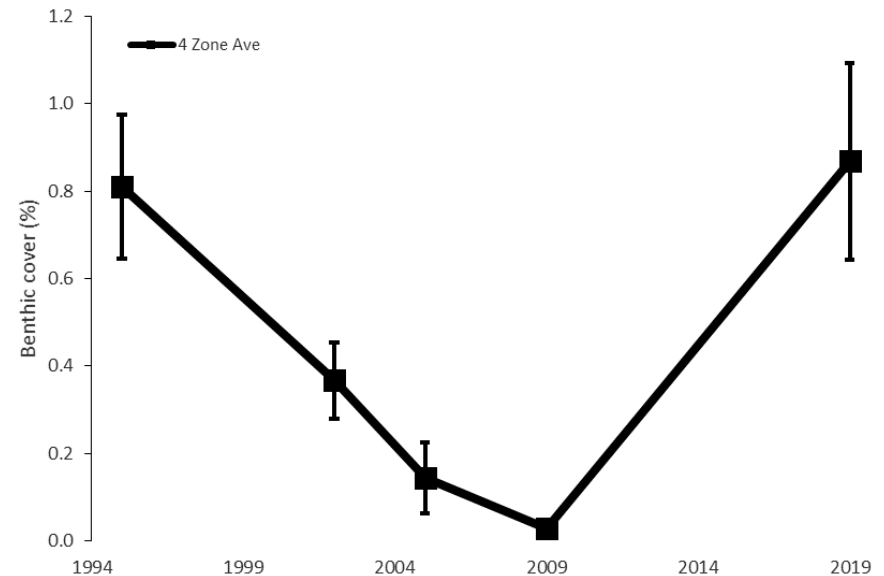
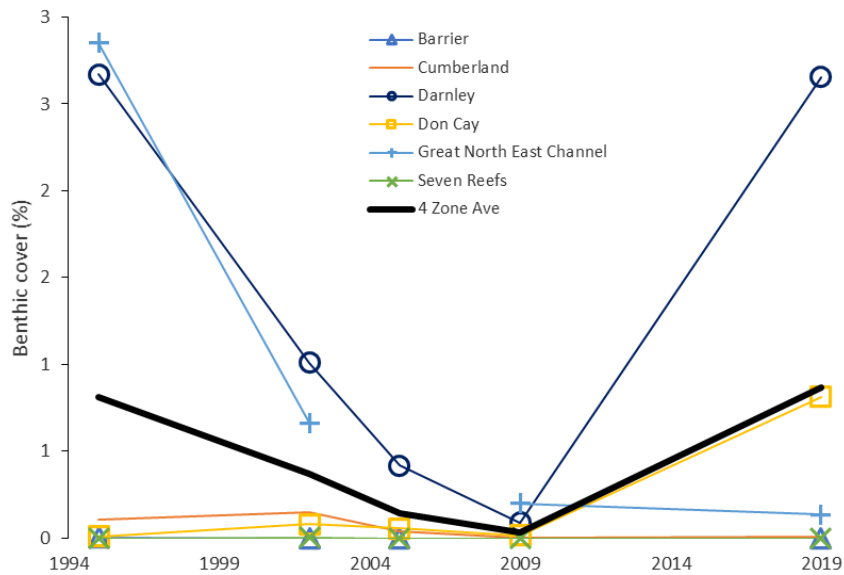
Total area = 1558 Ha



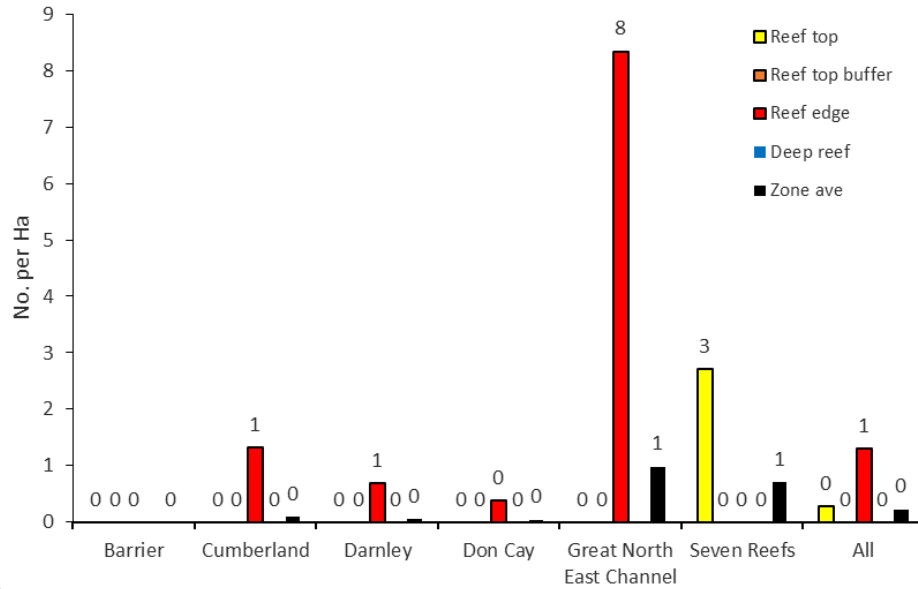
Environmental – Seagrass



Total area = 1119 Ha

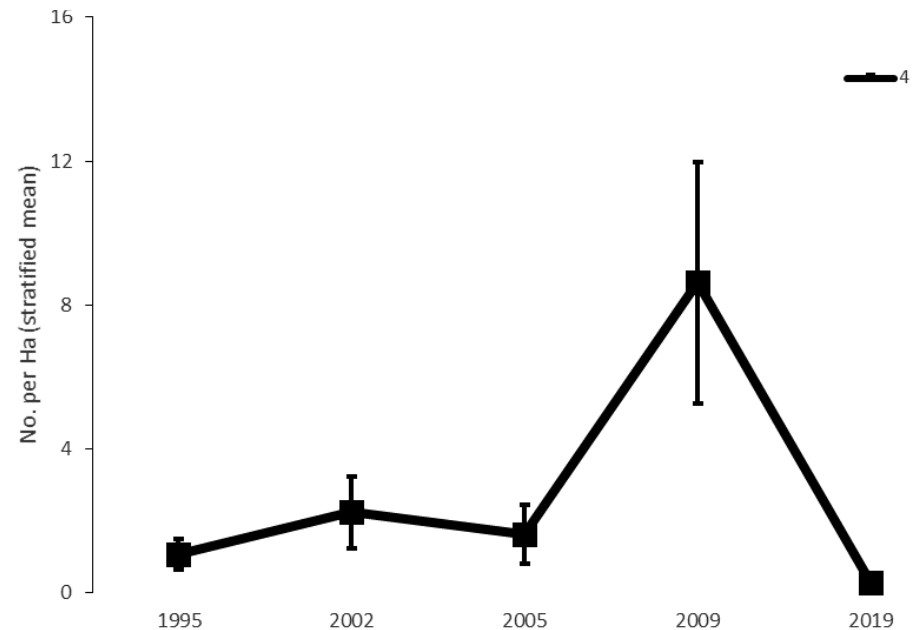
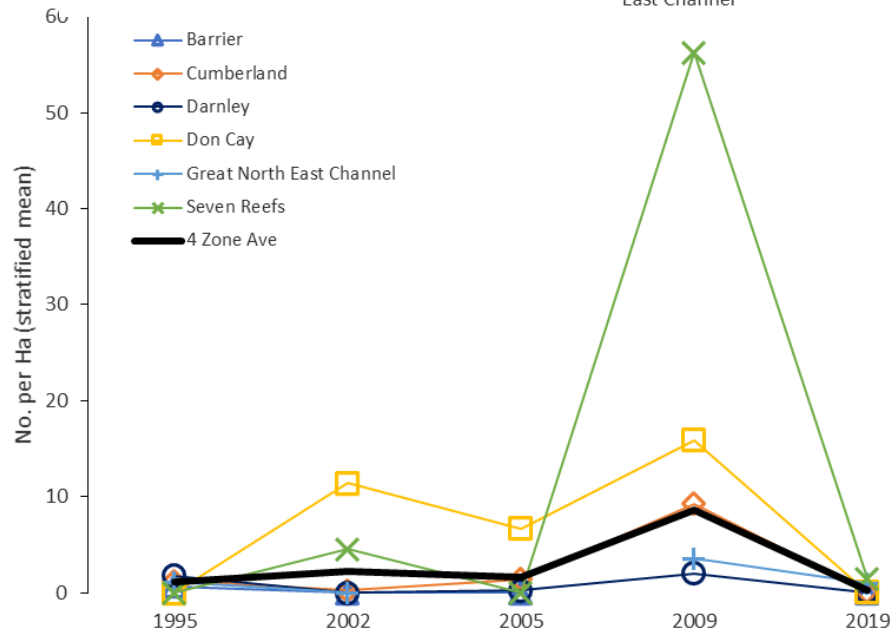


Crown of Thorns starfish

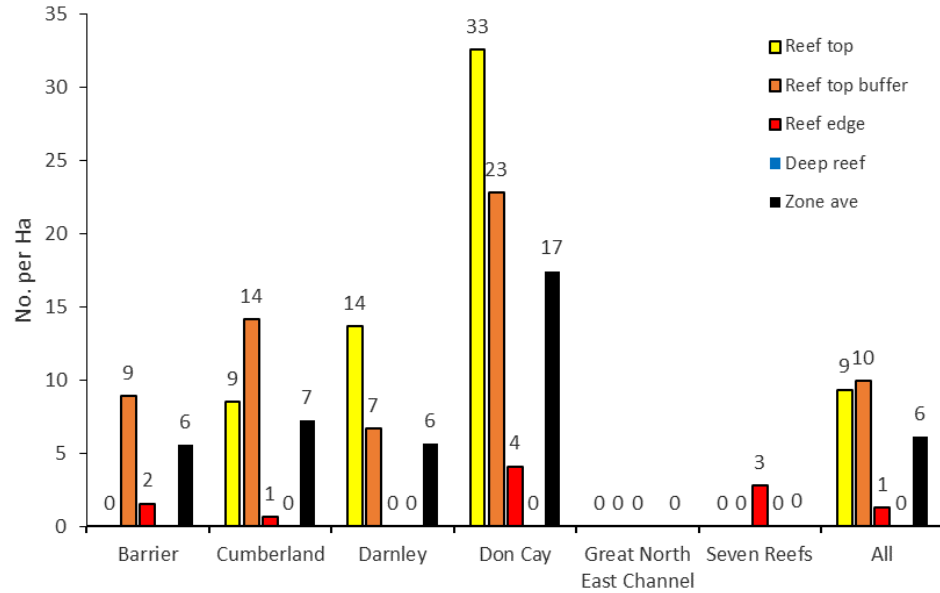


2019/20 Population estimate: 44,199

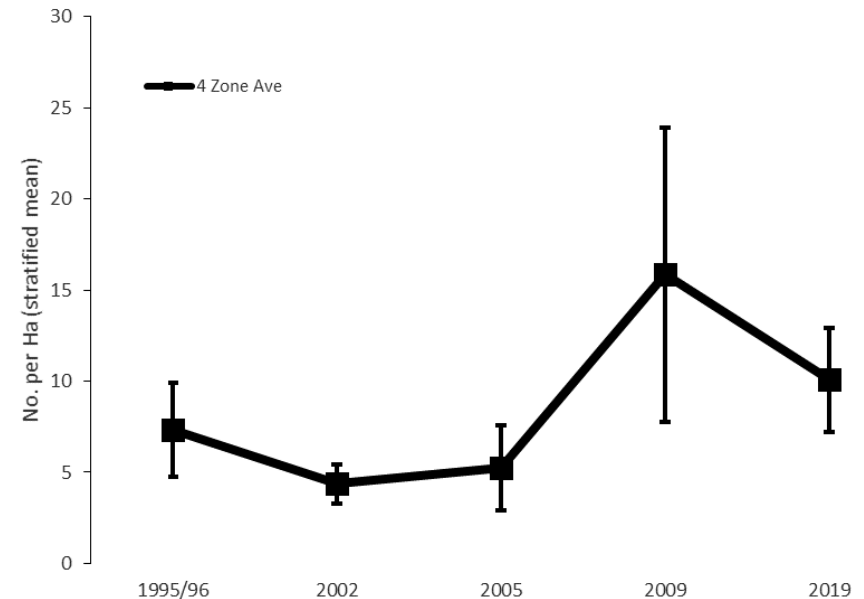
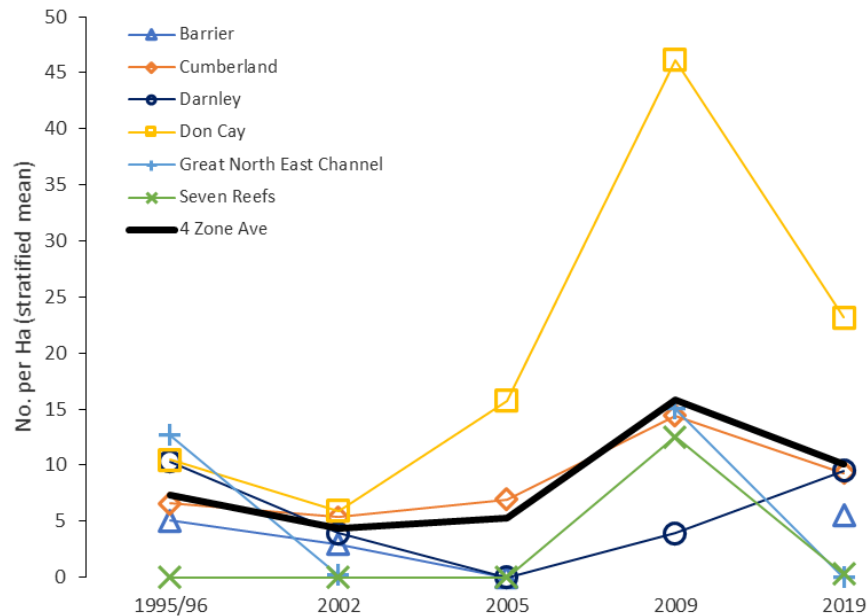
2009 Population estimate: 825,060



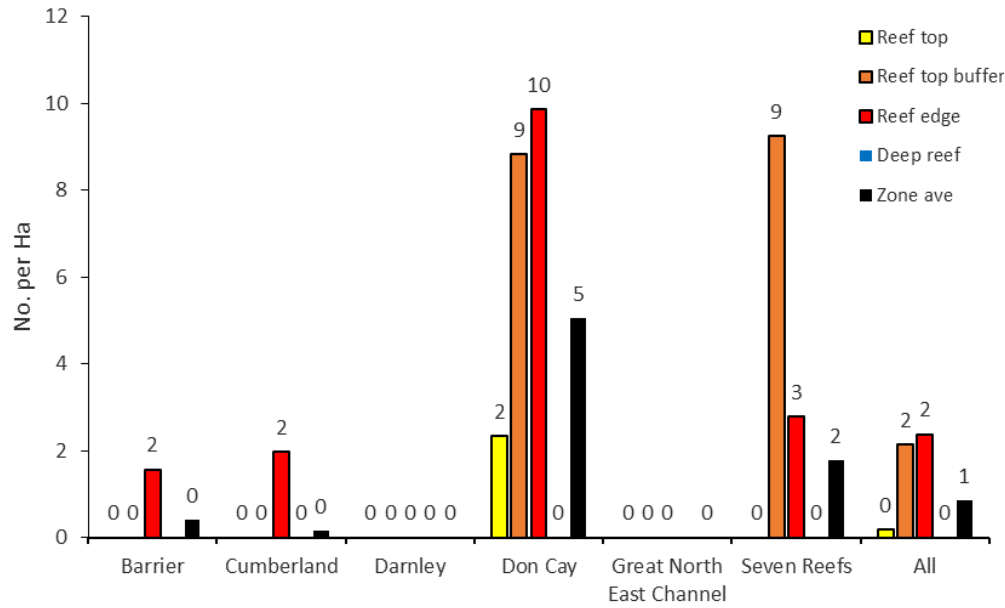
Giant clams (*T. gigas*)



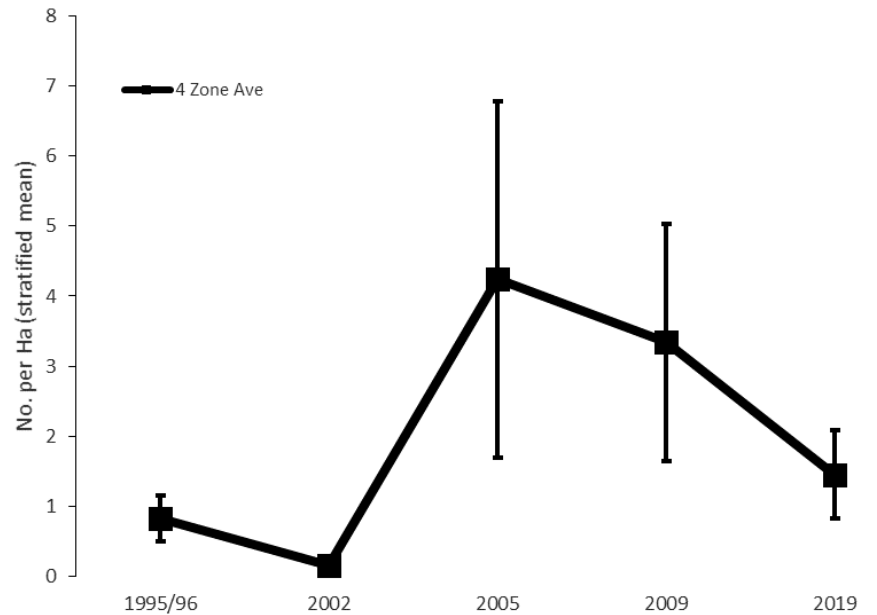
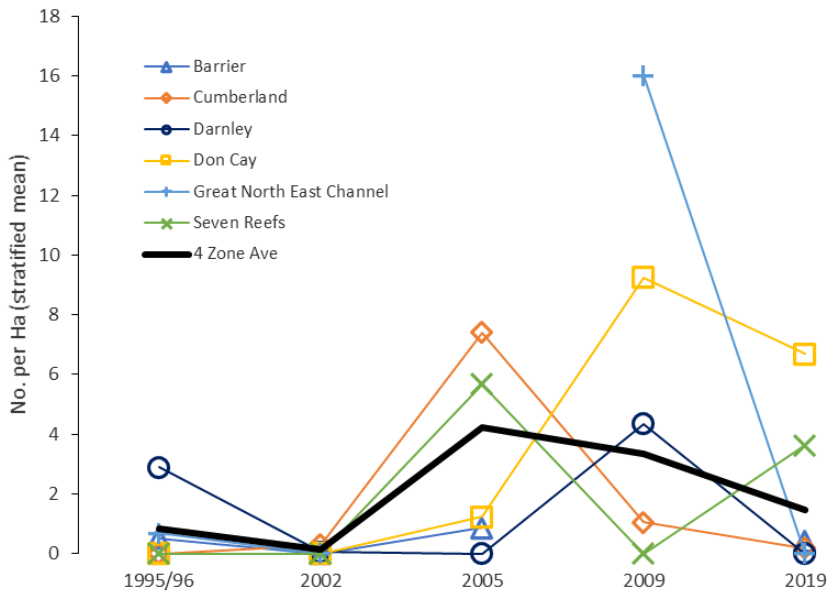
2019/20 Population estimate: 1,180,489



Trochus



2019/20 Population estimate: 163,622



Bêche-de-mer Taxonomy

- Morphology characteristics

Cuerverian tubules



Anus nearly dorsal (towards top)



Podia (tube like feet, underside)



Papillae (conical)



Anus terminal (towards belly)



Teats (pointed lateral protrusions)



Papillae (stout)



Anal teeth



Deep wrinkles



Papillae (thin)



Dorsal (top)

Ventral (underneath)

Lateral (side)



Tentacles

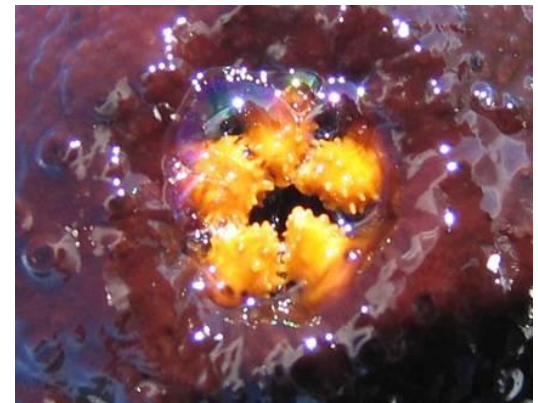


Blackfish

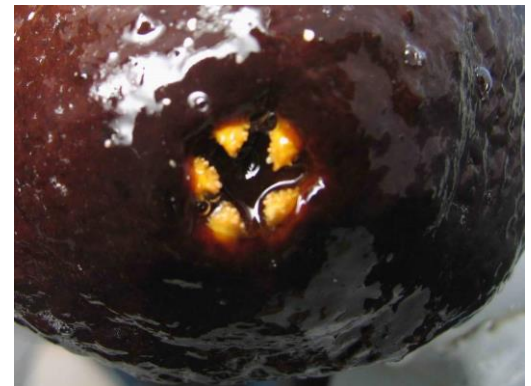
- Hairy blackfish
(*A. miliaris*)



- Burrowing blackfish
(*A. spinea*)



- Deepwater blackfish
(*A. palauensis*)



Curryfish

Curryfish (*Stichopus herrmanni*)



Dinosaur curry (*Stichopus vastus*)



Pinapple curry (*Stichopus ocellatus*)



Redfish

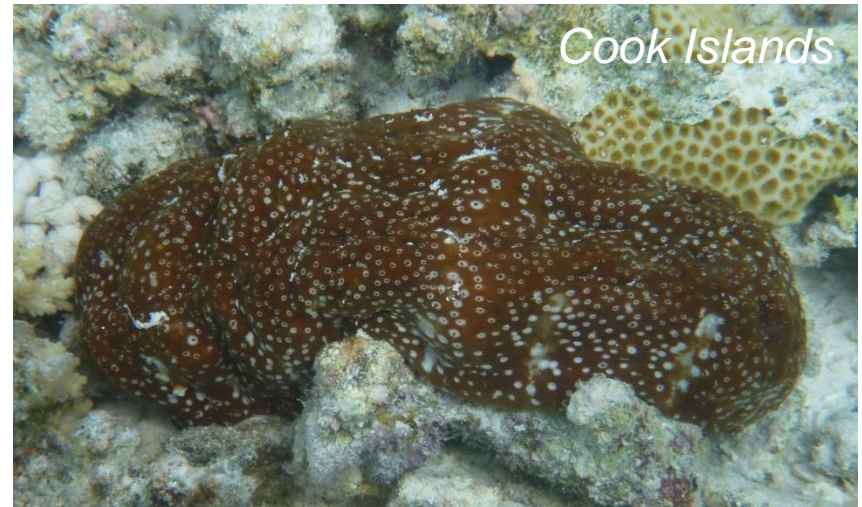
Deepwater redfish (*A. echinites*)



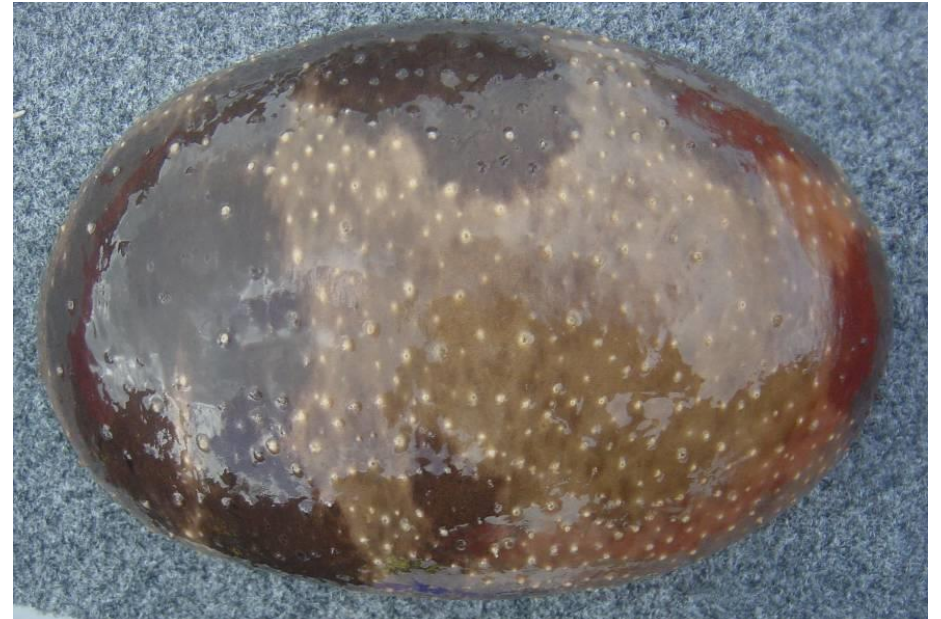
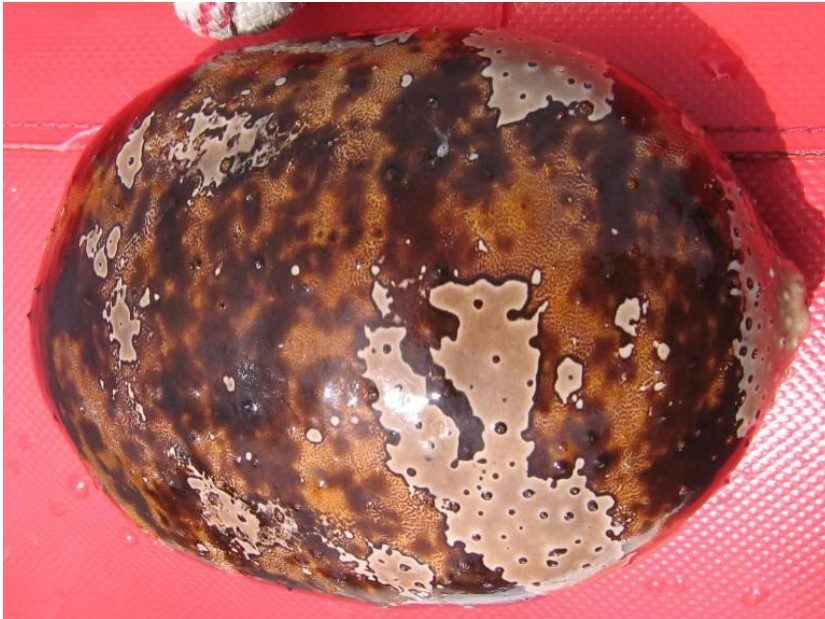
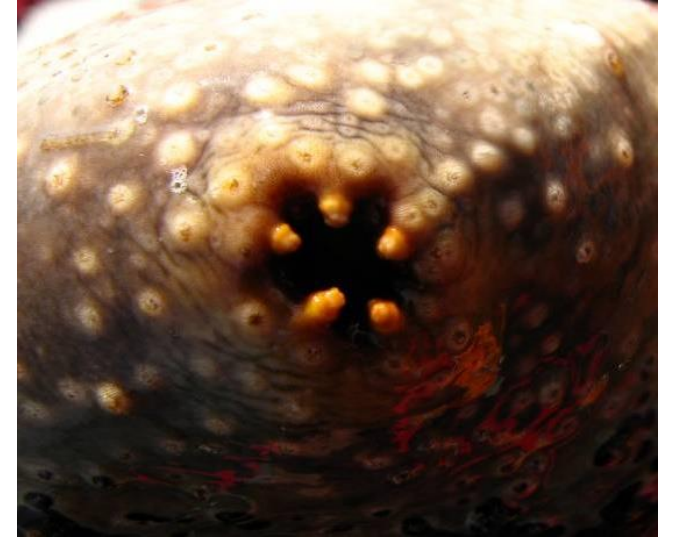
Surf redfish (*A. mauritiana*)



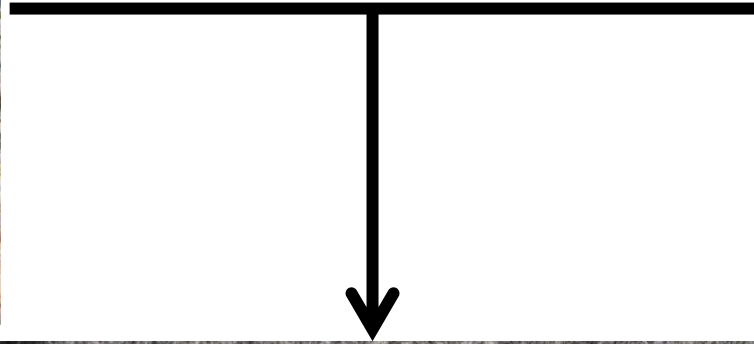
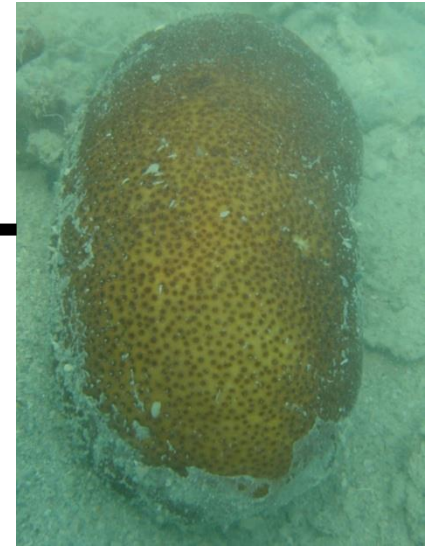
Surf redfish (*A. mauritiana*)



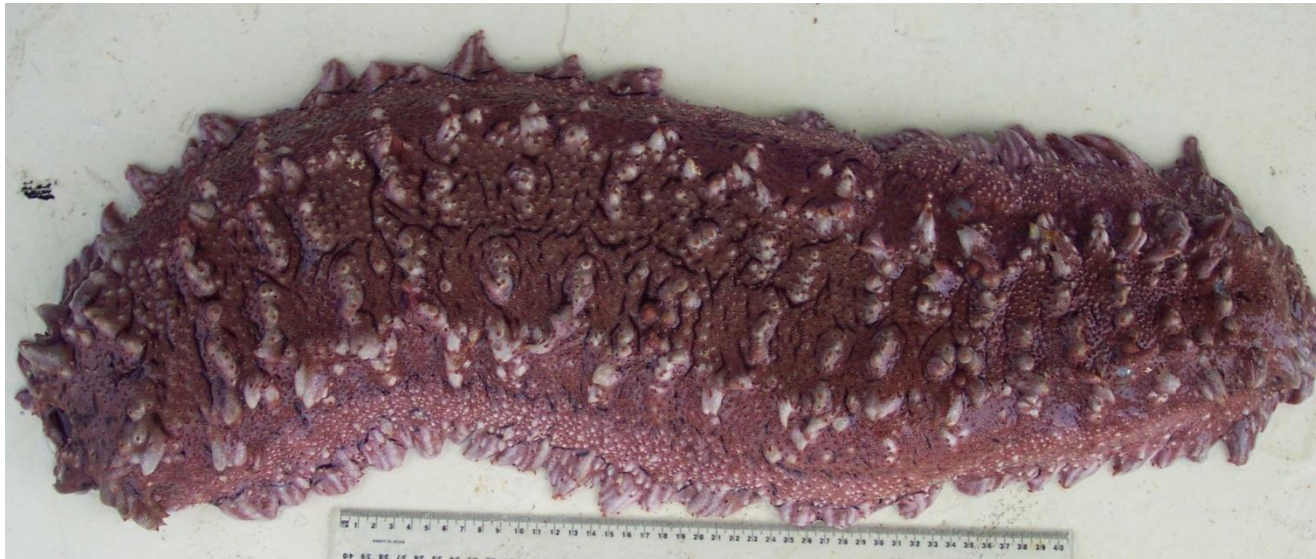
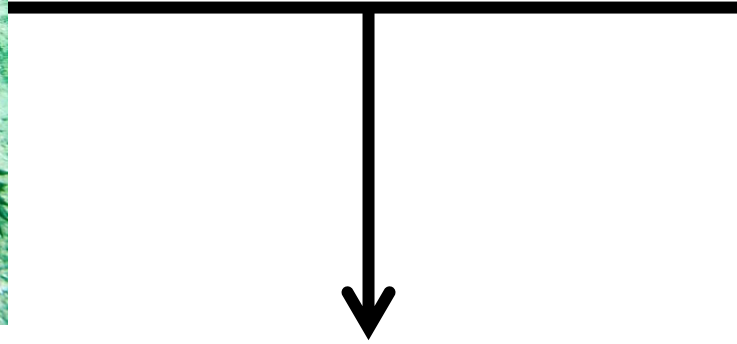
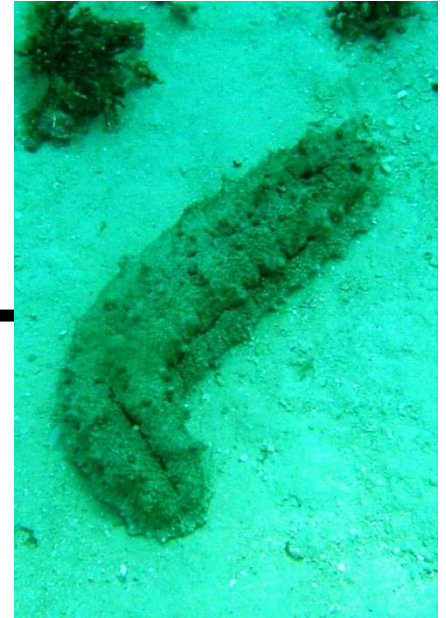
Stonefish (*A. lecanora*)



Hybrids!



Hybrids!



Beche-de-mer ID guide

Summary table of species

	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMERCIAL VALUE	MINIMUM SIZE LIMITS (MM)*	TOTAL ALLOWABLE CATCH (TAC) (TONNES)		COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	COMMERCIAL VALUE	MINIMUM SIZE LIMITS (MM)*	TOTAL ALLOWABLE CATCH (TAC) (TONNES)
	Sandfish	<i>Holothuria scabra</i>	High	180	Closed		Deepwater redfish	<i>Actinopyga echinites</i>	Medium	120	Part of 80t limit
	Surf redfish	<i>Actinopyga mauritiana</i>	High	220	Closed		Curryfish	<i>Stichopus vastus</i>	?		Part of 80t limit
	Black teatfish	<i>Holothuria whitmaei</i>	High	250	Closed		Burrowing blackfish	<i>Actinopyga spinea</i>	Medium		Part of 80t limit
	White teatfish	<i>Holothuria fuscogilva</i>	High	320	15		Deepwater blackfish	<i>Actinopyga palauensis</i>	High		Part of 80t limit
	Prickly redfish	<i>Thelenota ananas</i>	Medium	300	20		Golden sandfish	<i>Holothuria lessoni</i>	High		Part of 80t limit
	Hairy blackfish	<i>Actinopyga miliaris</i>	Medium	220	Part of 80t limit		Brown sandfish	<i>Bohadschia vitiensis</i>	Medium		Part of 80t limit
	Curryfish	<i>Stichopus hermanni</i>	Medium	270	Part of 80t limit		Leopardfish	<i>Bohadschia argus</i>	Medium		Part of 80t limit
	Elephants trunkfish	<i>Holothuria fuscopunctata</i>	Low	240	Part of 80t limit		Greenfish	<i>Stichopus chloronatus</i>	Medium		Part of 80t limit
	lollyfish	<i>Holothuria atra</i>	Low	150	Part of 80t limit		Stonefish	<i>Actinopyga lecanora</i>	lecanora		Part of 80t limit

*Size limits off PZJA website – <http://pzja.gov.au/the-fisheries/torres-strait-beche-de-mer-fishery/>

Beche-de-mer ID Guide

Burrowing blackfish (Island name: Aospir Aber)

Actinopyga spinea (Cherbonnier, 1980)



Animal forms odd shape out of water



Long cylinder shape in water



Nodular teeth that are close together



Deepwater blackfish (Island name: Goleh-Goleh Aber)

Actinopyga palauensis (Panning, 1944)



Protruding 'mouth' (proboscis) in water



Oval shape above water



Serrated teeth with spaces between



Hairy blackfish (Island name: Musmus Aber)

Actinopyga miliaris (Quoy and Gaimard, 1833)



Ball shape above water and 'hairy' looking



Slimy surface, often with globs of debris on top



Cone shaped (smoother) teeth with spaces between



Key survey outcomes

Black teatfish

- Black teat fish stocks likely near virgin biomass levels
- Preliminary sustainable yield recommendation of 20 t per yr

White teatfish

- Successfully surveyed white teatfish in deep (20-50 m) reef
- Although we surveyed habitat down to 60 m, we did not observe White teatfish deeper than 37 m
- The density (14 per Ha) and population (72%) of White teatfish in the deep-reef habitat was the highest of any of the sampled strata
- This information could justify an increase in the current 15 t TAC – still working through implications
- Outcomes of the 2019/20 survey have supported the current CITES *Non-Detriment* Finding for the Torres Strait Beche-de-mer Fishery

Key survey outcomes

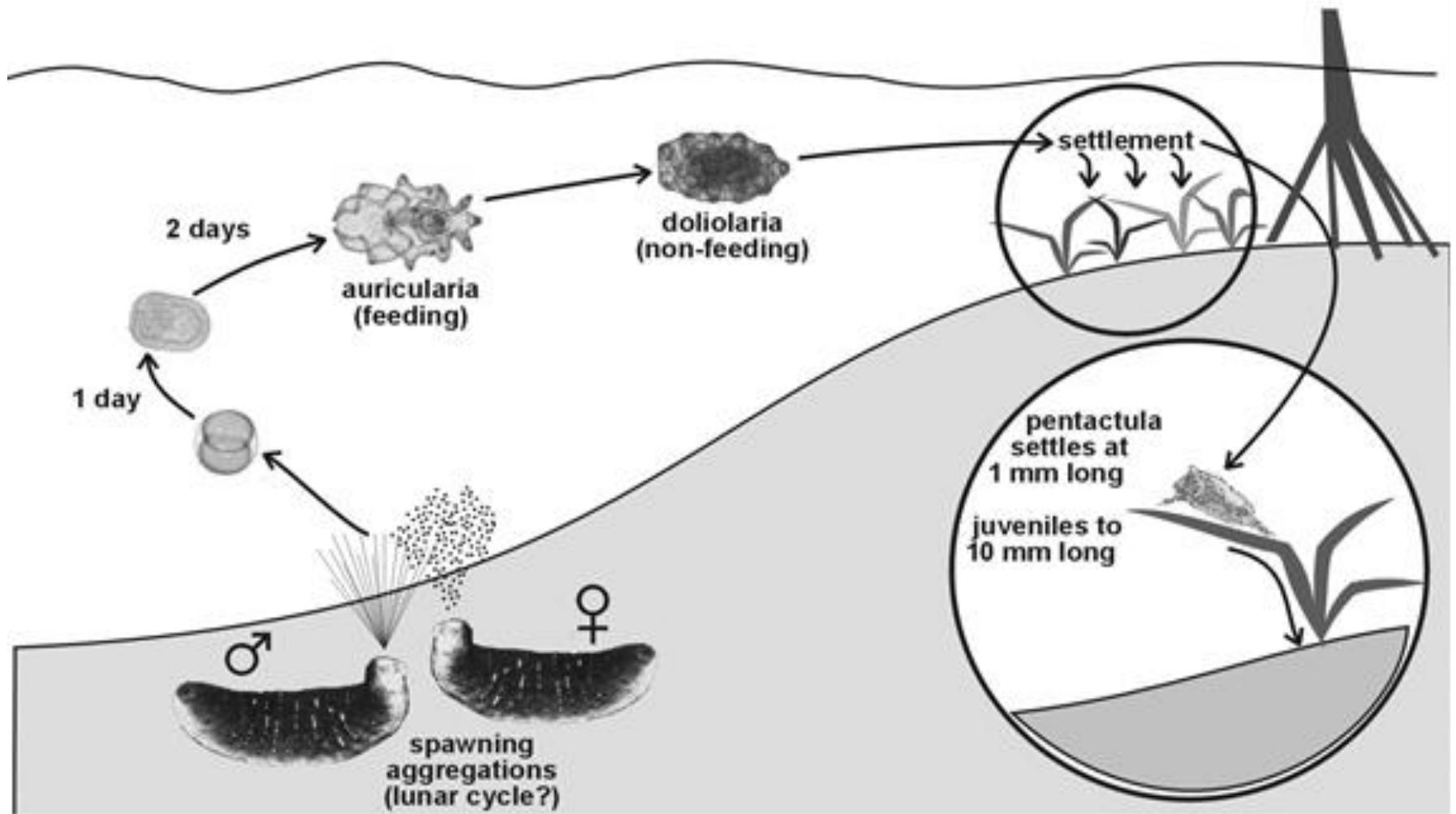
- Curryfish and Prickly redfish - small declines, however survey estimates suggest current catch limits are sustainable
- Surf redfish were found in higher numbers relative to previous surveys, which supports species recovery, but still not enough information available to reopen fishery
- Hairy blackfish and Deepwater redfish densities were lower than in previous surveys - may be due to their natural patchy distribution, or may indicate a possible decline

Biology

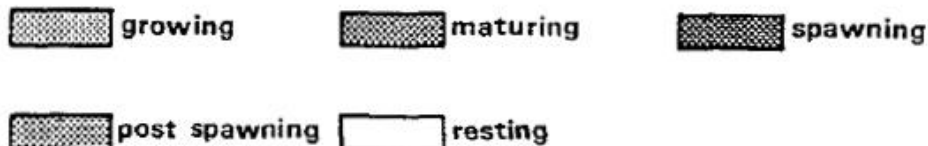
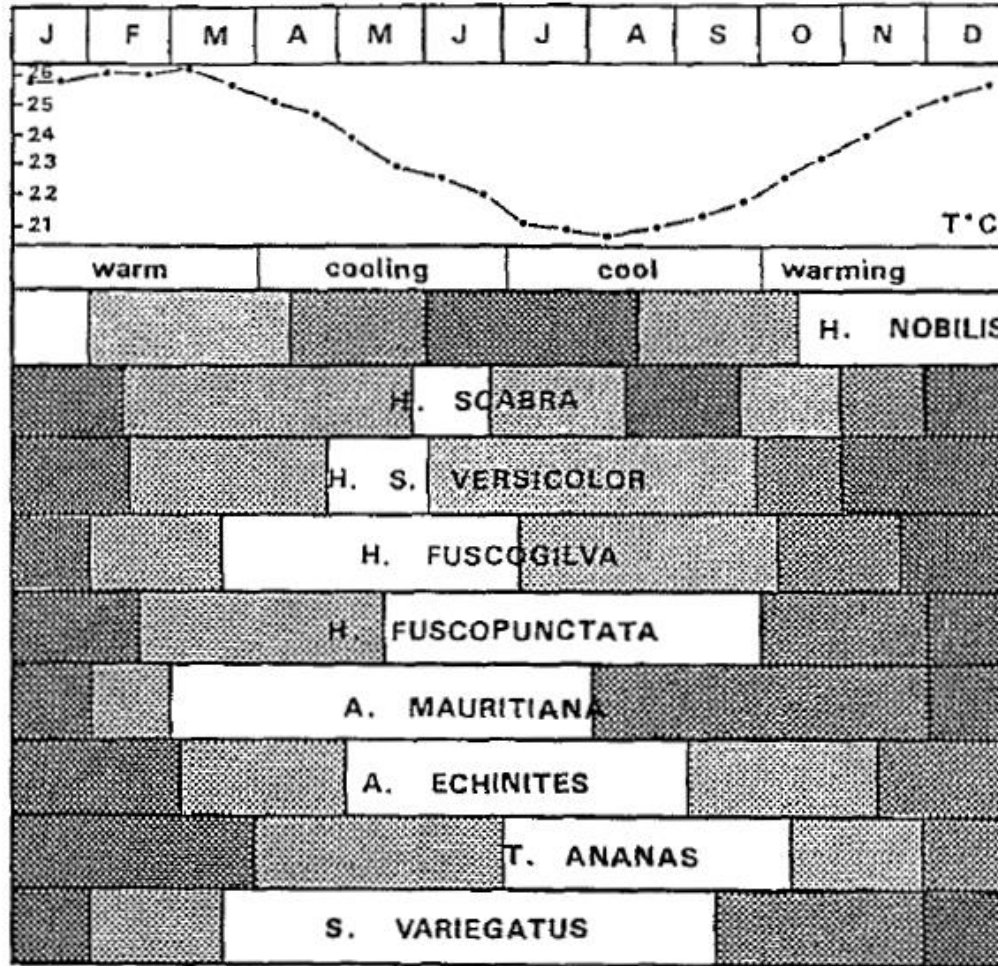
- **Reproduction**
 - Sexes separate
 - Broadcast synchronous spawners
 - Summer spawners (except black teatfish)
 - Short larval life (~2 weeks)
 - Reefs mainly self recruiting
 - Recovery of depleted populations hampered by dilution (Allee) effects
- **Recruitment**
 - Appears to be sporadic and unpredictable
 - Depleted populations can be very slow to recover, 7-20 years
 - Fishing to extinction rare
 - An effective breeding population is generally over a large area (100s kilometers).



Life cycle of sandfish



Biology - reproduction

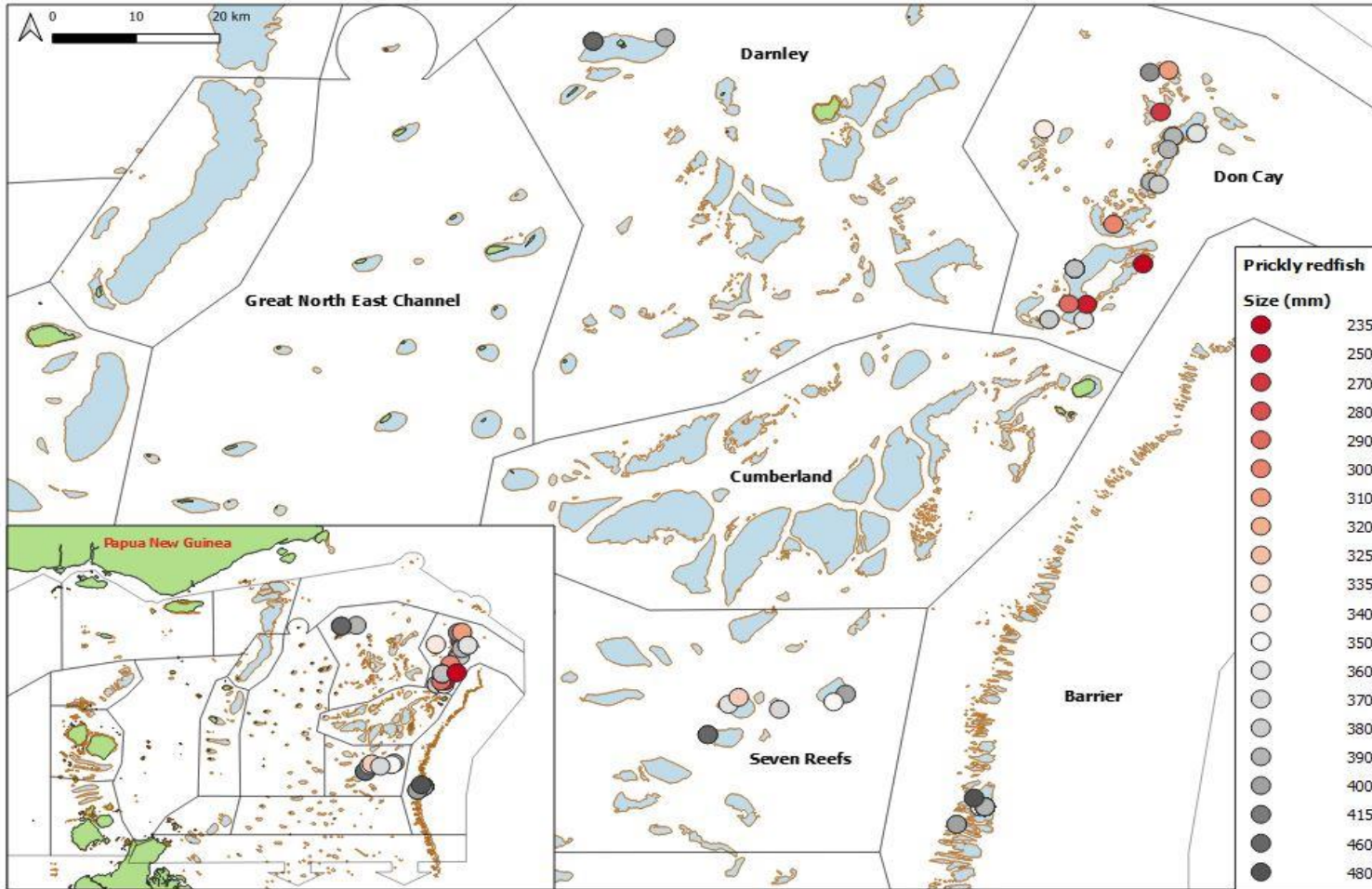


Future research

- Better population modelling
 - Could model all key species, with age structure and spatial component and bound the range of uncertainties
 - A tool to more comprehensively evaluate the risks of different TAC alternatives
 - Can explore how adding data reduces uncertainty and hence consequences for management recommendations
 - More broadly can contribute to aspirational development of an integrated ecosystem model that incorporates climate change
 - A tool to validate the new Harvest Strategy (HS) and help implement rules such as how best to use indicators to adjust TACs e.g. size measurements used to inform on age structure and hence available biomass
- Conversion ratios
 - Curryfish

Spatial fishing strategies

Fishers have good knowledge of juvenile and adult areas for sea cucumber species



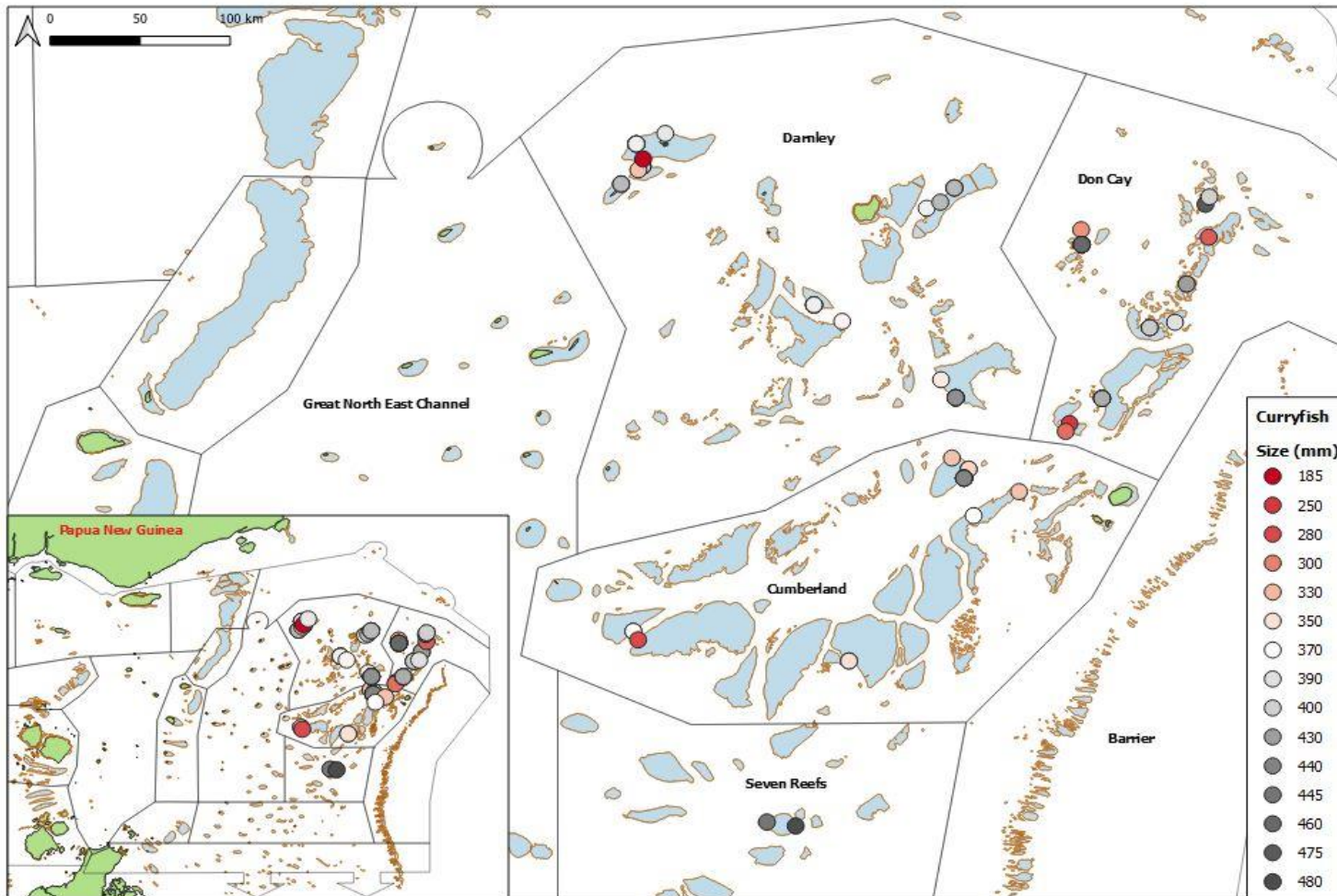
Prickly redfish

Size measurements across survey sites

Of note – Barrier and Seven Reefs

Rotational fishing

- Choose not to fish areas where individuals are known to be smaller in size
- Grounds that have been recently fished are avoided to shift effort

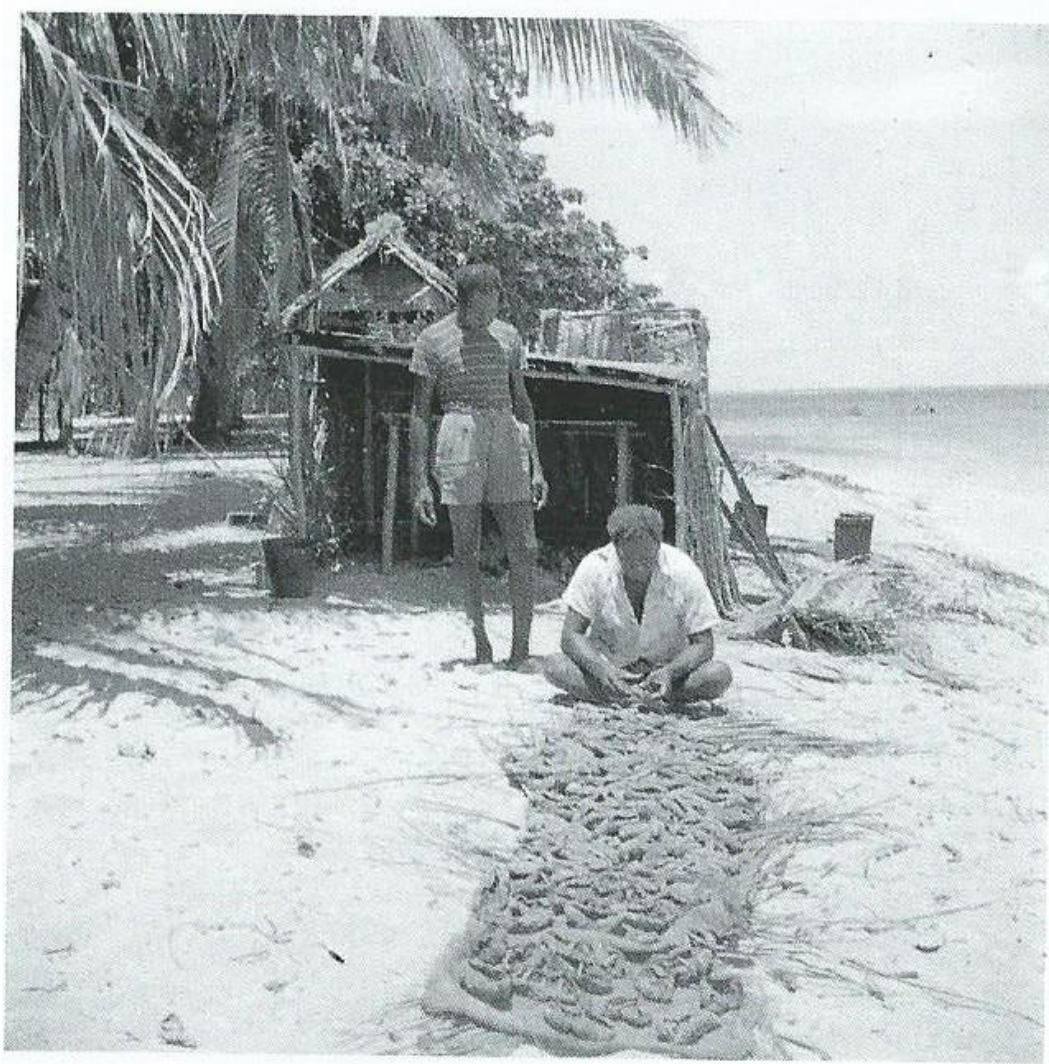


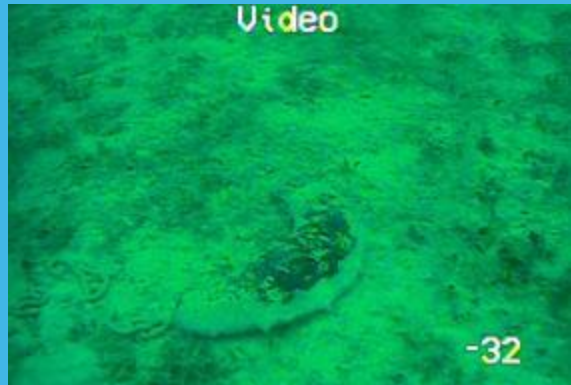
Curryfish (common)

Size measurements
across survey sites

Of note – Darnley and
Don Cay

Beche-de-mer fishing on Murray Island 1960





Thank you

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