

# PLAICE – SKARKOLI

## *Pleuronectes platessa*

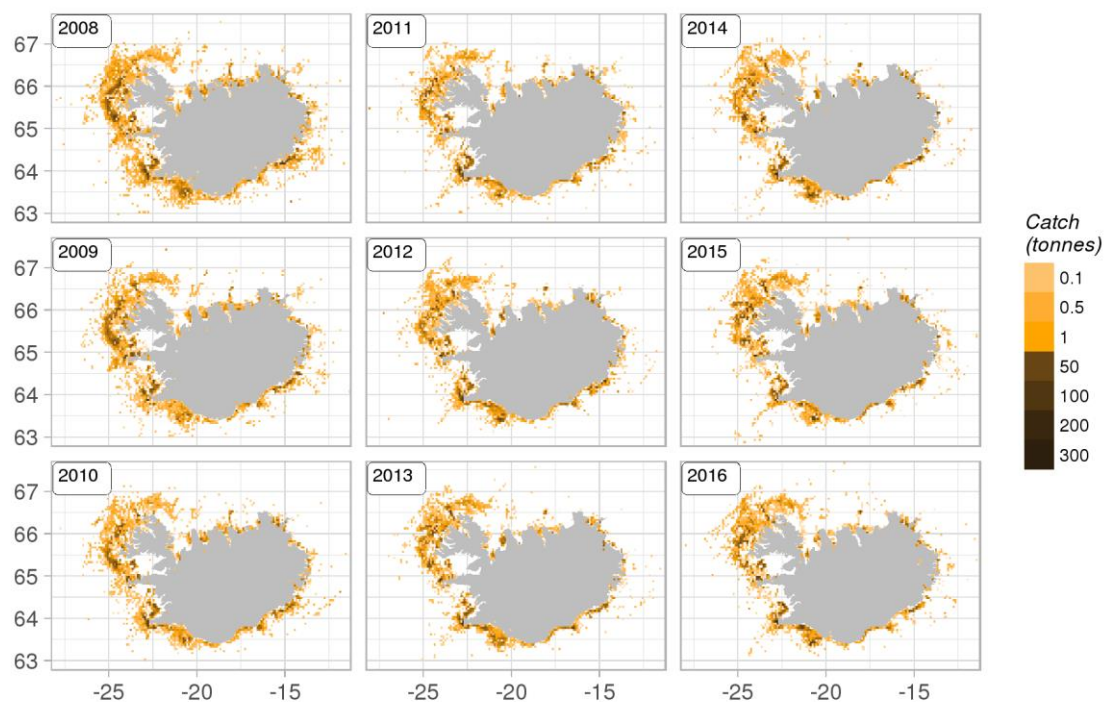
### GENERAL INFORMATION

Plaice is found on the continental shelf around Iceland with the highest abundance in the southwest and west of the island. It is mainly found on a sandy or muddy substrate, occurring at depths ranging from the coast down to 200 meters, sometimes even deeper.

Females grow larger than males. Only a small proportion of males become longer than 45 cm, but about the same proportion of females grow larger than 55 cm. Size at sexual maturity differs between the sexes. At the length of 33 cm about half the males have reached maturity, while females reach that level at 38 cm length. Spawning occurs mostly at 50-100 m depth in the relatively warm waters south and west of Iceland, but there is small-scale spawning off the northwest and north coast. After metamorphosis the juveniles seek bottom in shallow waters and spend the first summer just below the tidemark.

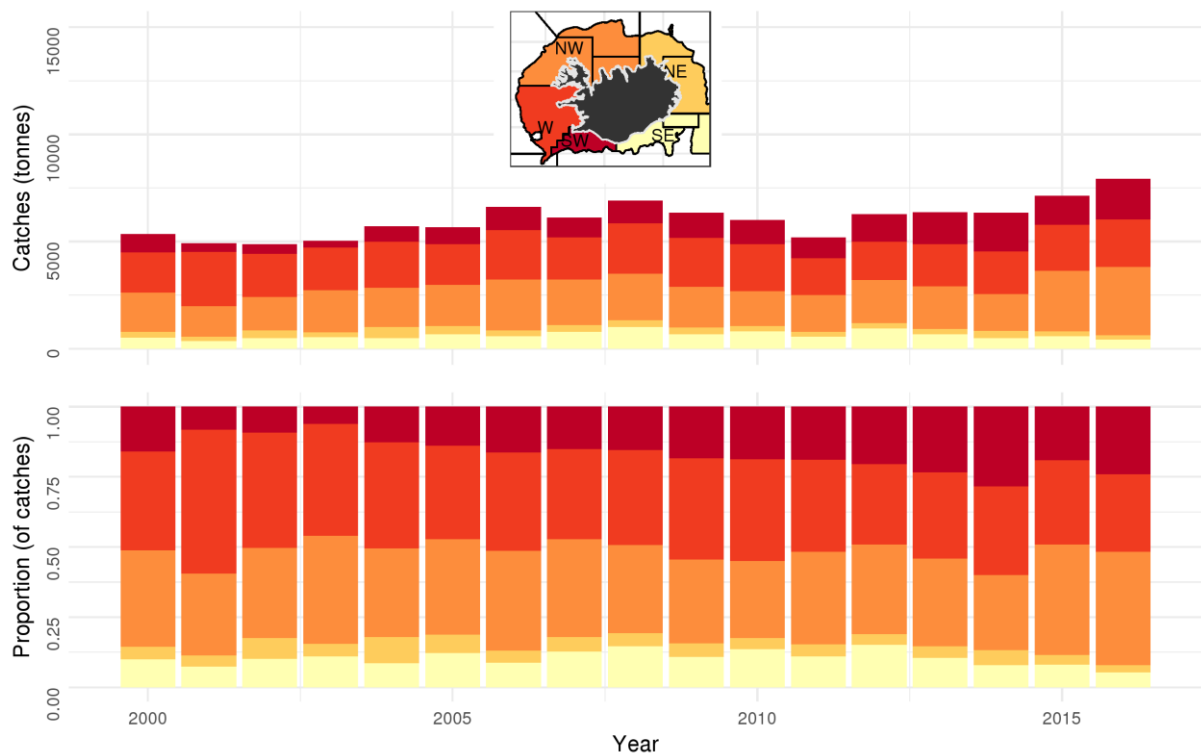
### THE FISHERY

Main fishing grounds for plaice are in the west and southwest of Iceland, with smaller fishing grounds in the southeast and several fjords in the north. Demersal seine is the main fishing gear for plaice in Iceland followed by demersal trawl, while a small proportion of the catch is taken in gillnets and longline. Seiners dominate the coastal fishery, while trawlers catch them deeper and further offshore. Plaice fishing grounds in 2008-2016, as reported by mandatory electronic logbooks, are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Plaice. Geographical distribution of the Icelandic fishery since 2008. Reported catch from logbooks.**  
*Mynd 1. Skarkoli. Útbreiðsla veiða á Íslandsmiðum frá 2008 samkvæmt afladagbókum.*

Since 2000, the main fishing grounds of plaice have been in the southwestern, western and northwestern part of the Icelandic shelf (Figure 2) according to logbook entries. Spatial distribution of the Icelandic plaice fishery has been relatively stable, with around 60% of the plaice caught on the western and northwestern part of the shelf. However, in the last decade, reported catches have increased in the southwestern part and were around 25% in the last four years as compared to 18% in the four years before that.



**Figure 2. Plaice. Spatial distribution of the Icelandic fishery by fishing area from 2000-2016. All gears combined.**  
*Mynd 2. Skarkoli. Útbreiðsla veiða á íslensku veiðisvæði árin 2000-2016. Öll veiðarfæri samanlagt.*

Plaice is caught in relatively shallow water, with most of the catch (60-80%) taken between 21-80 meters depth (Figure 3).

Most of the plaice is caught in demersal seine (65-71% since 2011) and demersal trawl (23-30%) or around 95% of the total catch (Figure 4). This proportion has been relatively stable through the years, as well as the relative amount caught in other gear (predominantly gillnets) with around 6% of the catch since 2011.

Since 2000, the number of vessels reporting catches over 1000 kg of plaice in total annually has decreased, whereas total catches have been increasing in the past few years. This decrease is most noticeable in the seiner fleet, where the number has dropped from 92 vessels in 2004, to 41 in 2016. The number of trawlers has remained relatively stable since 2010 (Table 1). Total catch of plaice has been relatively stable (5000-7000 tonnes) over the last 16 years, but has been slowly increasing since 2011, and was just short of 8000 tonnes in 2016 (Table 1).

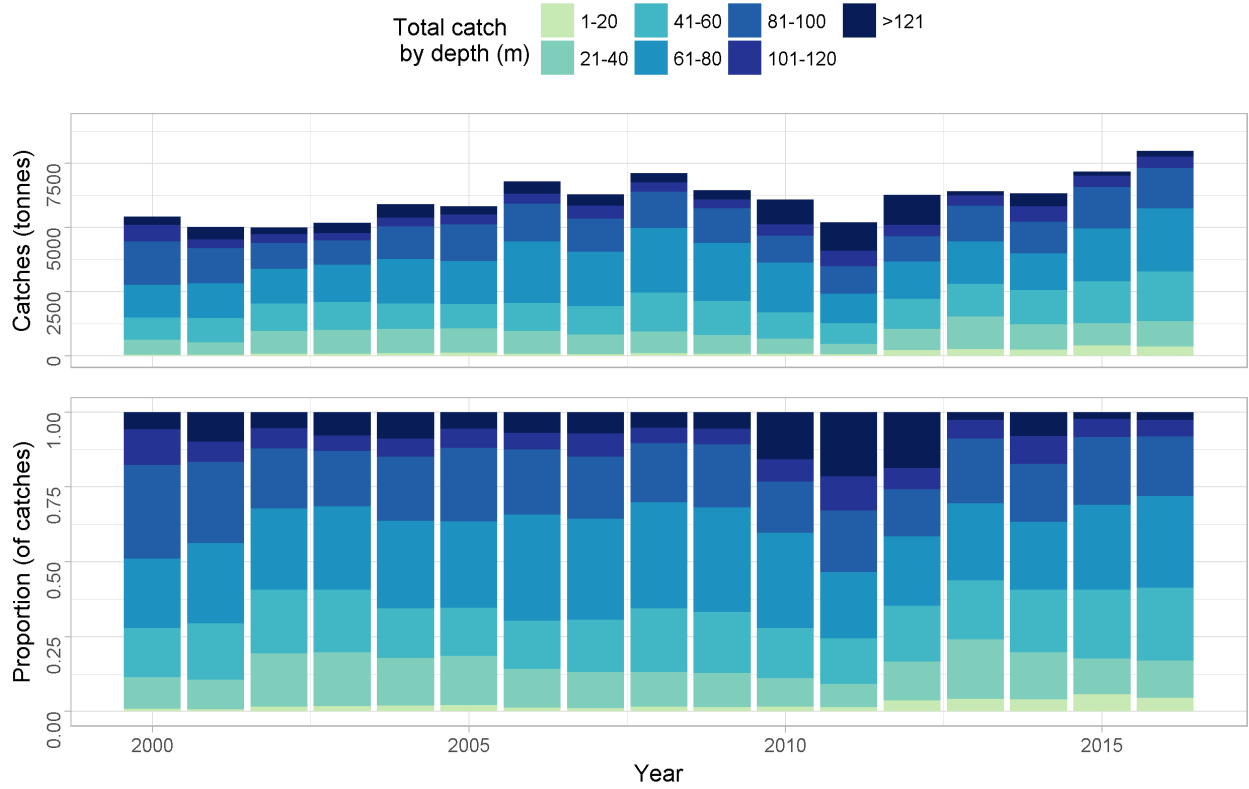


Figure 3. Plaice. Depth distribution of demersal seine and trawl catches according to logbooks.  
 Mynd 3. Skarkoli. Afli í dragnót og botnvörpu samkvæmt afladagbókum, skipt eftir dýpi.

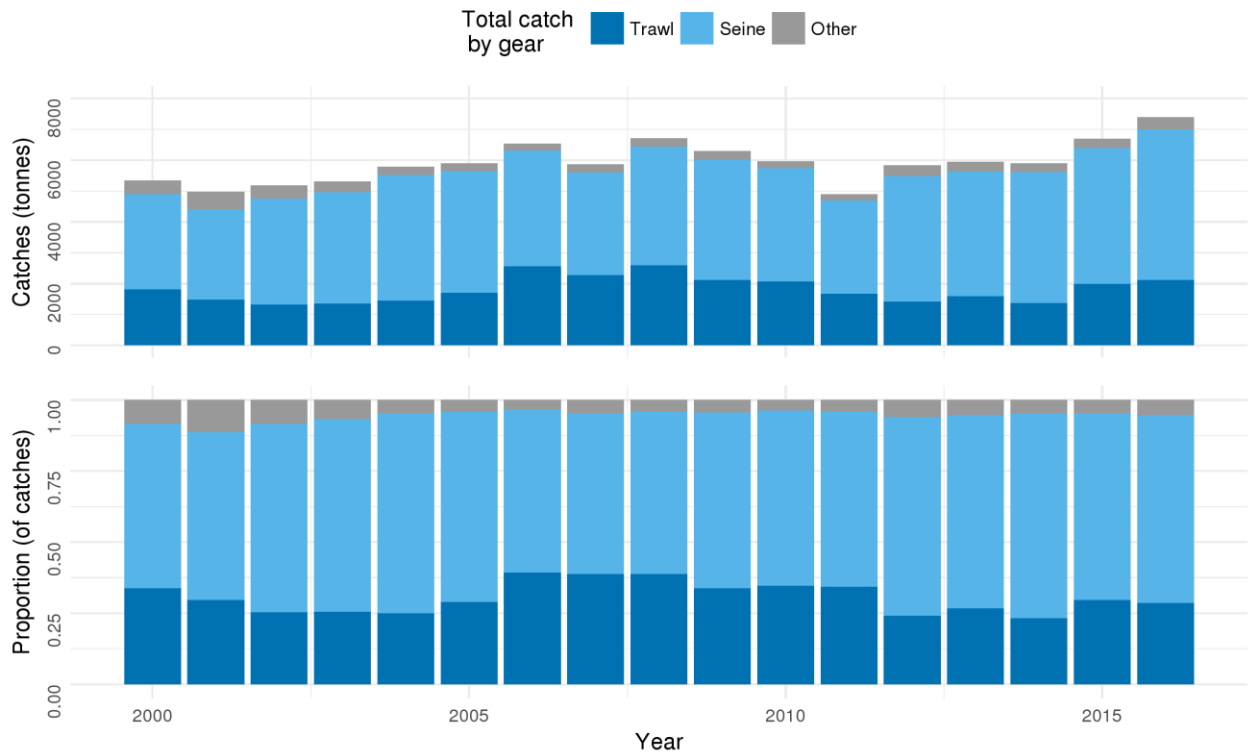


Figure 4. Plaice. Total catch (landings) by fishing gear since 2000.  
 Mynd 4. Skarkoli. Landaður afli eftir veiðarfærum frá 2000.

**Table 1. Plaice. Number of Icelandic vessels landing catch of 1000 kg or more of plaice, and all landed catch divided by gear type.**

**Tafla 1. Skarkoli. Fjöldi íslenskra skipa sem landað hafa yfir 1000 kg af skarkola og allur landaður afli eftir veiðarfærum.**

YEAR	NUMBER OF VESSELS			CATCHES (TONNES)			
	<i>Trawlers</i>	<i>Seiners</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Demersal trawl</i>	<i>Demersal seine</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Sum</i>
2000	89	81	78	1759	3052	409	5220
2001	77	87	106	1393	2906	610	4909
2002	67	87	86	1257	3420	465	5142
2003	71	90	65	1288	3602	342	5232
2004	60	92	73	1368	4015	309	5692
2005	67	81	63	1637	3894	261	5792
2006	70	75	44	2443	3704	223	6370
2007	74	68	59	2242	3282	292	5816
2008	66	67	52	2600	3828	290	6718
2009	62	65	57	2121	3872	323	6316
2010	57	55	66	2033	3639	311	5983
2011	42	52	65	1658	3020	265	4943
2012	44	48	85	1402	4075	453	5930
2013	45	48	65	1559	4041	379	5979
2014	40	43	61	1374	4235	313	5922
2015	55	45	66	2001	4404	363	6768
2016	52	41	71	2116	4885	449	7451

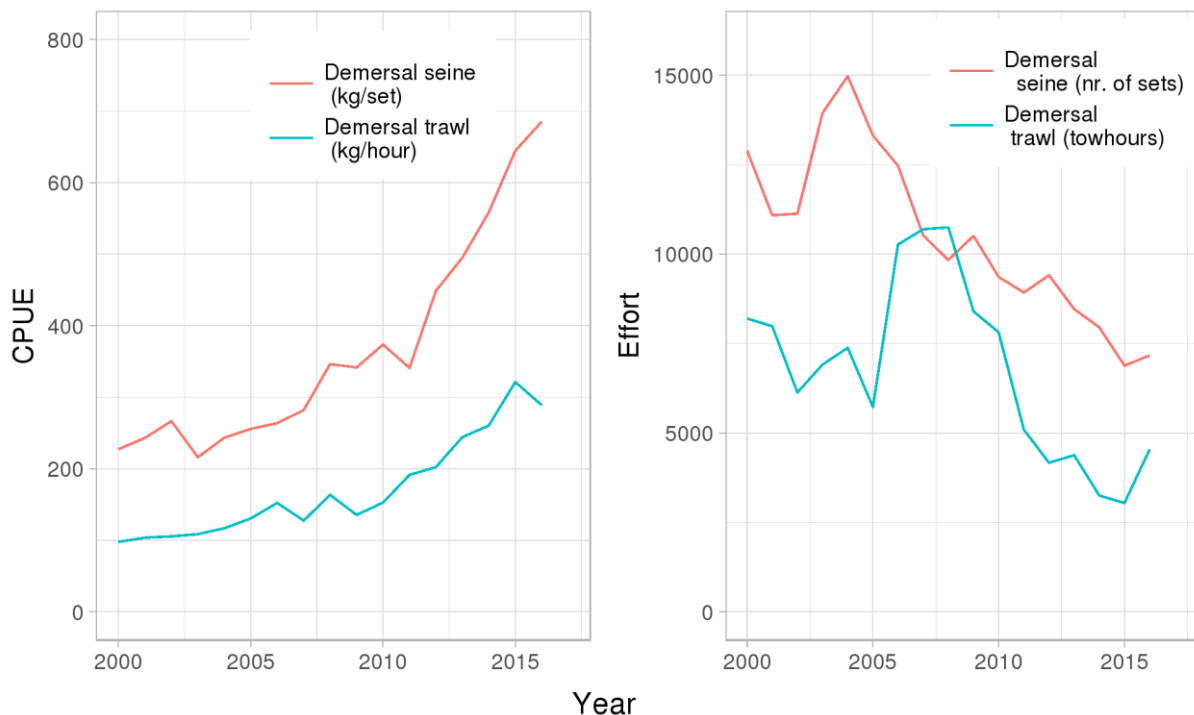
## CATCH PER UNIT EFFORT (CPUE) AND EFFORT.

CPUE estimates of plaice in Icelandic waters are not considered representative of stock abundance as changes in fleet composition, technical improvements and differences in gear setup among other things have not been accounted for when estimating CPUE.

Non-standardised estimates of CPUE in demersal seine (kg/set), on the traditional grounds from Stokksnes in the southeast, west and north to Horn in the northwest, is calculated as the total weight in sets in which plaice was more than 10% of the catch. According to logbooks, plaice CPUE remained quite stable since 1996 (in this aforementioned area) with around 300 kg of plaice on average per set. However, since 2011 CPUE has increased rapidly and was about 700 kg per set last year (Figure 5).

CPUE of demersal trawl (kg/hour), in hauls where plaice is more than 10% of the catch in the main fishing grounds in the northwest of the country (statistical squares 524, 574, 575, 624) remained relatively stable around 150 kg/hour until 2010. Since then CPUE has increased and was around 300 kg/hour last year.

Total fishing effort for plaice in demersal seine is estimated as the number of sets where plaice was more than 10% of the total catch. The fishing effort decreased rapidly from 2000-2001, whereafter it remained relatively stable until 2002 when it increased again for two years (Figure 5). After 2004 fishing effort has decreased continuously. This is both due to the fact that fewer seiners are fishing and catch per unit effort is higher. Effort (number of tows where plaice was 10% or more of the total catch) in demersal trawl has been more stable, but effort has been reduced by half from a peak in 2006-2008 (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Plaice. Non-standardised estimates of CPUE (left) and fishing effort (right) from demersal seine (kg/set or nr. of sets) in red and demersal trawl (kg/hour or towhours) in blue.**

*Mynd 5. Skarkoli. Afli á sóknareiningu (vinstri) og sókn (hægri) með dragnót (kg í kasti eða fjöldi kasta) rautt og botnvörpu (kg/klst eða togtímar) blátt.*

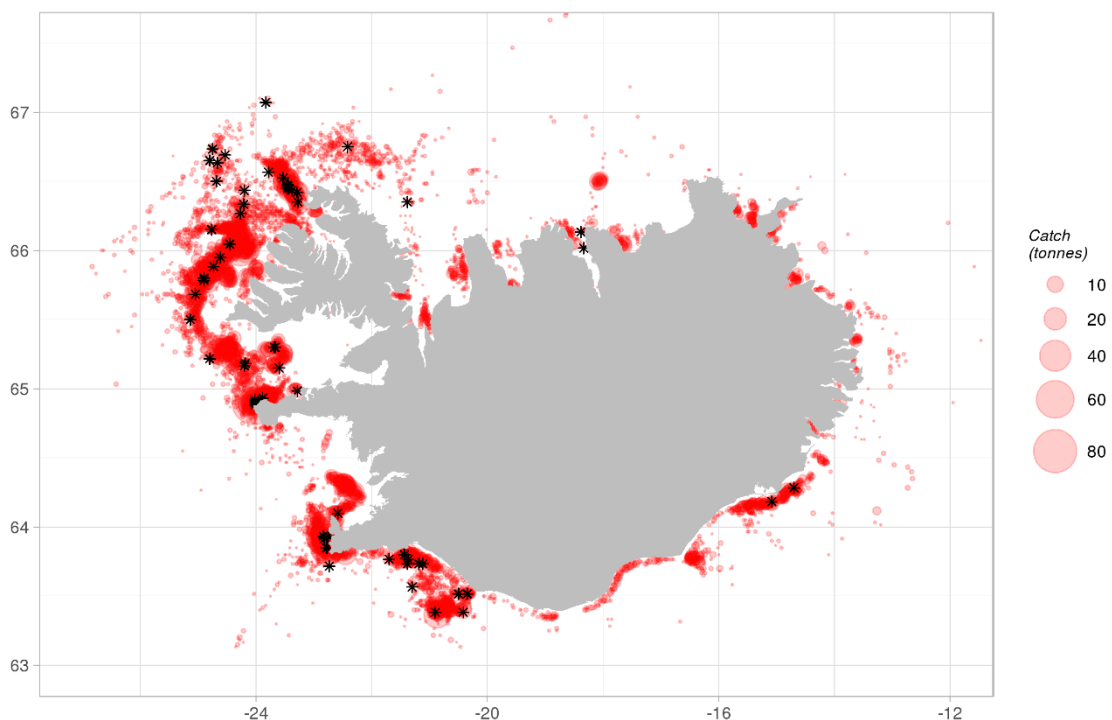
## AGE DISTRIBUTION OF LANDED PLAICE

Analysis done in 2013 by the MFRI suggested that excessive amounts of otoliths were being taken from commercial catches of plaice, and as a result the amount of samples taken have been greatly reduced to save time and resources. Before this change, around 6-7000 otoliths were being sampled yearly, but for last three years 32-45 samples from demersal seine and 20-23 samples from bottom trawl were collected, or a total of 800-1125 and 573-670 otoliths respectively (Table 2, Figure 6). Samples were not taken from other gear, as they represent a very small proportion (~5%) of the total catch.

**Table 2. Plaice. Number of samples and aged otoliths from landed catch.**

*Tafla 2. Skarkoli. Fjöldi sýna og aldursgreindra fiska úr lönduðum afla.*

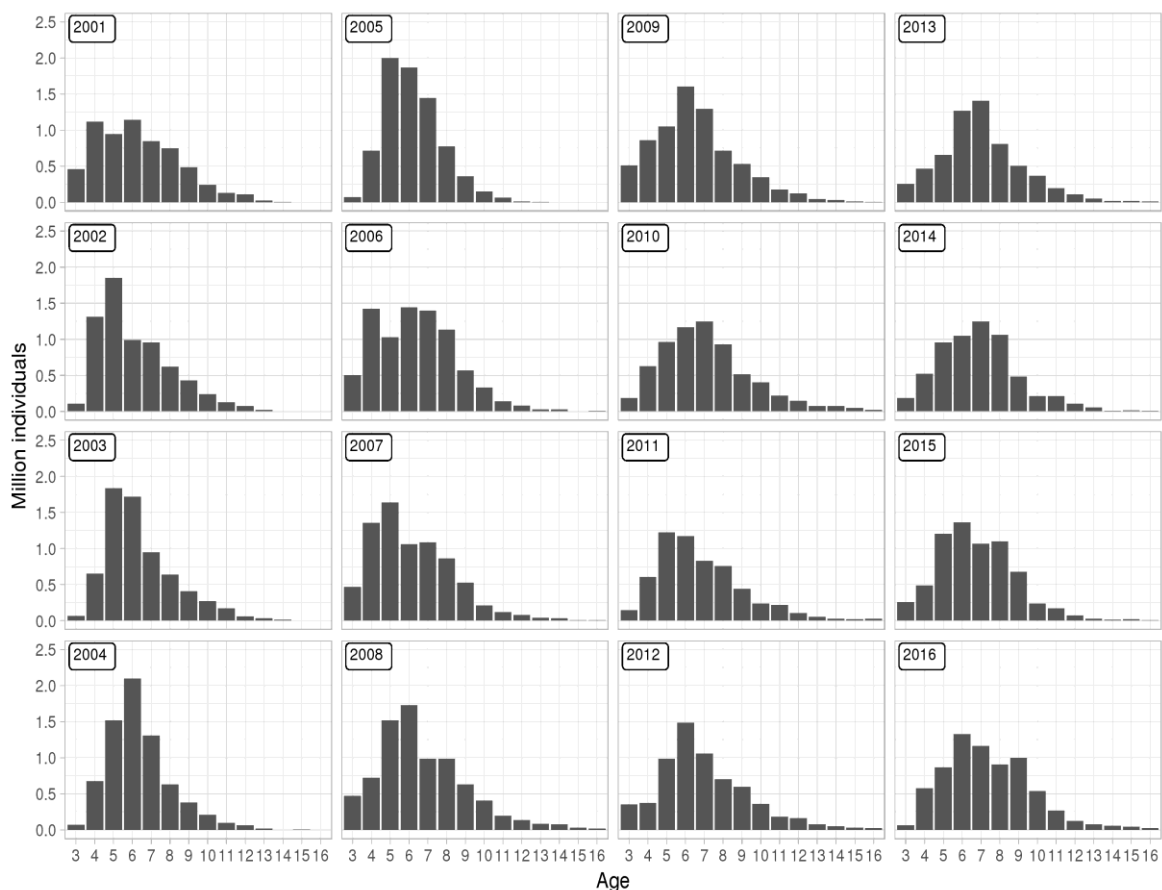
Year	Demersal seine		Demersal trawl	
	Samples	Otoliths	Samples	Otoliths
2010	78	3891	41	2016
2011	84	4200	50	2452
2012	104	5149	37	1835
2013	101	5010	27	1350
2014	36	900	20	575
2015	32	800	27	670
2016	45	1125	23	573



**Figure 6. Plaice. Fishing grounds in 2016 as reported in logbooks (red) and positions of samples taken from landings (asterisks).**

*Mynd 6. Skarkoli. Veiðisvæði við Ísland árið 2016 samkvæmt afladagbókum (rautt) og staðsetningar sýna úr lönduðum afla (stjörnur).*

In 2002-2005 the majority of the catch was 4-7 years old plaice, or about 60% of landings in terms of estimated numbers (Figure 7). The proportion of these age classes in the catch then decreased and for the last five years it has been 40-45%. Thus, the catch has gradually become older, and as an example the average age of plaice caught has increased from 6.3 in 2001-2007 to 7.0 in 2012-2016 and the largest cohorts have been 6-7 year old fish in the last 3 years, whereas in 2001-2007 4 or 5 year old fish were most common.

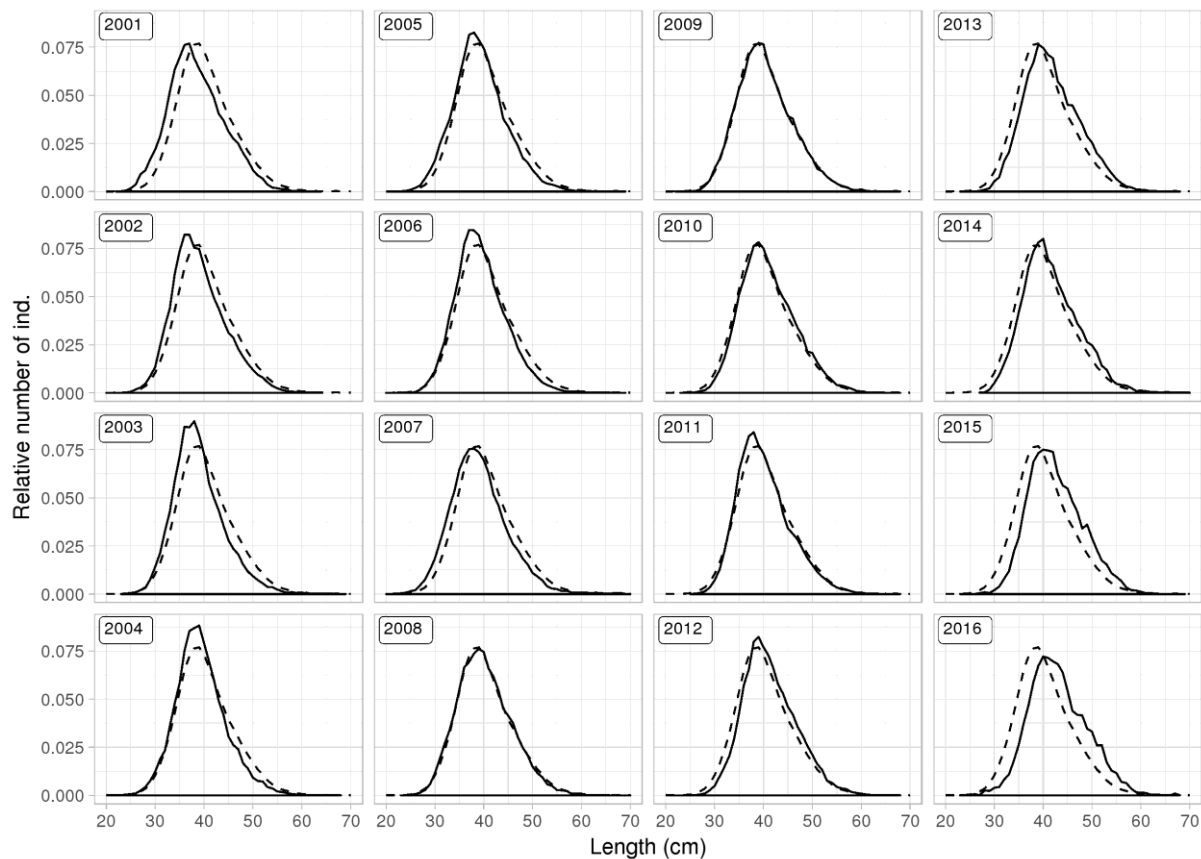


**Figure 7. Plaice. Estimated age distribution of landed catch based on landings and otoliths collected from landed catch.**

*Mynd 7. Skarkoli. Áætluð aldursdreifing landaðs afla byggð á aldursgreiningum á fiskum úr afla.*

**LENGTH DISTRIBUTION OF LANDED PLAICE**

There has been a shift towards larger fish in the length distribution of landed catch (Figure 8). As a result, the average length in the samples taken from commercial catch has increased from 38 cm in 2001 to 43 cm in 2016.



**Figure 8. Plaice. Length distribution from landed catch. The dotted line represents the mean length distribution for all years.**

*Mynd 8. Skarkoli. Lengdardreifing aflasýna frá árinu 2001 með meðallengdardreifing fyrir öll árin (punktalína).*

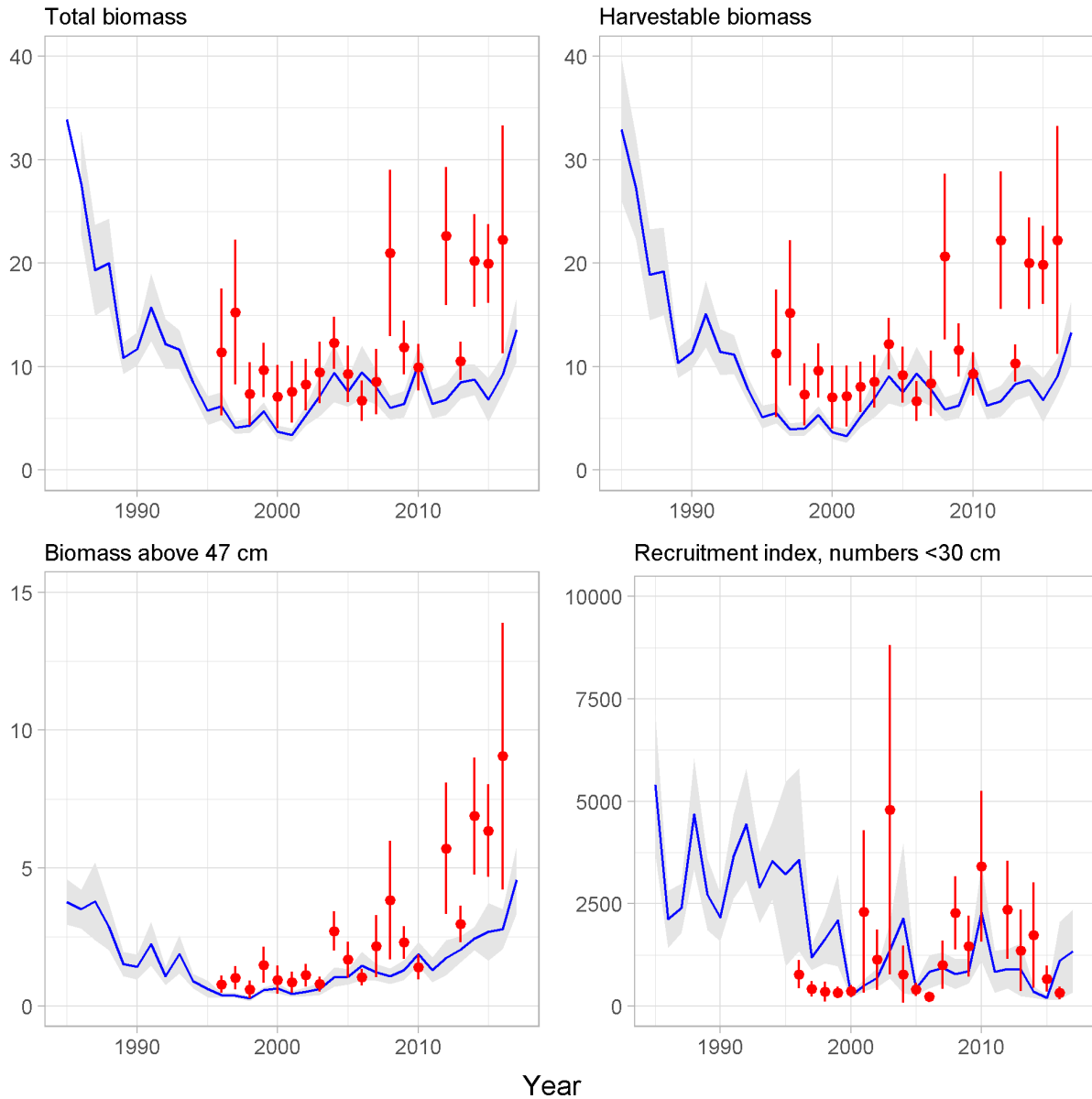


## SURVEY DATA

The Icelandic spring groundfish survey (hereafter spring survey), which has been conducted annually in March since 1985, covers the most important distribution area of the plaice fishery. In addition, the Icelandic autumn groundfish survey (hereafter autumn survey) was commenced in 1996. However, a full autumn survey was not conducted in 2011 due to a labour dispute and therefore the results for 2011 are not presented. The spring survey is considered to measure changes in abundance/biomass better than the autumn survey. It does not, however, adequately cover the main recruitment grounds for plaice as recruitment takes place in shallow water in habitats unsuitable for demersal trawling. In addition to these two major surveys, a designated flatfish survey with beam trawl was started in 2016 and will be expanded in 2017 to cover most of the recruitment grounds of plaice and other flatfish species. The plan is to incorporate this survey in the stock assessment for plaice in the future.

Figure 9 shows both a recruitment index based on abundance of plaice smaller than 30 cm, and trends in various biomass indices. Survey length distributions are shown in Figure 10 and Figure 11, abundance and changes in spatial distribution in Figure 12 - Figure 15.

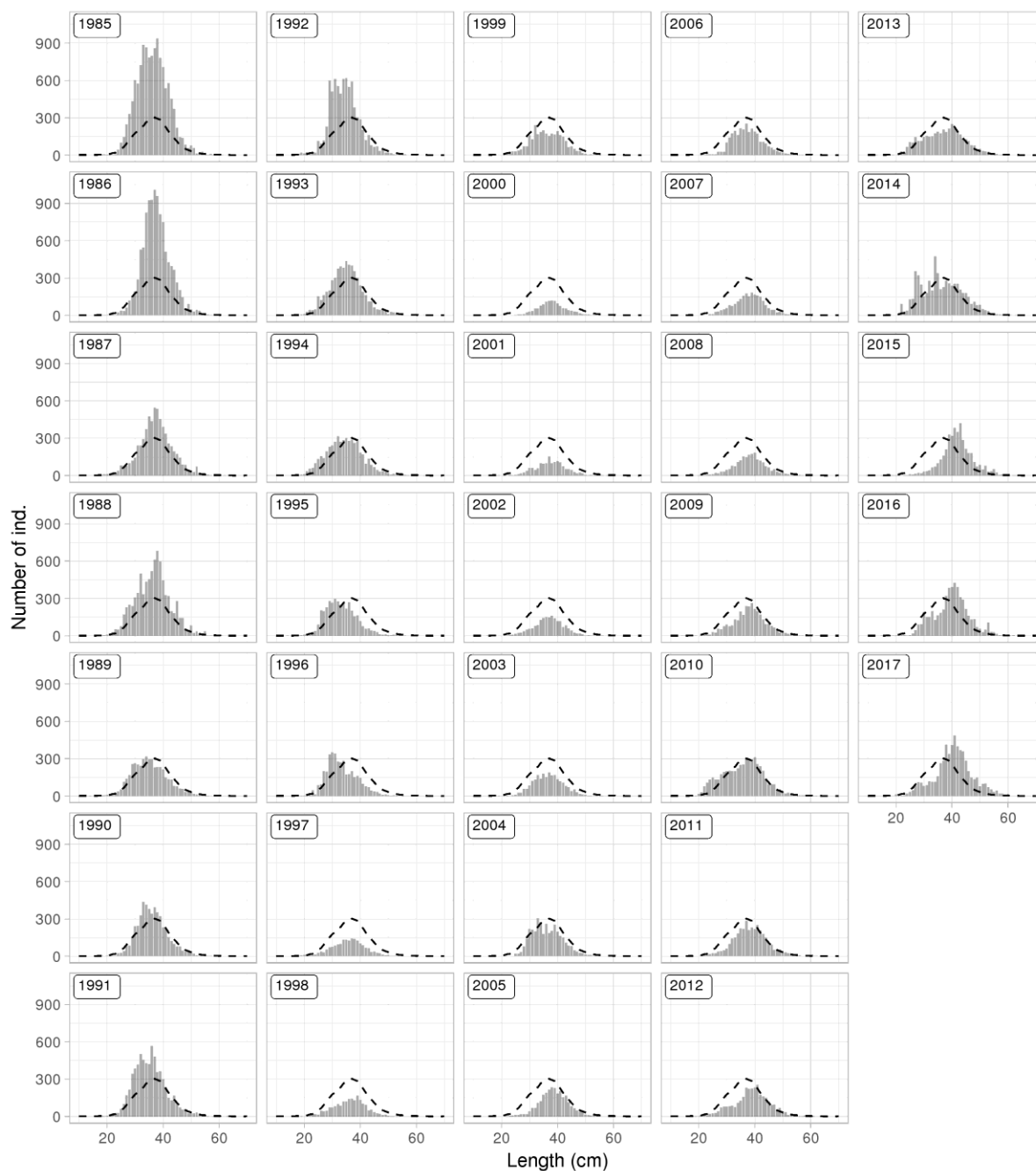
Biomass indices for the total stock of plaice, and plaice larger than 30 cm (harvestable part of the stock), have been increasing steadily since a historical low in 2001 (Figure 9). The same holds for the index of plaice larger than 50 cm, probably due to a decrease in fishing mortality. The index of juvenile abundance (<30 cm) has increased in the last two years after being at a historical low in 2015. Trends in the shorter autumn survey are similar to those observed from the spring survey, but standard deviations in the measurements tend to be high.



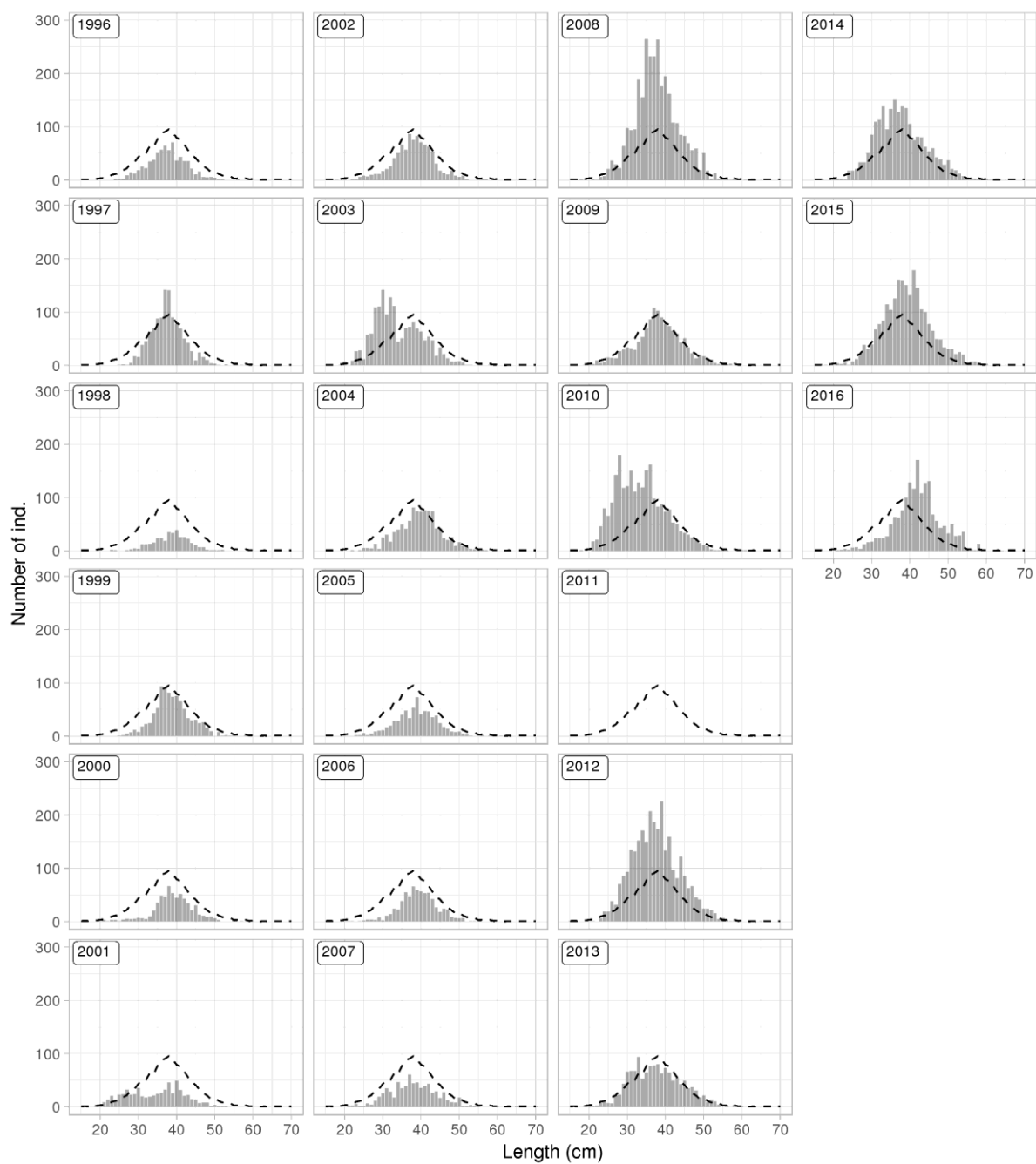
**Figure 9. Plaice total biomass indices (upper left) and harvestable biomass indices (>30 cm) (upper, right), biomass indices of larger ind. (>47cm) (lower left) and juvenile abundance indices (<30 cm) (lower right) from the spring survey (blue) from 1985 and autumn survey (red) from 1996, along with the standard deviation.**

*Mynd 9. Stofnvísitala skarkola (efri til vinstri), vísitala veiðistofns (30 cm og stærri, efri til hægri) og vísitala stærri einstaklinga (47 cm og stærri, neðri til vinstri) og nýliðunarvísitala (neðri til hægri), úr stofnmælingu botnfiska að vori (blátt) frá árinu 1985 og hausti (rautt) frá árinu 1996, ásamt staðalfrávik.*

Like in samples from the commercial catch, there has been a slight shift towards larger fish in the length distribution of measured individuals from the spring survey (Figure 10). The average length of plaice in the survey samples has increased from 38 cm in 2002 to 43 cm in 2017. Data from the autumn survey tells a similar story, with a marked increase in average size of plaice caught (Figure 11).

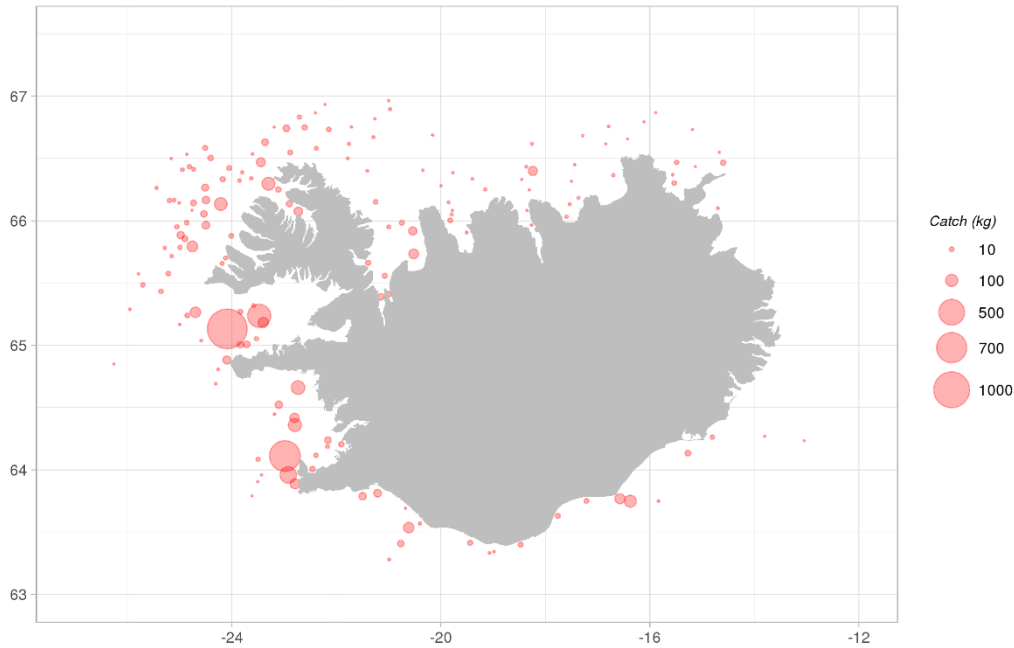


**Figure 10. Plaice. Length distribution from the spring survey. The dotted line shows mean length for all years combined. Mynd 10. Skarkoli. Lengdardreifing úr stofnmælingu botnfiska að vori frá 1985 ásamt meðallengd allra ára (punktalína).**

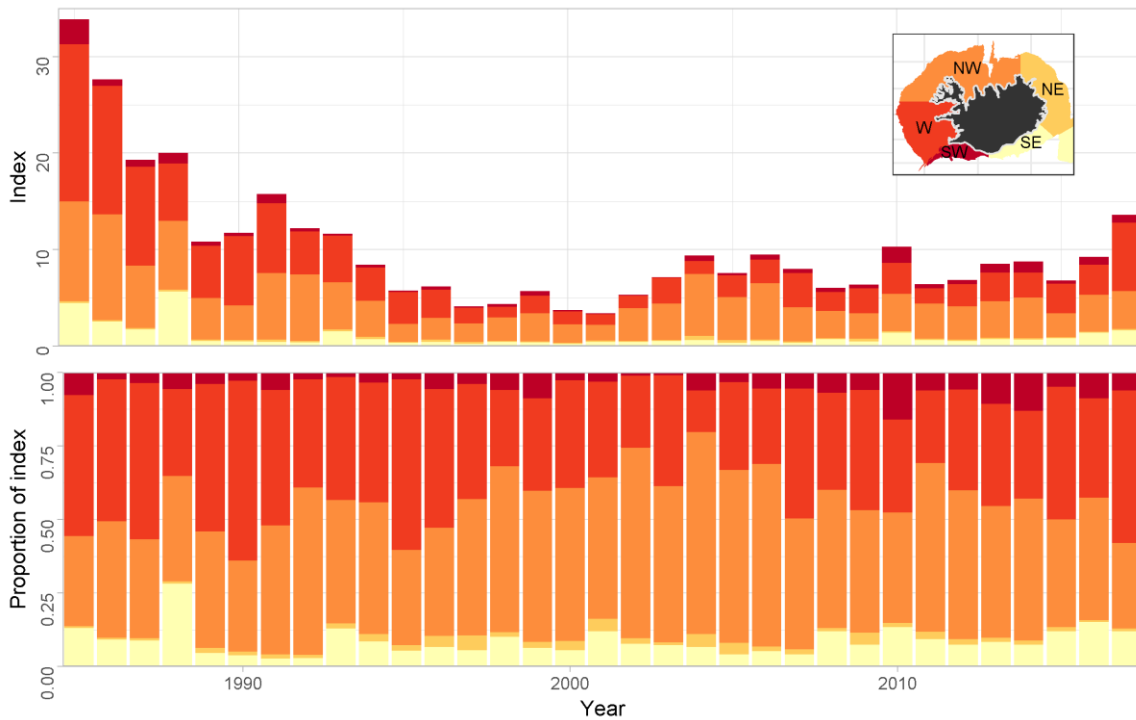


**Figure 11. Plaice. Length distribution from the autumn survey. The dotted line shows mean length for all years combined.**  
*Mynd 11. Skarkoli. Lengdardreifing úr stofnmælingu botnfiska að hausti frá 1996 ásamt meðallengd allra ára (punktalína).*

Plaice were mostly caught on the main spawning grounds off the western part of the country in the spring survey in 2017 (Figure 12). Spatial distribution of the catch of plaice in the spring survey shows some temporal changes, with a higher proportion caught in the west in the last three years (Figure 13). As a result, biomass indices in the northwest area have dropped from around 60% of the total biomass in 2002, down to around 30% in 2015-2017. This could be due to plaice moving earlier and in larger numbers to their traditional spawning grounds in the western part of the country as the survey takes place around the same time every year, or recovery of the stock in that area.

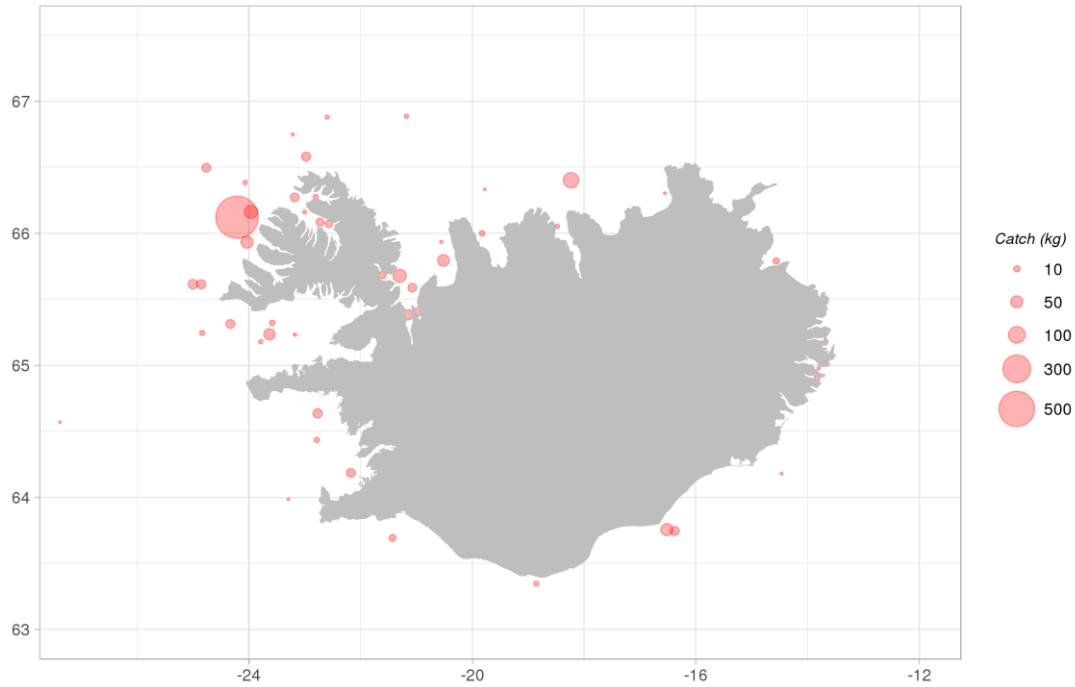


**Figure 12. Plaice. Spatial distribution in the spring survey in 2017.**  
*Mynd 12. Skarkoli. Útbreiðsla í stofnmælingu botnfiska að vori 2017.*

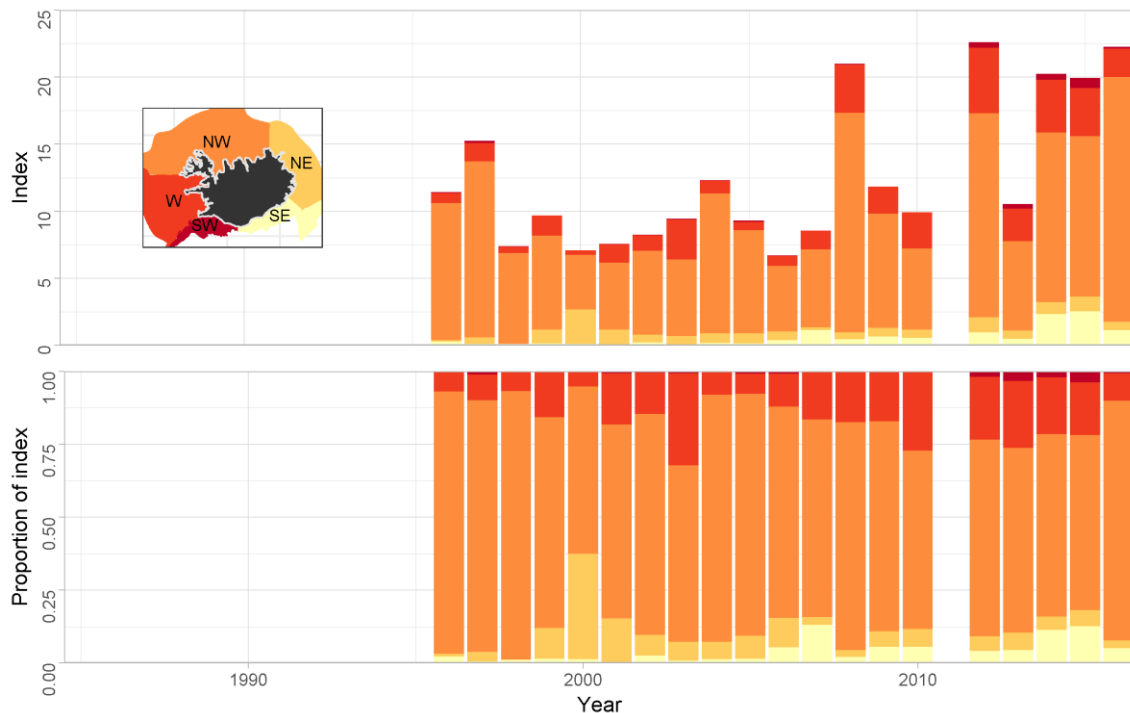


**Figure 13. Plaice. Spatial distribution of biomass index from the spring survey in 1985-2017.**  
*Mynd 13. Skarkoli. Dreifing lífmassavísitölu í stofnmælingu botnfiska að vori árin 1985-2017.*

Plaice were mainly caught in the main feeding grounds for plaice in the northwest of the country in 2016 (Figure 14). The majority of plaice in the autumn survey has been caught on the traditional feeding grounds in the northwest. However, there has been a slight increase in the relative abundance of plaice in the western part in recent years, from around 10% in 2004 and 2005 up to 25% in 2010-2015 (Figure 15). In 2016, however, vast majority of the plaice was caught in the northwest area.

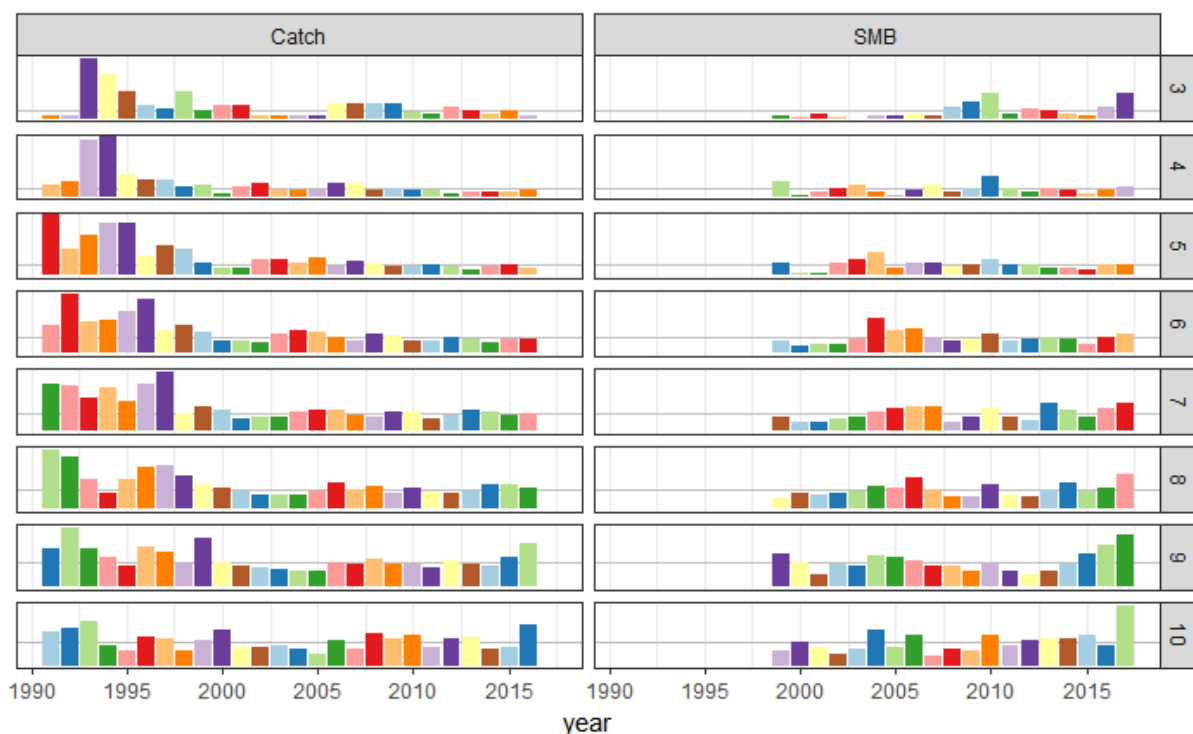


**Figure 14. Plaice. Spatial distribution of plaice in 2016 in the autumn survey.**  
*Mynd 14. Skarkoli. Útbreiðsla í stofnmælingu botnfiska að hausti árið 2016.*



**Figure 15. Plaice. Spatial distribution of biomass index from the autumn survey in 1996-2016.**  
*Mynd 15. Skarkoli. Dreifing lífmassavísitölu í stofnmælingu botnfiska að hausti árin 1996-2016.*

## STOCK ASSESSMENT



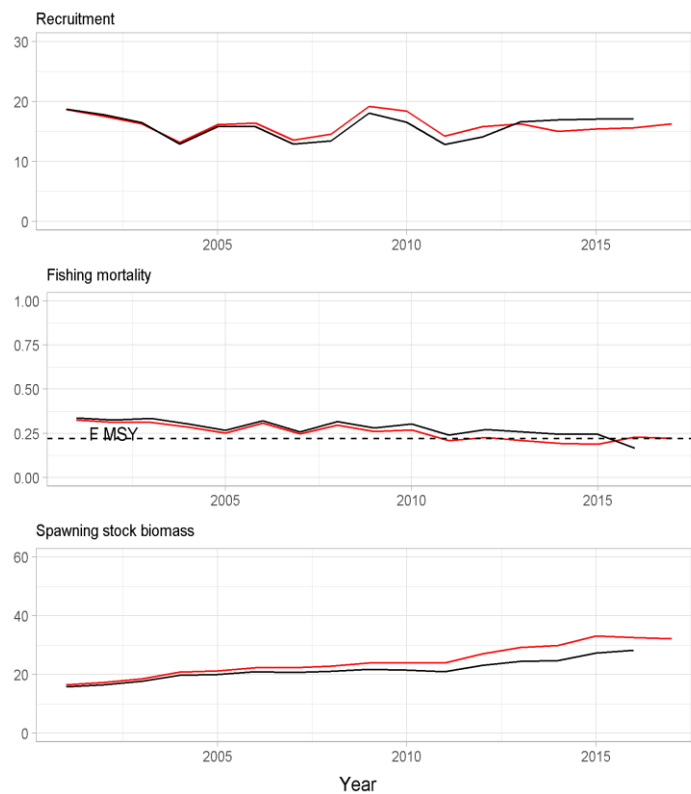
**Figure 16. Plaice. Yearclass strength of 3-10 year old fish in catch (1991-2016) and IS-SMB spring survey (1999-2017). Input data for the stock assessment.**

*Mynd 16. Skarkoli. Árgangar 3-10 ára fiska í afla (1991-2016) og vorralli (1999-2017). Inntaksgögn fyrir stofnmatíð.*

Strong year classes that are now 9 and 10 year old fish are seen in the catch, while a strong pulse of 3 year old fish was seen in this year's spring survey, similar to a pulse in 2010 that resulted in high numbers of 9 and 10 year old fish (Figure 16). Most of the harvestable biomass in 2016 is made up from strong year classes of old (9-10 year old) fish.

Analytical age-based stock assessment model using catch in numbers and age disaggregated indices from the spring survey was used for the first time in 2016, and that same model was used again this year. Considerable uncertainty is present in the model due to limited information on recruitment. Maximum sustainable yield is the basis for the advice, and the reference point is set as  $F = 0.22$ .

Results of the stock assessment model are slightly different in terms of predicted recruitment than last year's model, where this year's model estimates lower recruitment than last years, resulting in slightly lower TAC (Figure 17).



**Figure 17. Plaice. Estimates of recruitment, fishing mortality and spawning stock biomass from the analytical age based model. Current model results are shown with a red line, while results from 2016 are displayed with a black line.**

*Mynd 17. Skarkoli. Niðurstöður stofnmatslíkans á nýliðun, fiskveiðidánartölu og lífmassa hrygningarstofns. Niðurstöður líkansins í ár eru sýndar með rauðri línu en líkanið í fyrra með svartri línu.*

Predicted catch, estimate of harvestable biomass, spawning stock biomass, fishing mortality and TAC for 2017/2018 are shown in table 5.

**Table 5. Plaice. Projection of reference stock and spawning stock biomass (tonnes) based on  $F_{0.1}$ .**

*Tafla 5. Skarkoli. Áhrif á áætlaða stofnstærð (tonn) miðað við veiðar samkvæmt kjörsókn.*

2017				2018			
Predicted catches	Harvestable biomass	SSB	F	TAC	F	Harvestable biomass	SSB
7226	45.652	32.163	0.221	7103	0.220	45.707	32.005



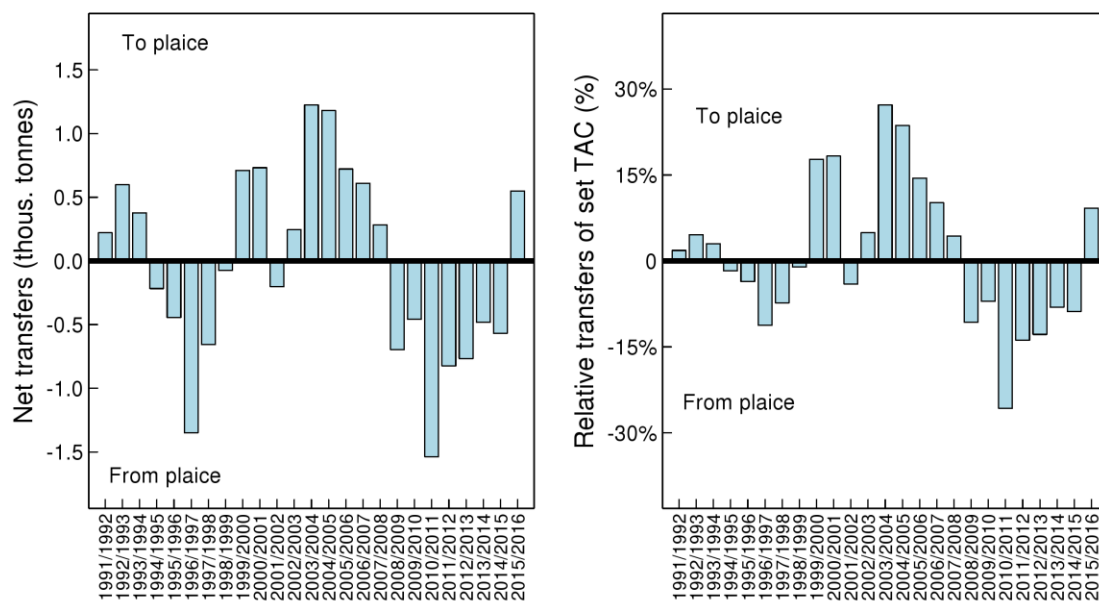
## MANAGEMENT

The Ministry of Industries and Innovation (MII) is responsible for management of the Icelandic fisheries and implementation of legislation. Plaice was included in the ITQ system in the 1991/1992 quota year and as such subjected to TAC limitations. For the first six years, the TAC was set higher than recommended by Marine Research Institute (MRI), but this practice stopped in the 2010/2011 quota year. One reason is that no formal harvest rule exists for this stock. In some recent quota years, landings have been lower than the advised TAC (Table 5). Figure 18, shows the net transfers in the Icelandic ITQ-system. From 2000-2008 (positive values in Figure 18) there was a net transfer of other species being transferred to plaice quota. However, from 2009-2015, this was reversed and plaice quota was transferred to other species until last year when there was a small net transfer to plaice from other species quota.

**Table 6. Plaice. Recommended TAC, National TAC set by the Ministry, and landings (tonnes).**

*Tafla 6. Skarkoli. Tillögur Hafrannsóknastofnunar um hámarksafli, ákvörðun stjórnvalda um aflamark og landaður afli (tonn).*

<b>FISHING YEAR</b>	<b>REC. TAC</b>	<b>NATIONAL TAC</b>	<b>CATCH</b>
<b>1991/92</b>	10000	11000	10200
<b>1992/93</b>	10000	13000	12400
<b>1993/94</b>	10000	13000	12300
<b>1994/95</b>	10000	13000	11100
<b>1995/96</b>	10000	13000	11000
<b>1996/97</b>	10000	12000	10345
<b>1997/98</b>	9000	9000	8083
<b>1998/99</b>	7000	7000	7452
<b>1999/00</b>	4000	4000	4907
<b>2000/01</b>	4000	4000	4921
<b>2001/02</b>	4000	5000	4402
<b>2002/03</b>	4000	5000	5402
<b>2003/04</b>	4000	4500	5844
<b>2004/05</b>	4000	5000	6184
<b>2005/06</b>	4000	5000	5647
<b>2006/07</b>	5000	6000	6149
<b>2007/08</b>	5000	6500	6620
<b>2008/09</b>	5000	6500	6361
<b>2009/10</b>	5000	6500	6389
<b>2010/11</b>	6500	6500	4843
<b>2011/12</b>	6500	6500	5822
<b>2012/13</b>	6500	6500	5932
<b>2013/14</b>	6500	6500	6030
<b>2014/15</b>	7000	7000	6237
<b>2015/16</b>	6500	6500	7619
<b>2016/17</b>	7330	7330	
<b>2017/18</b>	7103		



**Figure 18. Plaice. Net transfers of quota to and from plaice in the Icelandic ITQ system by fishing year. Positive values indicate that other species are being transferred to plaice but negative mean that plaice quota is being converted to other species.**

*Mynd 18. Skarkoli. Tilfærsla á kvóta milli skarkola og annarra tegunda í kvótakerfinu eftir fiskveiðiárum. Jákvæð gildi tákna að kvóta annarra tegunda var breytt í skarkola, en neikvæðar að skarkolakvóta var breytt í aðrar tegundir.*

ADVICE 2017

Recommended TAC for the 2017/2018 fishing year is 7103 tonnes.