Ilex Research Track Assessment

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I. Background

· Initial kickoff meeting for the Research Track Assessment (RTA) for *Illex illecebrosus* was held in January 2021.

· In March 2021, the RTA commenced.

· Interdisciplinary group assembled by the NEFSC to discuss data, concepts, modeling results, and research recommendations for the *Illex* stock assessment

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II. Goals

Goals of RTA process:

- To generate new research products that could either be used in the *Illex* stock assessment; or

- To inform the assessment and to prepare a stock assessment report for external peer review.

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III. Outcome

- The process did not unfold as expected because of challenges including:
  - non-federal WG members' access to federal data
  - the complexity of assessing the species in question and long-standing disagreement about which models and tools are appropriate and what data and how much is available or necessary
  - disagreement about the assessment WG process and the roles of participants;
  - interpersonal obstacles and group dynamics; and
  - task performance issues.

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IV. CBI's Involvement & Evaluation Process

- MAFMC, in consultation with the NEFSC, initially contracted with CBI to facilitate the WG because of some of the challenges that became apparent during the RTA.

- The contract was extended to undertake an evaluation of the *Illex* RTA, to ascertain the nature of the challenges faced by the *Illex* RTA WG, and to provide recommendations to improve future working groups.

- CBI facilitated the group, so CBI brings its experience and observations, but also potentially its own biases, into the evaluation.

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- CBI was not tasked to evaluate management or personnel, although these factors affected the operation of the WG in conducting the RTA.

- This evaluation is not intended to evaluate the full administrative record nor be an exhaustive accounting of all elements, emails, memos, and documents that the process generated. The evaluation process is described below.

- These recommendations were based solely on the assessment of the RTA for *Illex*, not any other RTAs. Therefore, it is unknown whether these recommendations would apply to RTAs overall.

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- CBI conducted sixteen, one-hour-long virtual interviews with stakeholders in April 2022

- Primarily WG members, but also stock assessment process personnel and industry representatives who had attended and participated in WG meetings.

- Interviews were conducted by two CBI staff facilitators:
    - one who had been brought onto the WG to facilitate meetings in the Fall of 2021
    - the other who possessed no prior firsthand knowledge of the process or people involved to provide for a fresh and outside perspective on the findings.

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V. Findings

Accomplishments

- Strides were made around aging and sequence of cohorts and understanding species growth
- Two methods for assessing the stock were advanced
- Initial testing of a generalized depletion model that considered ingress and egress
- An alternative CPUE model with economic factors was completed.
- Exploratory work around the species and oceanographic and environmental factors was advanced and holds promise for future research.

Challenges

- Overall, interviewees suggested that there were not as many successes in terms of research gains as would have been expected, considering the scope and purpose of the RTA process.

- *Illex* is a difficult species to assess, due to its ephemeral presence on and off the shelf, its short and complex life-history, and because most assessment models have been built for finfish.

- Over the years, *Illex* has not drawn more resources or attention when compared to traditionally high-value species like scallops or depleted stocks like some groundfish.

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Challenges

Access to data

- Several WG members who were not employed with the NEFSC faced obstacles in accessing federal data sets because they needed to wait on security clearances to meet federal data release requirements to the “public.”

    - Prevented WG members from conducting research in a timely manner.

    - Contributed to a perceived dynamic that certain scientists were holding onto key data to prevent other scientists from being able to contribute to advancing research.

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Challenges

Development of Terms of Reference (ToRs)

- To begin the RTA, key staff from the NEFSC drafted ToRs.
- The ToRs were then reviewed and approved by the NRCC as well as MAFMC (staff and SSC members) in September 2020.
- After the ToRs were finalized, some members of the public contended that there should have been an additional ToR for ecosystem considerations.
- Because the ToRs had already been “finalized,” it proved quite challenging to add a new ToR later in the process.

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Challenges

- Industry raised ToR concerns in an email to the CBI facilitator 4 March 2022 that had been previously raised in 2020:

    - 1) "A refusal to pursue an explicit Ecosystem-based ToR, for a stock whose distribution and productivity are thought to be primarily environmentally driven;"
    - 2) "TOR's were edited and debated in a manner such that the final results were created more out of frustration than through an open and deliberative process."

- The long and somewhat adversarial process regarding this ToR issue contributed to the sense of antipathy with the process and lack of transparency.

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Challenges

Delays

- There were many delays throughout the process, which meant:
  - the primary generalized depletion model (GDM) was not run until quite late
  - the RTA did not provide much ‘breathing room’ before review or before managers needed upcoming quota advice.

- Delays were due to:
  - lack of data access
  - the barrier for one WG affiliate to enter the U.S. due to COVID rules
  - performance issues on specific tasks
  - debate around the applicability of the Falkland’s fishery
  - lack of effective, constructive collaboration between WG members throughout the process.

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Challenges

Workplans, Milestones, and Clear Agendas

- Frustration that there was not a clear work plan, even in later stages of the process.
- There were not milestones set and accountability if/when they were missed.
- Agendas lacked clear, specific, timed topics and objectives.
- Amorphous process, with limited expectations setting at the outset or later around how the group would be moving from beginning to end.

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Challenges

Composition of the Working Group (WG) and Group Dynamics

- Some WG members had long and conflicted histories of working with one another in the past.
- The WG Chair and lead scientist were regularly challenged by other members of the WG and by members of the public.
- A few WG members tended to dominate the discussion, as well as the discord; several WG members remaining largely quiet, passive participants throughout the process.

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Challenges

Composition of the Working Group (WG) and Group Dynamics, Cont'd

- Some noted that the interest of some individuals in pursuing publishing as an outcome as well as development of technology not directly relevant to the ToRs seemed to potentially take away from the primary focus of the WG.

- Some stated that some members of the WG repeated and second-guessed other's work with the intended goal of reaching a higher quota for the fishery.

- Some interviewees noted that they did not believe all members stated facts clearly, accurately, or consistently.

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Challenges

Composition of the Working Group (WG) and Group Dynamics, Cont'd

- The WG was missing additional species expertise and more modeling expertise when compared to other WGs, which meant only a smaller subset of the WG could engage deeply in model development and evaluation.

- There was only one lead scientist with substantial *Illex* experience, so the scientist was often placed in the crosshairs of debate about the features and nature of the species.

- This in turn led to contentious discussions, lack of trust, and the inability of the group to have expertise be derived from at least a few people.

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Challenges
Difficulty in Collaborating

- The group struggled in full WG meetings to accomplish tasks, so individual members formed smaller cohorts to complete:
    - the oceanographic work,
    - the aging and sampling of *Illex*,
    - the standardization of the CPUE model with economic factors,
    - and the development and advancement of the models and tools under consideration.
- The “stove piped” approach inhibited fuller collaboration, inhibited more WG members from contributing more meaningfully, and led to missed opportunities to advance a better understanding of the species.

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Challenges

Industry Involvement

- Industry interviewees noted that collaborative involvement in previous stock assessments was more productive and lacked the contention of the *Illex* RTA.

- Perhaps the combination of lack of clear procedures governing public participation, and an unusually high degree of interest on the part of the industry led to excessive contention and difficulty.

- At times, the industry felt shut out or not listened to. At times, WG members felt that the industry was hostile, interrogating, and did not advance the science, but rather sought to protect or advance economic interests.

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VI. Recommendations

1. NEFSC leadership should carefully consider the combination of personalities, interests, and skill sets of members when evaluating applicants for positions on the WG.

2. Where possible, there should be more than one species expert in the WG to increase the spirit of collaboration and sources of knowledge.

3. There should be sufficient modelers on Work Groups to set up, run, debate, and evaluate models given models' inherent complexity.

4. There should be an opportunity for WG members and the public to comment on and influence ToRs at the earliest stage of the RTA.

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VI. Recommendations

5. WG members should be put through a streamlined clearance process to enable all members to access all relevant data during the RTA.

6. All WG members should have equal access to data throughout the RTA, whenever possible.

7. NEFSC should put in place or clarify and enforce internal protocols that make clear that NEFSC data, however developed, does not belong to any one individual or group of researchers.

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VI. Recommendations

8. A clear timeline with milestones along the way should be presented at any initial WG meeting and be kept up to date and revised as needed for a clear roadmap for the work's beginning, middle, and end.

9. If original research is an objective of the RTA, the timeline must consider the requisite time required to accomplish those elements of that work.

10. Communication norms should be presented to the WG at the outset of the process, supported by leadership, and enforced.

11. Roles should be clarified early on, so that all WG members are clear on who is the primary decision maker, as well as on how to best deliver input in the process.

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VI. Recommendations

12. The NEFSC should help ensure that the Chair can be successful on behalf of the group by providing the resources, support, and training needed for success.

13. NEFSC should ensure that the industry has a meaningful role in helping shape ToRs, providing, and analyzing data, and questioning and debating models, choices, and conclusions. At the same time, NEFSC should make clear that the industry also has responsibilities for supporting the scientific and group process in a constructive manner.

14. The NEFSC should think about further ways to separate out and sequence MTAs from RTAs.

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