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Juvenile Sportfish Monitoring in Florida Bay, Everglades National Park: Monitoring and Assessment Plan Results from 2004–2018

C. Kelble
J. Browder
C. Quenée-Stewart
I. Smith
K. Montenero
L. Visser
J. Contillo

Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory
Miami, Florida

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Juvenile Sportfish Monitoring in Florida Bay, Everglades National Park: Monitoring and Assessment Plan Results from 2004–2018

Christopher R. Kelble¹

Joan A. Browder²

Charline T. Quenée-Stewart^{1,3}

Ian E. Smith^{1,3}

Kelly A. Montenero^{1,3}

Lindsey A. Visser^{1,3}

Joseph P. Contillo²

¹NOAA–Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory
Miami, Florida

²NOAA–Southeast Fisheries Science Center
Miami, Florida

³University of Miami-Cooperative Institute for Marine and Atmospheric Studies
Miami, Florida

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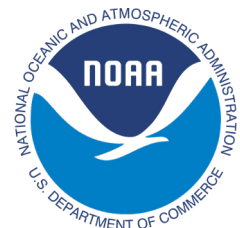
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Dr. Richard W. Spinrad, Under Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator

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Mr. Craig N. McLean, Assistant Administrator



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Acronyms

BB	Braun-Blanquet abundance indices
CERP	Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project
MAP	Monitoring and Assessment Plan
RECOVER	Restoration Coordination and Verification

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Executive Summary

The spotted seatrout, *Cynoscion nebulosus*, is an important recreational sportfish in Florida Bay and spends its entire life history within the bay (Rutherford *et al.*, 1989). The geographic distribution of juvenile (20-100 mm standard length, 35-100 days old) *C. nebulosus* within the bay varies in response to salinity conditions, seagrass characteristics, and sediment types (Thayer and Chester, 1989). This and other findings clearly show that juvenile spotted seatrout are a good ecosystem indicator that is directly responsive to changes in freshwater runoff from the Everglades to Florida Bay. Plans to restore the Everglades are centered on continued increases in freshwater flows to Florida Bay in the future. These changes in freshwater flow are likely to impact sportfish populations in Florida Bay by affecting seatrout physiology and recruitment, as well as habitat and predator-prey distributions.

This report describes reference conditions that can be used as a baseline to evaluate trends in juvenile spotted seatrout populations and compares current year juvenile spotted seatrout population metrics and environmental parameters with datasets from 2004-2018. The report describes juvenile abundance, as well as compares differences in abundance throughout the bay; examines the relationship between juvenile spotted seatrout abundance to salinity and seagrass habitat to provide insight into the potential response of spotted seatrout to Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program (CERP) implementation; and determines salinity preferences for other juvenile sportfish in Florida Bay.

This project will help better predict juvenile sportfish responses to modifications in the timing, distribution, and quantity of freshwater inflow to Florida Bay and provide information to the adaptive management process on ecological effects in Florida Bay. Continued monitoring also provides insight on the effect of storms and other environmental events on sportfish distribution and abundance in Florida Bay. This project is a component of the Restoration Coordination and Verification (RECOVER) Monitoring and Assessment Plan of CERP.

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1. Introduction

The spotted seatrout, *Cynoscion nebulosus*, is an important recreational sportfish in Florida Bay and spends its entire life history within the Bay (Rutherford *et al.*, 1989). Spotted seatrout typically spawn multiple times between March and October at temperatures occurring between 27°C and 35°C (Powell, 2003). The geographic distribution of juvenile *Cynoscion nebulosus* (20-100 mm standard length, 35-100 days old) within the bay varies in response to salinity conditions, seagrass characteristics, and sediment types (Thayer and Chester, 1989). Western Florida Bay is an excellent habitat for juvenile spotted seatrout (Thayer *et al.*, 1987; Thayer and Chester, 1989), whereas the north-central part of the bay is less suitable. In 1984-1985, seatrout distributions were limited primarily to the western portion of the bay and absent from the north-central part of the bay, where hypersaline conditions prevailed. Hypersaline conditions are characteristic of the north-central sub-region of Florida Bay (Orlando *et al.*, 1997; Kelble *et al.*, 2007), although they are alleviated with increased freshwater inflow (Lee *et al.*, 2008), as the period of unusually high rainfall beginning in 1994 demonstrated. During 1994-1996, when hypersaline conditions in the north-central area of the bay were rare or absent, spotted seatrout juveniles expanded into the north-central part of the bay (Thayer *et al.*, 1999).

Despite hypersalinity, Powell (2003) reported substantial numbers of spotted seatrout larvae in Whipray Basin from 1994-1999. But only in 1994 and 1995, a period of relatively low salinities, were there significant juvenile spotted seatrout populations in this sub-region. Because of limited circulation from mudbanks (Fourqurean and Robblee, 1999), adults and juveniles are generally non-migratory, so larval distribution is a good indicator of spawning areas (Powell, 2003). These observations suggest spotted seatrout spawn viable eggs that produce larvae in north-central Florida Bay even during periods of hypersalinity; however, during hypersalinity, these larvae likely fail to recruit into the juvenile population and thus never enter the adult population.

Salinity and freshwater influx affect spotted seatrout distribution both directly through physiology and indirectly by affecting habitat (i.e., seagrass), prey and

predator distributions, and species composition. Seagrass meadows are critical habitats for juvenile spotted seatrout (Chester and Thayer, 1990; Thayer *et al.*, 1999). Seagrass species are distributed unevenly throughout Florida Bay because of water depth, sediment depth, temperature, salinity, water clarity, and sediment organic content (Zieman *et al.*, 1989; Thayer and Chester, 1989). *Thalassia testudinum* is the dominant species in the bay, occurring most often on shallow mudbanks. *Syringodium filiforme* grows along the southern and western portions of the bay in deeper areas of stronger oceanic influence, and *Halodule wrightii* is a pioneering species occurring in disturbed conditions (Zieman *et al.*, 1989).

Spotted seatrout occur more frequently in the western portion of the bay where a mixture of *Syringodium* and *Thalassia* is more prevalent because sediments are deeper with more organic content (Powell, 2003; Thayer and Chester, 1989). High densities of *Syringodium* and *Halodule* provide high quality juvenile spotted seatrout habitat, and areas of low seagrass diversity and density are areas where juvenile spotted seatrout are rare or absent (Thayer and Chester, 1989; Powell, 2003). *Thalassia* does not tolerate extreme fluctuations in salinity outside the minimum and maximum ranges reported (10–48 ppt), and a major die-off of dense stands that occurred in the late 1980s was hypothesized to have been partially the result of hypersalinity (Fourqurean and Robblee, 1999). A *Thalassia* die-off in 2015 followed two consecutive years of low rainfall that led to an extreme hypersaline event in July 2015. High temperatures exacerbated salinity stress and decomposition of the dead grass, creating a low oxygen environment and a positive feedback loop that intensified and expanded the seagrass die-off.

Plans to restore the Everglades are centered on increasing freshwater flows to Florida Bay within the next few decades. Increased freshwater flows can have potential positive and negative impacts on spotted seatrout populations. Increased freshwater flows will alleviate hypersaline conditions, which are likely to allow for an expanded distribution of the early life stages of spotted seatrout into the north-central part of the bay (Thayer *et al.*, 1999). There will be indirect effects as well, because the altered freshwater inflows will modify the current seagrass distributions and seagrass species composition

(Zieman *et al.*, 1989), as well as the distribution and species composition of both predators and prey of juvenile spotted seatrout. Increased predators could have a negative impact on juvenile spotted seatrout.

This project will help us better predict juvenile sportfish responses to modifications in the timing, distribution, and quantity of freshwater inflow to Florida Bay. But, because the realized effects of hydrologic restoration cannot be exactly known in advance due to interacting factors, species-specific responses, and species interactions, it is important to continue monitoring juvenile spotted seatrout and other juvenile sportfish as water management projects are implemented so that feedback on ecological effects in Florida Bay can be provided in the adaptive management process.

This project is a component of the Restoration Coordination and Verification (RECOVER) Monitoring and Assessment Plan of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program (CERP). The objectives of this year's efforts were to: (1) develop reference conditions that could be used as a baseline to evaluate trends in juvenile spotted seatrout populations and, as an exercise, compare data with Monitoring and Assessment Plan (MAP) datasets (2004–2017); (2) develop a juvenile abundance index (mean density and frequency of occurrence) and determine if annual differences in abundance occurred among areas in the bay; (3) examine the relationship between juvenile spotted seatrout abundance and salinity and use this analysis to gain insights into the potential response of spotted seatrout to CERP implementation; and (4) determine salinity preferences for other juvenile sportfish in Florida Bay.

2. Methods

2.1 Observational Data

The four sub-regions (**Figure 1**) in which spotted seatrout are monitored were selected based upon two criteria: (1) juvenile spotted seatrout were previously collected in the sub-region according to historical data; and (2) the sub-region is likely to be affected by water management changes associated with CERP. Each sub-region was

divided into cells (macrocells) measuring 1800 m per side, which were further divided into four smaller cells (microcells). Hence, there were four potential sampling sites per macrocell. Macrocells were randomly selected within each sub-region, and a microcell (900 m per side) was then randomly selected within the randomly selected macrocell. A sample was collected at the center of this microcell. Because of the presence of shallow mud banks, islands, and variable tides, many macrocells contained less than four trawlable microcells. If a microcell was unsuitable for trawling, another microcell within the macrocell was randomly chosen. If there were no suitable microcells within a macrocell, we randomly selected an alternate macrocell.

There are 50 trawlable macrocells in the West sub-region, 23 in Rankin, 19 in Whipray, and 20 in Crocodile Dragover (**Figure 1**). The sampling scheme from 2004 through 2008 was weighted by the number of trawlable sites per sub-region; therefore, the initial (through 2008) total number of samples to be collected annually (ca. 360) was distributed among the areas as follows: 156 samples per year in West, 84 in Rankin, and 60 in both Whipray and Crocodile Dragover. A modified sampling distribution based on an updated power analysis (Cohen, 1988) began in 2009. This distribution collected 492 samples per year, with 120 collected in West, 138 in Rankin, 114 in Whipray, and 120 in Crocodile Dragover. In 2011, we again expanded the number of samples collected, this time to 140 samples in West, 152 in Rankin, 134 in Whipray, and 140 in Crocodile Dragover for a total of 566 samples per year. This new sampling regime improved our ability to estimate the juvenile spotted seatrout population in the central areas of the bay, where the population is often low, but where the greatest change from CERP may occur.

Routine sampling is conducted monthly only from May through October (or through November when October status indicates November sampling would be productive), the period of peak abundance for juvenile spotted seatrout (Powell *et al.*, 2007). The annual sample total was divided equally for each month in each sub-region. The sampling design could not be completed every year. In 2004, funding did not become available until August, and

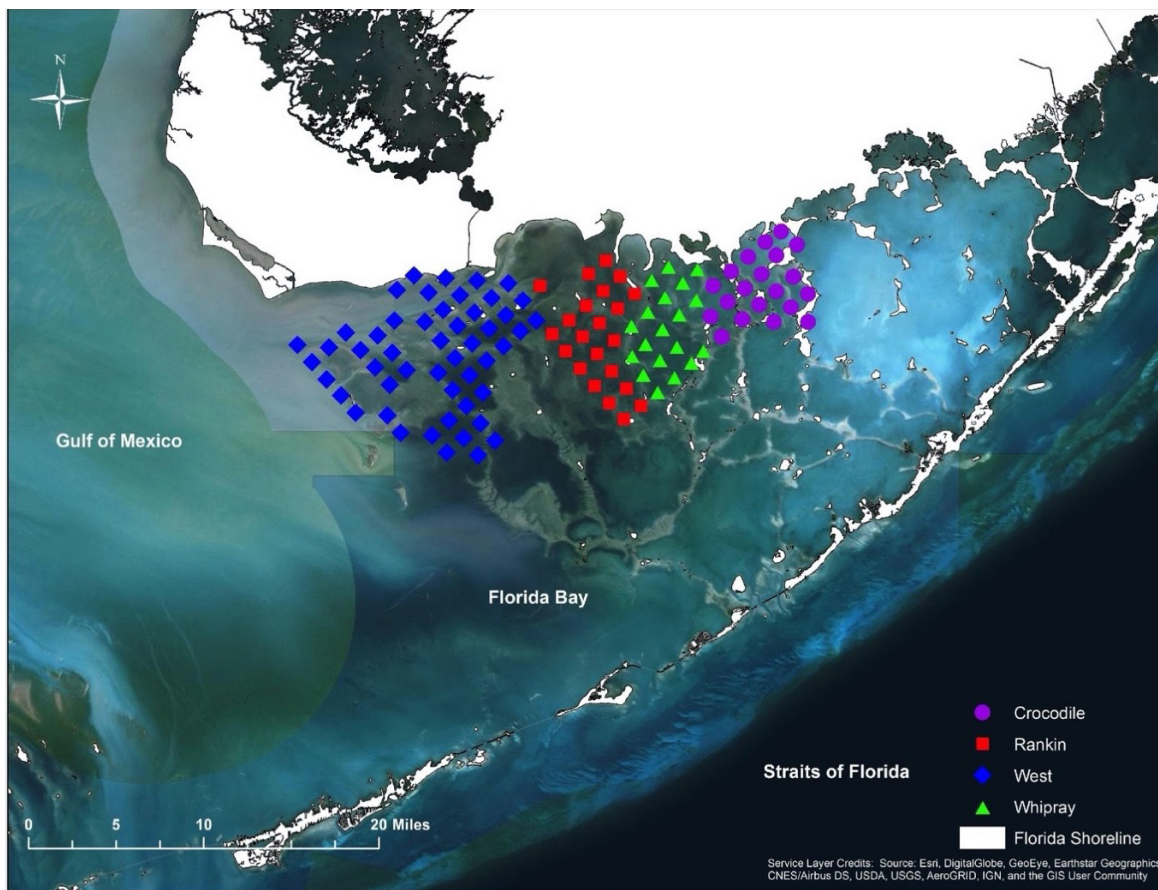


Figure 1. Map of Florida Bay showing the location of all potential sampling stations by sub-region. Symbols are centered in the macrocell that is 1800 m per side.

a hurricane truncated sampling in September. In 2005, sampling was not performed in August, September, and only partially in October due to hurricanes. We sampled intensively in November 2005 in an attempt to reach our annual sampling goal. Sampling from 2006 through 2018 was as planned with minimal impact from adverse weather and funding delays.

Juvenile spotted seatrout sampling was conducted with an otter trawl. The trawl has a 3.4 m head rope, 3.8 m footrope equipped with a 3 mm galvanized tickler chain, 6 mm mesh in the body, and a 3 mm mesh tail bag. The mouth opening has an effective width of 2.1 m. The trawl was towed at a speed of approximately 2.0 m s^{-1} for 2 min (to sample an area of about 500 m^2), unless the net was clogged with detritus. If the net became clogged, the sample would be counted if the tow was longer than a minute or redone if the clog occurred prior to 1 minute.

In 2004-2007, a floating marker was deployed at the beginning and end of each tow and the distance between buoys measured using GPS technology (GPSMAP4212 and Garmin Homeport). In 2008, we modified this scheme, recording a waypoint in the GPS at the beginning and end of each tow to more accurately calculate the tow distance and bearing. The distance towed (calculated from the GPS waypoint) was multiplied by the mouth opening of the net to calculate the area sampled in a tow. Density (number of fish 1000 m^{-2}) and frequency of occurrence were calculated as the indices of abundance. Spotted seatrout $<30 \text{ mm}$ and $>200 \text{ mm}$ standard length were excluded from the analysis because the sampling gear did not effectively capture them. Although juvenile spotted seatrout were the main target of our sampling, we also identified, measured, and counted all sizes of other species of sportfish caught in every tow. At a subset of 12 stations (five in West, two in Rankin, two in Whipray, three in

Crocodile Dragover), for each month starting in 2009, all organisms under 100 mm total length found in the net were preserved in alcohol, then identified and measured in the lab for community and gut content analysis.

Temperature and salinity were measured with either a Hydrolab Scout 2 Water Quality Data System, a YSI environmental Professional 30 instrument (Pro30), a SeaBird Model 21 thermosalinograph, or an EXO2 multiparameter sonde at each tow. From 2009 through 2012, seagrass abundance was quantified by conducting triplicate Braun-Blanquet 0.25 m² quadrats at both endpoints and the midpoint of each tow and included estimates of macroalgal abundance. This was done to standardize our seagrass data collection with the Fisheries Habitat Assessment Program that monitors seagrass throughout Florida Bay. However, the Braun-Blanquet is not a linear scale, making its utility for statistical analyses suspect. Therefore, beginning in 2013, seagrass percent cover, to the nearest 5% value, was recorded for each quadrat instead of Braun-Blanquet abundance indices. Various statistical methods, including a non-parametric, Mann-Whitney U-test (Sokal and Rohlf, 1981) with $\alpha = 0.05$, were used for significance testing throughout the document and are briefly noted where used.

3. Results and Discussion

Frequency of occurrence and density (number 1000 m⁻²) of juvenile *C. nebulosus* has been quantified for all years from 2004 through 2018 in which there was sampling in Florida Bay (15 years in total). Pre-MAP (i.e., pre-2004) sample sizes were small in each year ($n < 15$) and may not well represent the juvenile spotted seatrout population of a given year. Moreover, these data were collected intermittently over 15 years in what is a dynamic environment and, therefore, are unlikely to accurately represent conditions throughout this 15-year period. Therefore, we removed these data from our analyses.

3.1 Monitoring Results: September 2004 to November 2018

In the West sub-region, 2018 had significantly greater densities of juvenile spotted seatrout than 2004, 2005,

2007, 2013, 2014, and 2015, but had significantly lower densities than 2006. However, 2006 had significantly higher densities of juvenile spotted seatrout than in all other years (**Figure 2, Table 1**). Frequency of occurrence (0.45) was also highest in 2006. The second highest mean density, which was significantly higher than in all years from 2009-2015, was found in 2016. The year 2018 had a significantly higher mean density than 2004, 2005, 2007, 2013, 2014, and 2015. The year 2014 had a significantly lower density of juvenile spotted seatrout than all other years. Juvenile spotted seatrout densities in the West sub-region were much more consistent and higher than the rest of Florida Bay. As a result, 2006, 2016, 2017, and 2018 were high-population years, while 2014 was the only low-population year, with all other years in the middle.

In Rankin, 2018 juvenile spotted seatrout densities were significantly higher than 2007-2016 and similar with 2004-2006 and 2017. Juvenile spotted seatrout densities were significantly greater in 2004-2007 and 2016-2018 than in 2008-2015 (**Table 1**). The years 2004-2007 and 2016-2018 were thus deemed high-population years and 2008-2015 were deemed low-population years for juvenile spotted seatrout in Rankin. Significant differences were present within these high-population years. Specifically, juvenile spotted seatrout density was significantly higher in 2005, 2006, and 2018 than in 2007 and 2016. Within the low-population years there were no significant differences (**Figure 2, Table 1**).

In Whipray, a similar pattern followed: 2018 had significantly higher juvenile spotted seatrout densities than 2008-2015 and 2017, lower than 2006, and similar to 2004-2005, 2007, and 2016. The years 2004-2007, 2016, and 2018 had significantly higher juvenile spotted seatrout densities than 2008 and 2010-2015. However, 2009 and 2018 had significantly higher population densities than 2010-2015, but lower densities than 2006. Thus, we deemed 2004-2007, 2016, and 2018 as high-population years and 2008 and 2010-2015 as low-population years, while 2009 and 2017 were in between these two groupings. Within the high-population years, 2006 had a significantly greater density than any other year (**Figure 2, Table 1**). Within the low-population years, there were no significant differences among years.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney U-test summary table of p-values comparing juvenile spotted seatrout densities between years within each sub-region. Arrows indicate if the year in the row was significantly higher or lower than the year in the column (e.g., in 2004 spotted seatrout density in West was significantly lower than it was in 2006, 2016, 2017, and 2018, but higher than 2014).

West															
Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
2004	--		↓								↑		↓	↓	↓
2005		--	↓								↑		↓	↓	↓
2006	↑	↑	--	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
2007			↓	--							↑		↓	↓	
2008			↓		--					↑	↑	↑			
2009			↓			--							↓	↓	↓
2010			↓				--				↑				
2011			↓					--			↑		↓	↓	
2012			↓						--		↑				
2013			↓		↓					--	↑		↓	↓	↓
2014	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	--	↓	↓	↓	↓
2015			↓		↓						↑	--	↓	↓	↓
2016	↑	↑	↓			↑		↑		↑	↑	↑	--		
2017	↑	↑	↓	↑		↑		↑		↑	↑	↑		--	
2018	↑	↑	↓			↑				↑	↑	↑			--

Rankin															
Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
2004	--	↓			↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑			
2005	↑	--		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	
2006			--	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		
2007		↓	↓	--	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑			↓
2008	↓	↓	↓	↓	--								↓	↓	↓
2009	↓	↓	↓	↓		--							↓	↓	↓
2010	↓	↓	↓	↓			--						↓	↓	↓
2011	↓	↓	↓	↓				--					↓	↓	↓
2012	↓	↓	↓	↓					--				↓	↓	↓
2013	↓	↓	↓	↓						--			↓	↓	↓
2014	↓	↓	↓	↓							--		↓	↓	↓
2015	↓	↓	↓	↓								--	↓	↓	↓
2016		↓	↓		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	--		↓
2017		↑			↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		--	
2018			↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		--

Whipray															
Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
2004	--		↓	↓			↑	↑							
2005		--	↓		↑		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		↑	
2006	↑	↑	--	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
2007	↑		↓	--	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	
2008		↓	↓	↓	--										↓
2009			↓	↓		--	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑			↓
2010	↓	↓	↓	↓			--						↓	↓	↓
2011	↓	↓	↓	↓				--					↓	↓	↓
2012	↓	↓	↓	↓					--				↓	↓	↓
2013	↓	↓	↓	↓						--			↓	↓	↓
2014	↓	↓	↓	↓							--		↓	↓	↓
2015	↓	↓	↓	↓		↓						--	↓	↓	↓
2016			↓	↓			↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	--		↓
2017		↓	↓	↓			↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑		--	↓
2018			↓		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	--

Crocodile Dragover															
Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
2004	--				↑		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑			
2005		--			↑		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	
2006			--					↑	↑	↑	↑	↑			
2007				--	↑			↑	↑	↑	↑	↑			
2008	↓	↓		↓	--										↓
2009						--		↑		↑	↑	↑			
2010	↓	↓		↓			--								↓
2011	↓	↓	↓	↓		↓		--							↓
2012	↓	↓	↓	↓					--						↓
2013	↓	↓	↓	↓		↓				--					↓
2014	↓	↓	↓	↓		↓					--				↓
2015	↓	↓	↓	↓		↓						--			↓
2016		↓											--		↓
2017		↑												--	
2018					↑		↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	--

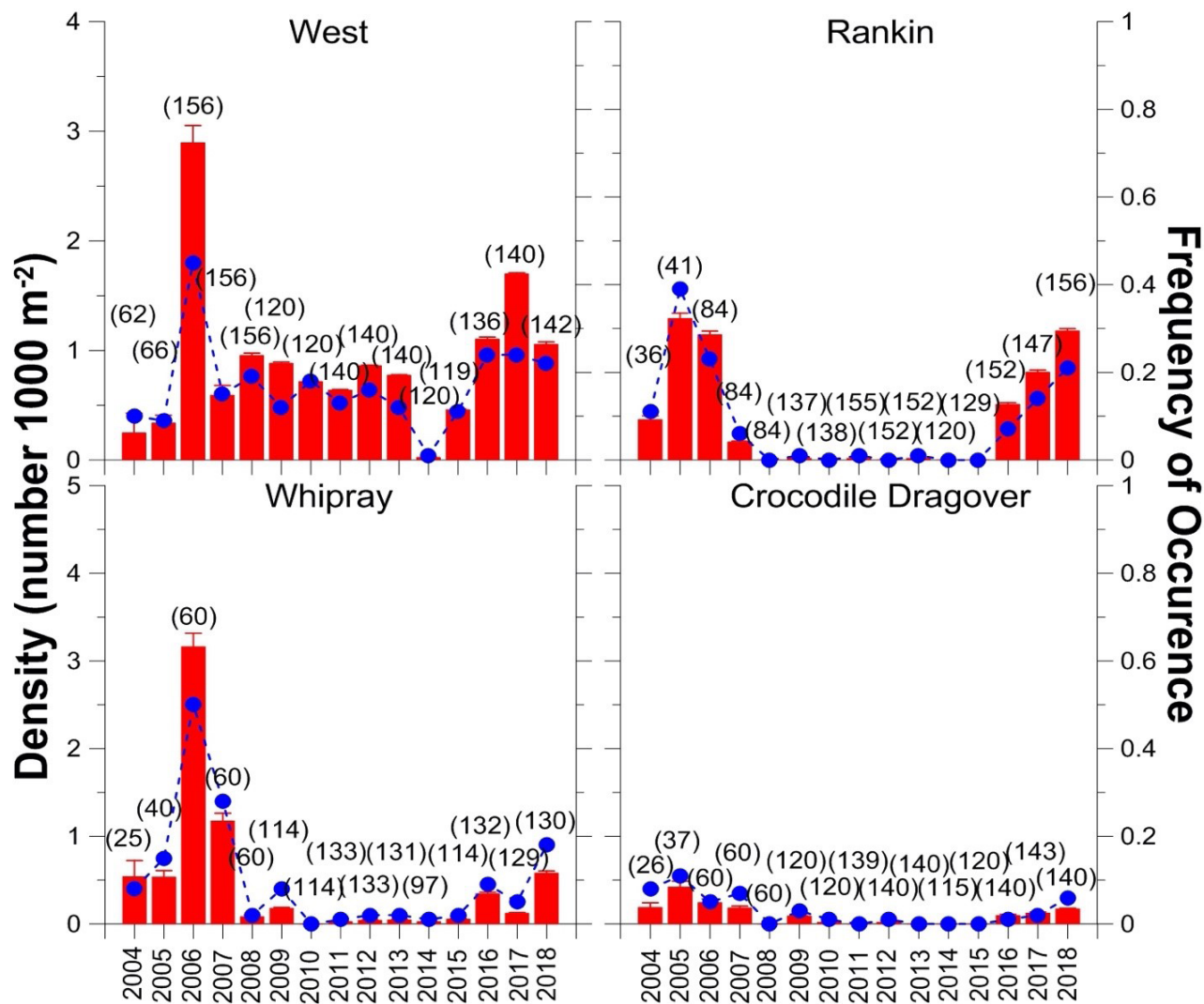


Figure 2. Density (number 1000 m⁻² + standard error) as a bar chart with each error bar representing the standard error and frequency of occurrence as linked points for juvenile spotted seatrout by area and by year in Florida Bay. Values in parentheses indicate the number of stations sampled.

Crocodile Dragover followed a similar pattern to that of Whipray and Rankin for interannual changes in juvenile spotted seatrout density. The year 2018 was significantly higher than 2008 and 2010-2016, and 2004-2007 had significantly greater juvenile spotted seatrout densities than most other years, including 2008 and 2010-2016 (Table 1). The year 2009 was not significantly different from 2004, 2005, and 2007. Although density increased in 2016 and 2017, it was not significantly different from the low-population years and was still significantly lower than 2005 and 2007. Thus, 2004-2007 and 2018 were deemed high-population years, while 2008 and 2010-2015 were deemed low-population years.

The highest density and frequency of occurrence was in 2006 in Whipray Basin and in the West sub-region. In Whipray Basin during September 2006, the mean salinity was 30.7, and there were over six seatrout per 1000 m⁻². A notable increase in spotted seatrout densities in West and Rankin occurred in the fall of 2005 after a substantial decrease in salinity following the passage of hurricanes (Figure 3). The lowest density and frequency of occurrence of seatrout was in 2014 when only two were caught for the entire year in all sub-regions (452 stations sampled). The following year, 2015, had the second lowest number of seatrout caught for the sampling period at 3% of the stations (21 out of 482 stations). The year

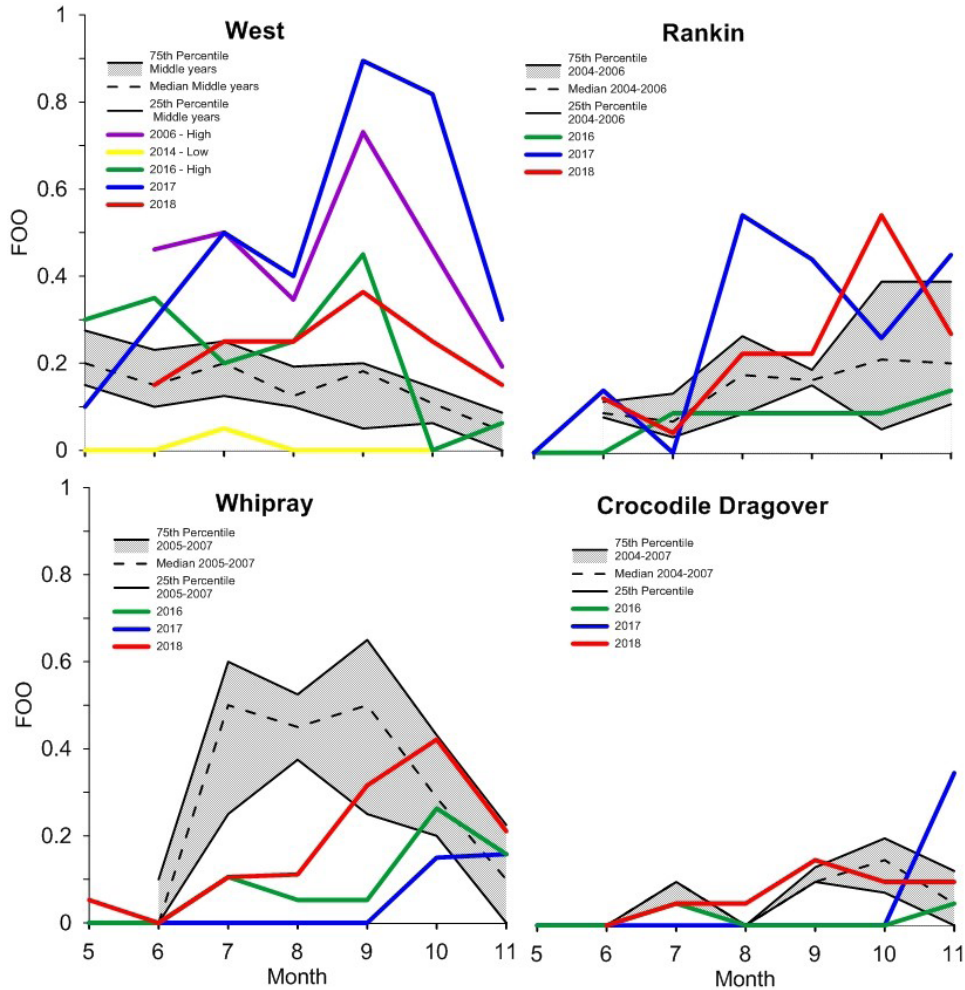


Figure 3. Ribbon plots showing the median monthly frequency of occurrence of juvenile spotted seatrout within each sub-region for high-population years (dashed black line). The shading encapsulates the 75th and 25th quartiles of monthly frequency of occurrence for seatrout in high years (grey shading). The purple (2006), yellow (2014), green (2016), blue (2017), and red (2018) lines shows the monthly frequency of occurrence for the designated year.

2016 had a sharp increase in seatrout; they were caught at 10% of the stations (90 seatrout at 560 stations). Similarly, 2018 had the third highest frequency of occurrence, with spotted seatrout caught at 16.9% of the stations (179 juvenile seatrout caught at 96 out of 568 stations). The highest annual frequency of occurrence was in 2006 when seatrout were caught at 33% of the stations (260 at 360 stations) (Table 2).

The West sub-region had one year of an abnormally high juvenile *C. nebulosus* population in 2006 and one abnormally low year in 2014. The rest of the years in the West varied from 9% to 24% frequency of occurrence for juvenile *C. nebulosus*. The three most recent years

were all above 20%, being the second, third, and fourth highest for the period of record. In the West sub-region, monthly patterns of juvenile spotted seatrout frequency of occurrence were variable, with a mean trend showing a decline at the end of May through November during all “normal” years (Figure 3). “Normal” years were defined as all years excluding 2006 and 2014. During the high population year of 2006, the peak frequency of occurrence occurred much later in September. In 2016, frequency of occurrence rose above the 75th quartile during four months, and September 2016 had the highest monthly frequency of occurrence (45%) since 2006 (in which four months that year were higher). In 2017, the frequency of occurrence was above the 75th quartile

Table 2. Spotted seatrout frequency of occurrence for each year and zone from 2004-2018.

Year	West FOO	Rankin FOO	Whipray FOO	Crocodile FOO	Overall FOO
2004	0.10	0.11	0.08	0.08	0.09
2005	0.09	0.39	0.15	0.11	0.17
2006	0.45	0.23	0.50	0.05	0.34
2007	0.15	0.06	0.28	0.07	0.14
2008	0.19	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.09
2009	0.12	0.01	0.08	0.03	0.06
2010	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.05
2011	0.13	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.04
2012	0.16	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.05
2013	0.12	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.04
2014	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
2015	0.11	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.03
2016	0.24	0.07	0.09	0.01	0.10
2017	0.24	0.14	0.05	0.02	0.11
2018	0.22	0.21	0.18	0.06	0.17

of normal years for all months except May. In 2018, frequency of occurrence rose above the 75th quartile in August and stayed above the 75th percentile of normal years for the rest of the year. In 2018, frequency of occurrence in the West sub-region was 22% (31 stations with juvenile spotted seatrout present out of 142 stations).

In the Rankin sub-region, the high-population years of 2004-2007 and 2016-2018 had frequencies of occurrence of 8% or higher. The low-population years of 2008-2015 all had a frequency of occurrence of 1% or less. In high-population years (2004-2007 and 2016-2018), seatrout frequency of occurrence generally increased during the sampling season, peaking in August through November and coinciding with a decrease in salinities in this sub-region during the sampling season (Figures 3 and 5). During low-population years, only a single seatrout was caught in Rankin in 2009, 2011, and 2013, and none were caught in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2015. Occurrence levels during four months of 2016 were within the same quartiles as the high-population years. In 2018, the frequency of occurrence in the Rankin sub-region was 21% (33 stations with juvenile spotted seatrout present out of 156 stations). The monthly pattern of juvenile spotted seatrout frequency of occurrence in 2018 was

similar to all other high-population years with a generally increasing trend throughout the sample period.

In the Whipray Basin sub-region, the high-population years of 2004-2007, 2016, and 2018 had a frequency of occurrence that was at least 8%. The low-population years of 2008 and 2010-2015 had frequency of occurrences of 2% or less. The years 2009 and 2017 were intermediate population years and had frequencies of occurrence of 8% and 5%, respectively. During the initial high-population years of 2004-2007, the peak in juvenile *C. nebulosus* was observed in the late summer from July through September (Figure 3). However, the 2018 high-population year, as well as 2016 and 2017, all had peaks later in the season from September through November (Figure 3). In low-population years, no more than two juvenile seatrout were collected each year. In 2006, seatrout were found at 50% of sampled stations (30 stations with juvenile spotted seatrout present out of 60 stations), and in 2007 seatrout were found at 28% of sampled stations (17 stations with juvenile spotted seatrout present out of 60 stations). In 2018, Whipray sub-region had a frequency of occurrence of 18% (23 stations with juvenile spotted seatrout present out of 130 stations).

Juvenile spotted seatrout are rarely collected in Crocodile Dragover, an area that represents their easternmost distribution in Florida Bay. Thus, high-population years in Crocodile Dragover in 2004-2007 and 2018 only had a frequency of occurrence of 5% to 11%. Low-population years (2008 and 2010-2015) had a frequency of occurrence of 1% or less. Only five seatrout were collected in Crocodile Dragover in 2016, at just 1% of the stations. With regard to low-population years, only one seatrout was caught in 2010, one in 2012, and none were caught in 2011 and 2013-2015. In 2018 in Crocodile Dragover, juvenile *C. nebulosus* were caught at 6% of the stations (nine stations with juvenile spotted seatrout present out of 140 stations). In high-population years, including 2018, juvenile *C. nebulosus* frequencies peaked late in the sampling season from September through November (Figure 3).

Overall, juvenile spotted seatrout populations were low throughout the central bay in 2008 and 2010-2015. The West sub-region was consistently higher than the central

bay except in 2014, with the lowest observed population by far in the West (Figure 2, Table 1). Juvenile spotted seatrout frequency of occurrence varied interannually from 0% in 2014 up to 34% in 2006. The results show there was a statistically significant shift to lower juvenile spotted seatrout populations beginning in 2008 and running through 2015, after which it increased to the third highest overall frequency of occurrence in 2018 (Table 2).

The cause of the shift after 2007 is uncertain, but 2008 had the second highest salinities observed during the MAP sampling period and 2015 had the highest salinities. These hypersaline periods may have resulted in a shift in seatrout populations. Salinity was lower in 2016 through 2018, and each of the four sub-regions displayed salinity ranges similar to the mid-2000 high-population years, which might explain the similarity in densities between those two years (Figure 4).

Overall, the highest mean frequency of occurrence of juvenile spotted seatrout throughout Florida Bay since

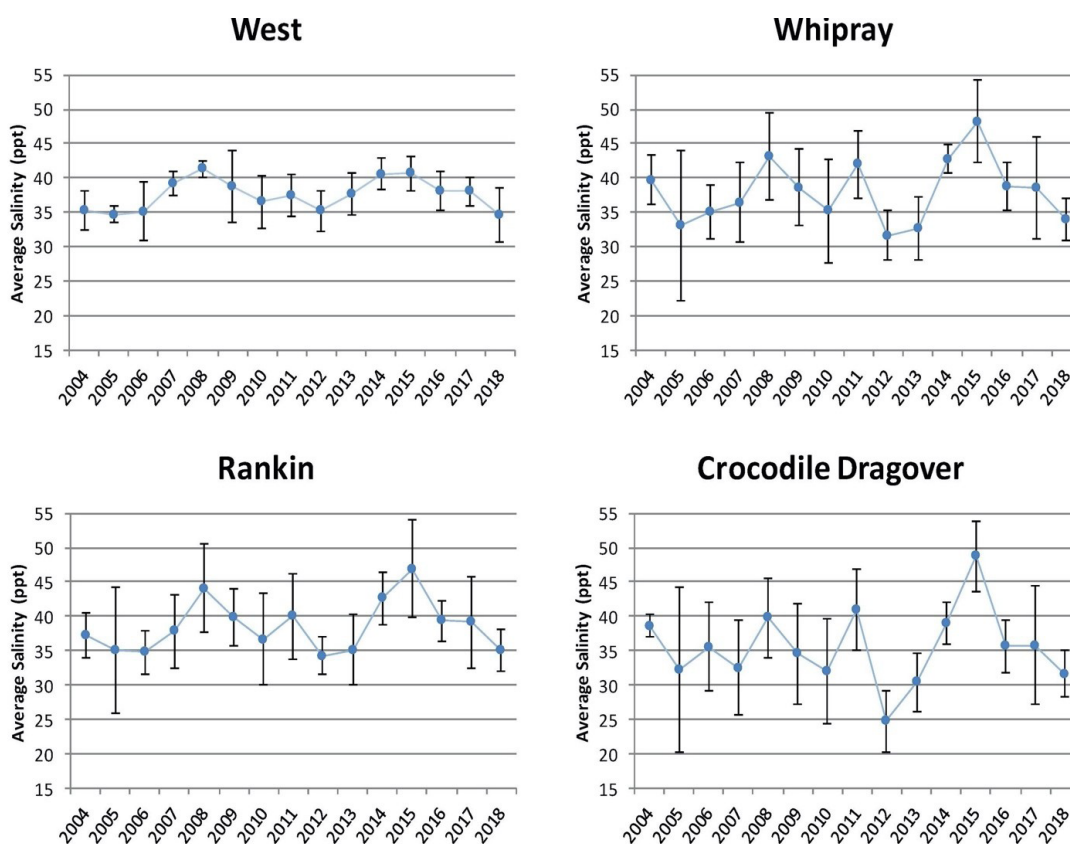


Figure 4. Average salinities and standard deviations at time of tow, by area, and by year.

2007 was found in 2018, meaning that 2018 was a high-population year in all of the sub-regions. Thus, conditions have improved significantly for juvenile spotted seatrout in the central and western part of Florida Bay since 2016.

3.2 Salinity Patterns during Sampling

Mean salinities in 2018 in each sub-region were 34.6 ± 3.2 in West, 35.1 ± 3.1 in Rankin, 34.0 ± 3.1 in Whipray, and 31.6 ± 3.4 in Crocodile Dragover. Salinities in 2018 were significantly lower than the mean overall salinities for each region, and the West sub-region had the lowest salinity recorded for the entire period of record (Table 3). All regions showed similar interannual trends in salinity, but the magnitude of variability differed (Figure 4).

Mean monthly salinities in the West sub-region displayed a slight downward trend throughout the sampling season (May–November), but this trend was not as pronounced as in other sub-regions (Figure 5). The lowest observed annual mean salinities in the West sub-region were during the 2005, 2006, 2012, 2013, and 2018 sampling periods (Figure 4). Low salinities were observed in the fall of 2005 and 2017, and the late spring of 2018, following the passage of hurricanes. The two lowest mean monthly salinities were recorded immediately after hurricanes, but the West salinity variability was significantly less than the other regions, both interannually and intrannually (Figures 4 and 5), confirming the previously documented

influence of Gulf of Mexico waters on western Florida Bay salinity patterns (Kelble *et al.*, 2007).

The West sub-region’s highest annual mean salinity occurred in 2008 (41.3), followed by 2015 and 2014, with mean salinities greater than 40 in all 3 years. Salinities in June 2015 were the highest monthly mean observed (44.4) in the West sub-region, and both 2014 and 2015 had hypersaline conditions above the 75th quartile in four of the six months sampled. In 2017, salinity (38.8) was slightly above average. In 2018, salinity (34.7) was significantly lower than average (37.8, $p = 0.011$). In 2018, the mean monthly salinity started out significantly below the lower quartile of the historic values, returned within the historic quartile range by September, and was slightly elevated above the upper quartile in November (Figure 5). The low salinities early in the 2018 sampling period were likely due to lingering low salinities from the large rainfall associated with Hurricane Irma, which passed over the study site in September 2017.

Rankin experienced a similar interannual variability as the West, with low annual salinities in 2005, 2006, 2012, 2013, and 2018, and high annual salinities in 2015 (46.8) and 2008 (44.1) (Figure 4). Monthly salinities in this sub-region tended to decline throughout the sampling season (Figure 5). As a result, the five lowest monthly mean salinities in this sub-region occurred in the months of October or November. July of 2015 had the highest mean salinity (55.6) in this sub-region, followed

Table 3. Comparison of 2018 salinities by zone to all previous years, including data on the maximum and minimum salinity values recorded for each time period.

Zone	Year	Mean Salinity	Standard Deviation	Maximum	Minimum	p-value
West	2004-2017	37.79	2.21	53.00	26.90	0.011
	2018	34.59	3.17	40.72	26.72	
Whipray	2004-2017	38.29	4.67	65.40	19.00	0.026
	2018	33.98	3.12	39.14	24.10	
Rankin	2004-2017	38.80	3.75	64.20	18.75	0.024
	2018	35.09	3.11	41.33	24.69	
Crocodile Dragover	2004-2017	35.76	5.67	56.20	15.00	0.043
	2018	31.63	3.36	38.01	23.60	

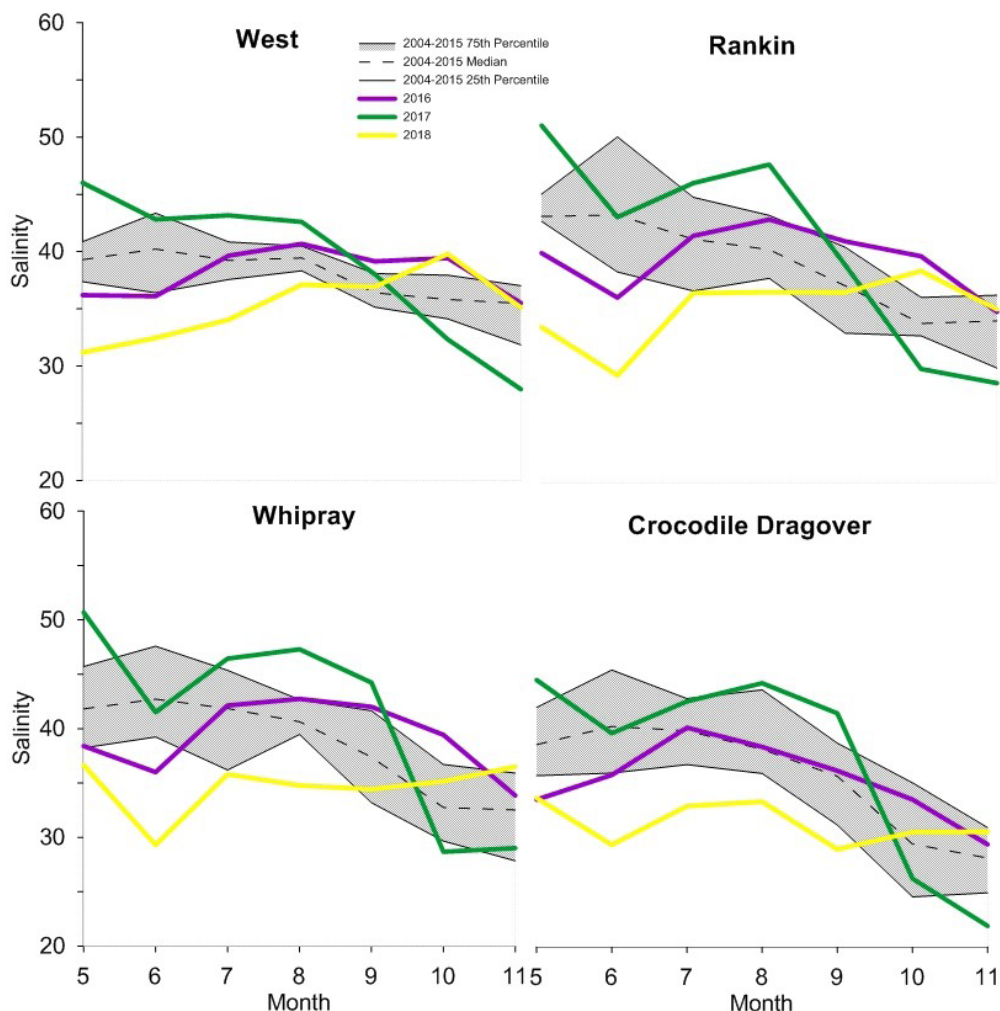


Figure 5. Ribbon plots showing the median monthly salinity (ppt) within each sub-region for 2004–2015. The shading encapsulates the 25th to 75th quartiles of the monthly salinities. Purple, blue, and yellow lines show the median monthly salinity for 2016, 2017, and 2018, respectively.

by June of 2008 (53.9). Furthermore, every month in 2015 in Rankin, Whipray, and Crocodile Dragover sub-regions had salinities above the 75th quartile. Salinity in Rankin in 2016 returned to its historical range at the beginning of the season but was elevated in September and October, and annual mean salinity was still above average and comparable to 2009 and 2011. In 2017, salinities in Rankin started out slightly elevated from baseline conditions before plummeting to significantly below baseline conditions in October and November after the passage of Hurricane Irma. Salinity in Rankin in 2018 was remarkably stable. Thus, it started out with fresher salinities than were typical in Rankin, but by July salinities were within the historical quartiles.

Whipray had the same interannual patterns in mean salinity as Rankin and West, but with higher variability than either. Whipray had the second highest annual salinity observed (48.24 in 2015), the highest monthly mean salinity on record (57.9 in July 2015), and the highest observed salinity for the entire period of record (65.4), measured during the July 2015 hypersaline event. The lowest annual mean salinities in this sub-region occurred in 2012 and 2013. Monthly salinities in Whipray peaked in the summer from June through August and then decreased for the rest of the sampling period. In 2018, monthly salinities were stable in Whipray, starting out on the low end of the historic quartiles in May and June and finishing on the higher end of historic monthly quartiles in November.

Crocodile Dragover had the most variable salinities of any sub-region sampled. This sub-region had the highest overall annual mean salinity (48.75 in 2015) and also the lowest (24.7 in 2012), reflecting the effects of high evaporation coupled with shallow depths, direct freshwater runoff, and poor mixing in the northern interior bay (Lee *et al.*, 2008). In 2015 more mean monthly salinities in Crocodile Dragover were above the 75th quartile than any other sub-region, but in 2016 salinities returned to historic levels, except in October, when salinities were elevated above the 75th quartile in every sub-region. In 2018, salinities were stable on the low end of the historic range. In fact, the mean monthly salinity was below the historic lower quartile from May through September. In October and November, the mean monthly salinity had returned to within the historic quartile range (Figure 5).

3.3 Spotted Seatrout Distribution and Abundance Relative to Salinity (Potential Restoration Effects)

To examine the impact of salinity on the juvenile spotted seatrout population, data within each sub-region were binned into salinity categories, each with a range of 5 ppt. Bins with five or fewer observations were omitted due to the inability of such a small sample size to adequately capture the true population dynamics. The data on the seatrout population within each bin were expressed as three abundance metrics: (1) frequency of occurrence (i.e., the percent of tows with at least one juvenile spotted seatrout); (2) the concentration of seatrout only when present (number per 1000 m⁻²); and (3) density (number per 1000 m⁻²) for all observations.

Across all of Florida Bay, salinity did not have an affect on any of the metrics of juvenile spotted seatrout population (Figure 6). However, within all of the sub-regions, two or more aspects of the juvenile spotted seatrout population abundance metrics inversely correlated with salinity (Figure 7). Both frequency of occurrence and overall juvenile density decreased with increasing salinity in all three other sub-regions, and concentration was also inversely correlated with salinity in Whipray and Crocodile Dragover (Figure 7). This indicates that salinity likely did not play a role in shaping the spatial distribution of juvenile spotted seatrout among sub-regions or across

the entirety of Florida Bay; however, it did play a major role in driving juvenile spotted seatrout distributions within all of the sub-regions.

3.4 Spotted Seatrout Distribution and Abundance Relative to Seagrass

From 2004 through 2008, seagrass density and biomass were measured. The biomass values were converted to Braun-Blanquet (BB) abundance for years prior to 2009 using a linear regression between biomass and BB abundance. These BB abundance indices were used directly to quantify seagrass and macroalgae coverage at each station beginning from 2009 to 2012. BB abundance was then converted to a percent cover to make the numbers linear and comparable to the percent cover measures, which began in 2013. A linear regression was used again for the years prior to 2009, and a standard conversion was used for the years after 2009. This conversion used the midpoint of percent cover for each BB index score. These indices were measured not only for overall seagrass coverage and algae coverage, but also for each seagrass species (*Thalassia* spp., *Syringodium* spp., and *Halodule* spp.) The average length of each seagrass species was also measured. Seatrout abundance metrics were grouped according to 10% seagrass cover ranges, and the relationship between them is expressed in Figures 8 and 9.

Seagrass showed significant changes throughout the period of our monitoring. The change that received the most attention was the seagrass die-off that occurred throughout Rankin and in some areas of West and Whipray in September and October 2015 (Hall *et al.*, 2016). Within our dataset, this die-off only produced a significant change in Rankin, as observed by the large decrease in mean monthly seagrass percent cover in Rankin in September and October of 2015. Seagrass percent cover remained low throughout 2016 in Rankin, likely as seagrass was just beginning to recover from the die-off (Figure 10). However, by 2017 seagrass percent cover had returned to its historic range in Rankin. This suggests the recovery, in terms of percent seagrass cover, was less than 2 years in Rankin following a major die-off. Moreover, this 2015 die-off did not produce a significant signal in any of the other sub-regions (Figure 11).

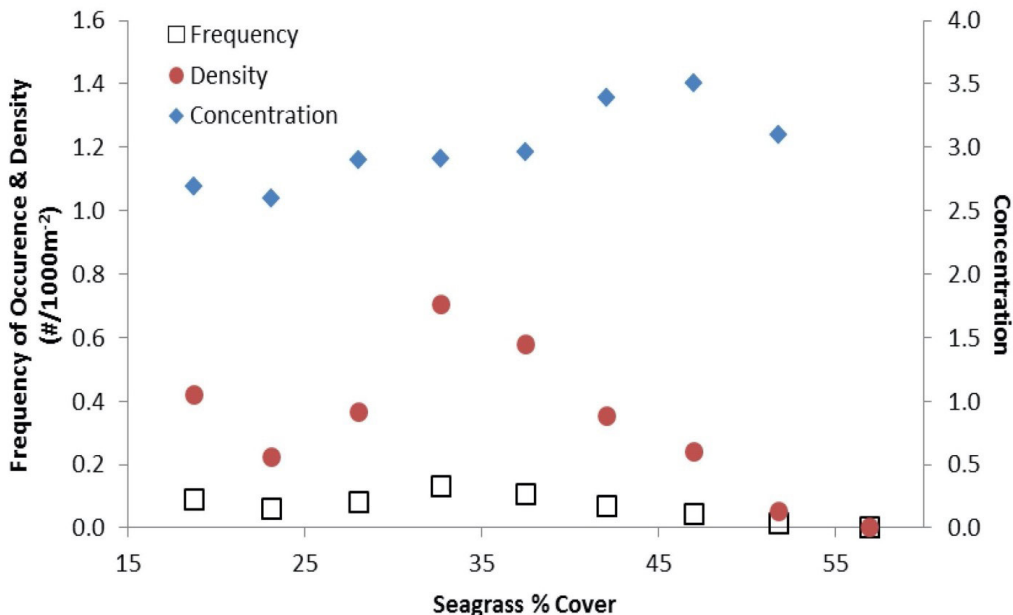


Figure 6. Scatter plot depicts the correlation of the juvenile spotted seatrout population with salinity for all sub-regions combined. The open black boxes are frequency of occurrence, blue diamonds are concentration, and red circles are density. Only significant linear regressions are depicted. Bins have ranges of 5 ppt cover.

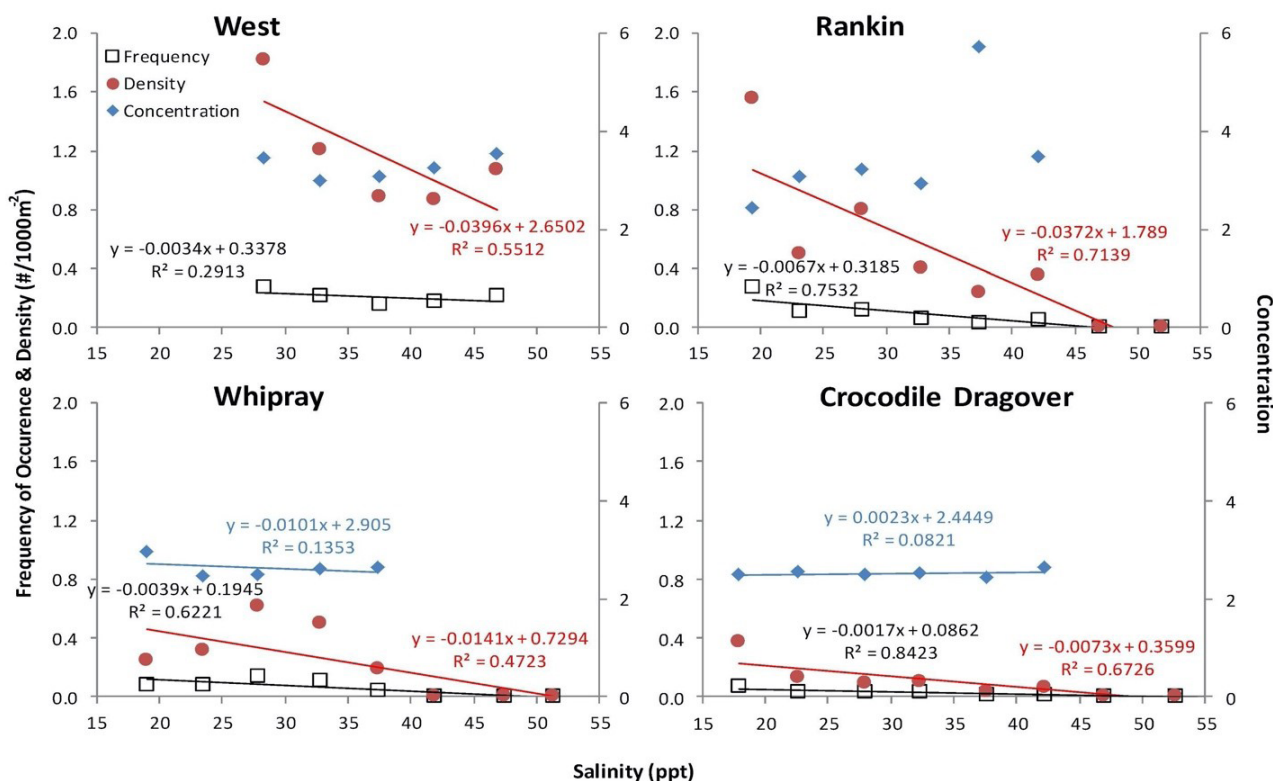


Figure 7. Scatter plots depict the relationship between the juvenile spotted seatrout population and salinity within each sub-region. Black boxes are frequency of occurrence, blue diamonds are concentration, and red circles are density. Only significant linear regressions are depicted.

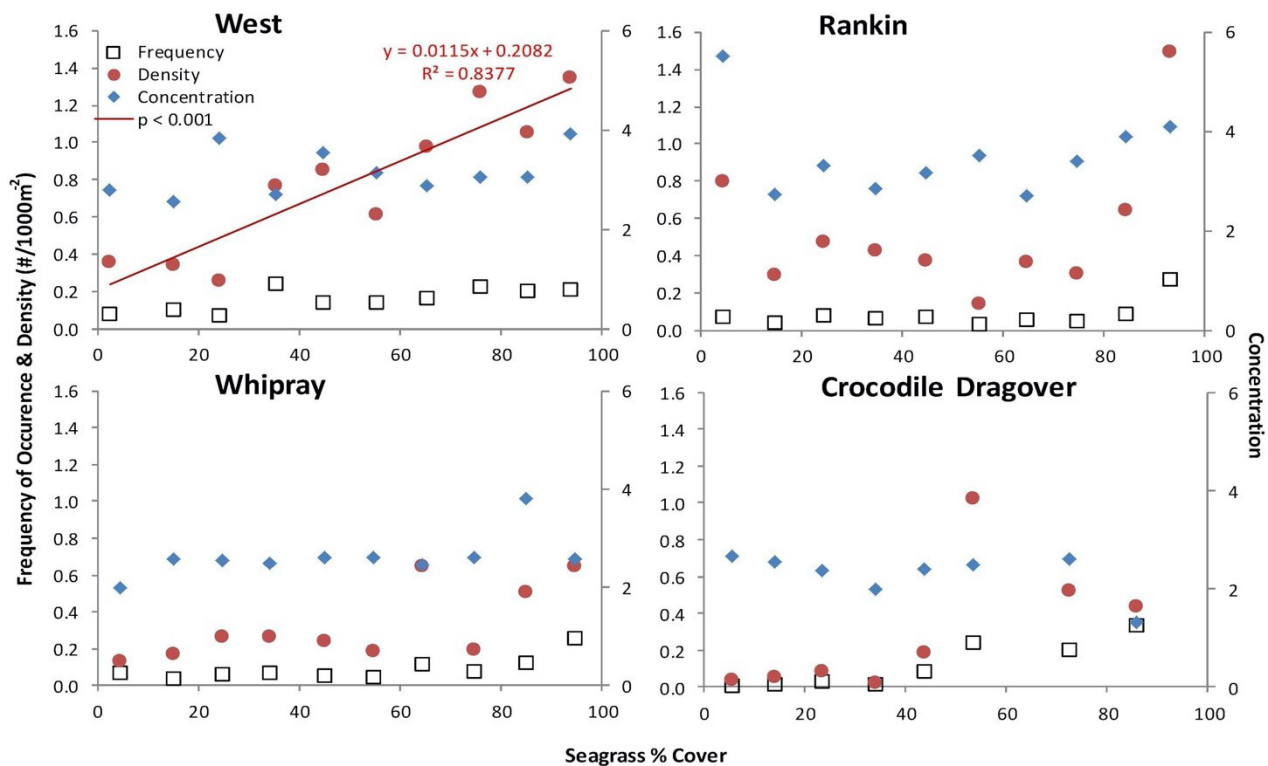


Figure 8. Scatter plots depict the correlation of the juvenile spotted seatrout population with seagrass percent cover for each sub-region. The open black boxes are frequency of occurrence, blue diamonds are concentration, and red circles are density. Only significant linear regressions are depicted.

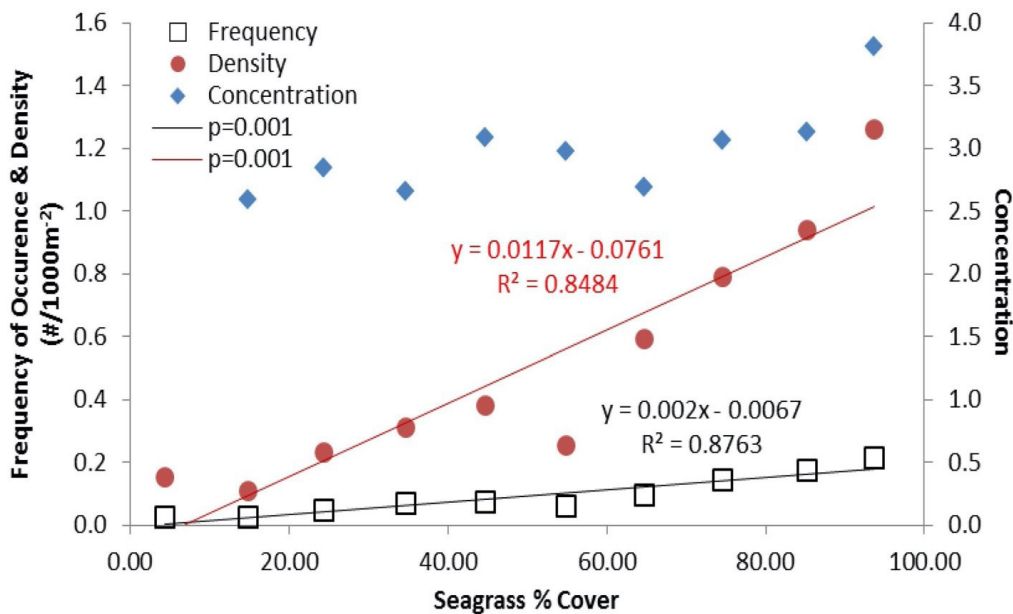


Figure 9. Scatter plot depicts the correlation of the juvenile spotted seatrout population with seagrass percent cover for all sub-regions combined. The open black boxes are frequency of occurrence, blue diamonds are concentration, and red circles are density. Only significant linear regressions are depicted. Bins have ranges of 10% cover.

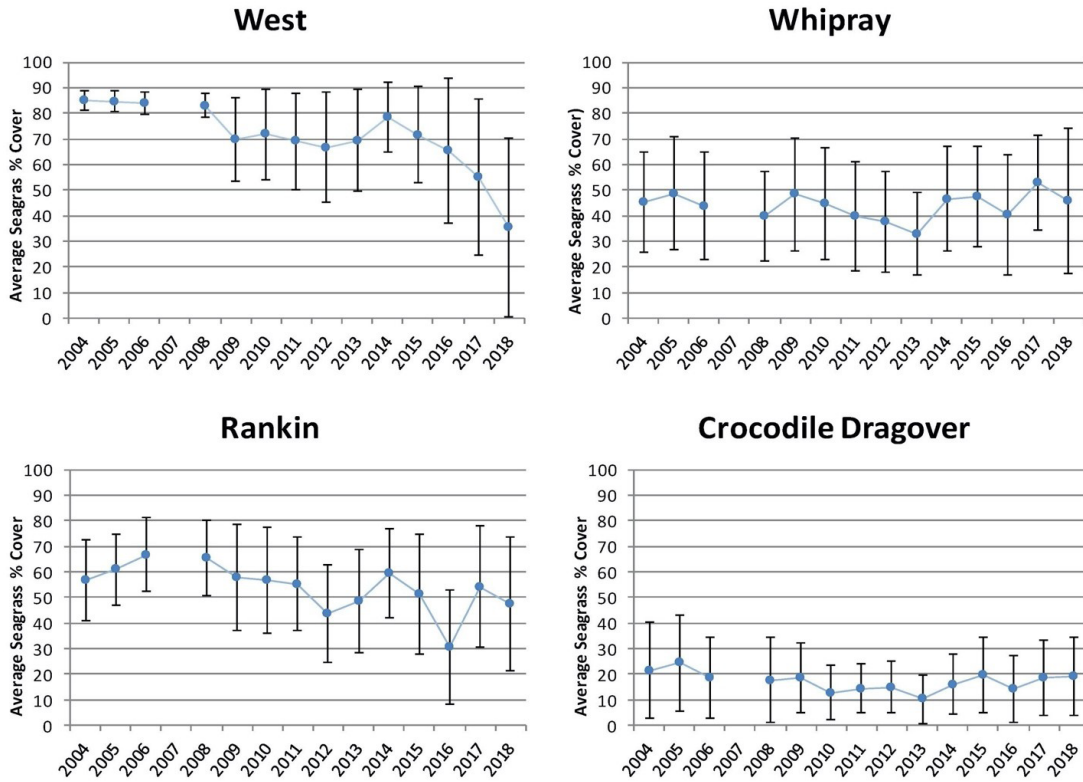


Figure 10. Average seagrass percent cover and standard deviations at time of tow, by sub-region, and by year.

Another major signal in the seagrass percent cover data is the steady decrease that has been observed in the West sub-region since 2015. This decrease has been a steady decline in the annual mean since 2015, with a corresponding increase in the standard deviation (Figure 10).

Contours depicting the relationship of salinity, mean seagrass percent cover, and annual juvenile seatrout frequency of occurrence per basin were created (Figure 12). A higher relationship was observed between 60-90% (mid to high) seagrass cover and frequency of occurrence when salinity was in the 25-40 ppt range in all basins but Crocodile Dragover.

The relationship between seagrass percent cover and juvenile spotted seatrout showed a significant positive linear relationship between seagrass percent cover and spotted seatrout density ($p < 0.001$) and frequency of occurrence ($p < 0.001$) throughout all of Florida Bay (Figure 9). However, when separated by sub-region there were no significant linear regressions with density

and frequency of occurrence to seagrass percent cover, except for density in the West sub-region (Figure 8). This suggests that, as percent cover increases, juvenile spotted seatrout are caught more frequently in the West. However, in the other sub-regions, salinity had a stronger effect than seagrass percent cover on seatrout frequency of occurrence. Moreover, it suggests that seagrass may play a larger role in shaping bay-wide (i.e., among sub-regions) distributional differences in *C. nebulosus*; whereas, within sub-region changes in juvenile *C. nebulosus*, population dynamics are more a result of salinity.

3.5 Spotted Seatrout Distribution and Abundance Relative to Temperature

To examine the impact of temperature on the juvenile spotted seatrout population, data were binned into temperature categories, each with a range of 2° Celsius. Bins with five or fewer observations were omitted, due to the inability of such a small sample size to adequately

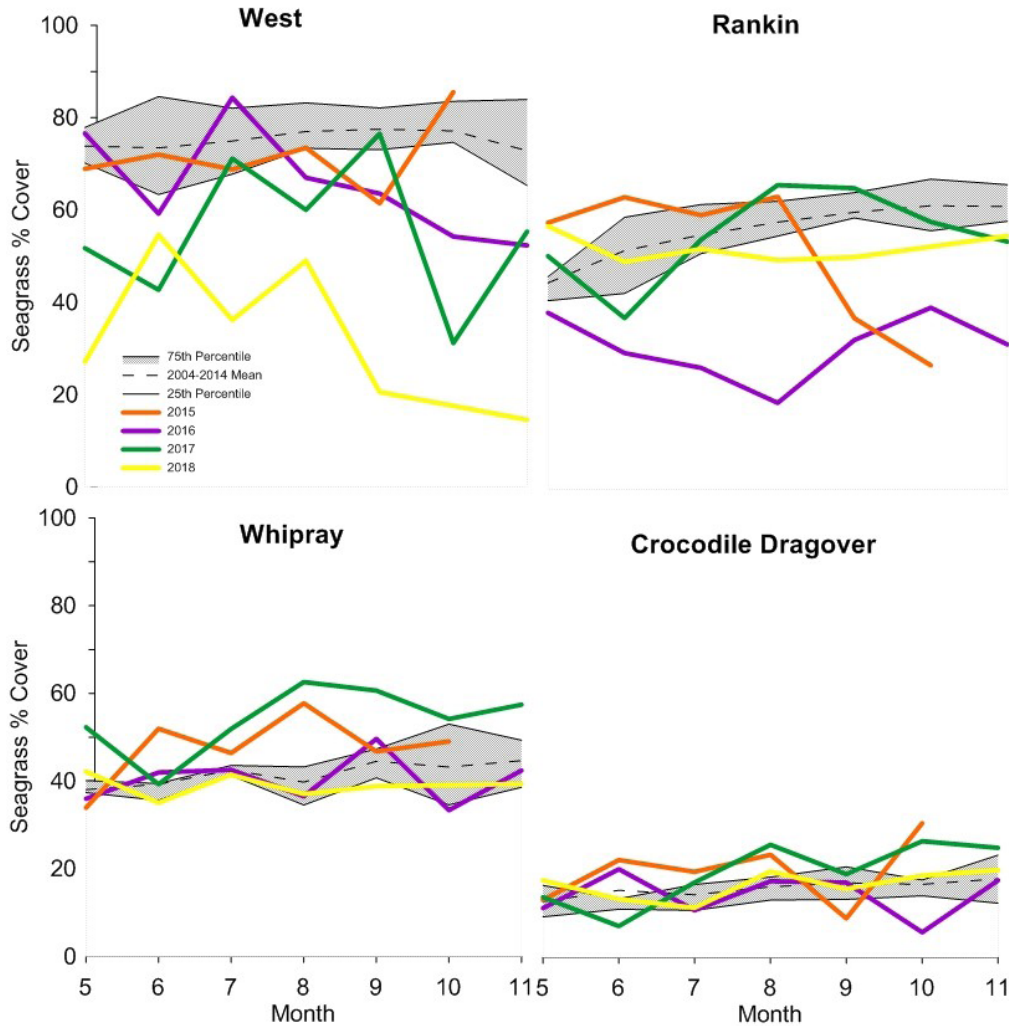


Figure 11. Ribbon plots show the mean monthly seagrass percent cover within each sub-region for 2004-2014. The shading constrains the 25th to 75th quartiles of monthly seagrass percent cover. The orange, purple, green, and yellow lines show the monthly seagrass percent cover for 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018, respectively.

capture the true population dynamics. The data on the seatrout population were expressed as three abundance metrics: (1) frequency of occurrence (i.e., the percent of tows with at least one juvenile spotted seatrout); (2) the concentration of seatrout only when present (number per 1000 m⁻²); and (3) density (number per 1000 m⁻²) for all observations.

In 2018, the annual mean temperature for all sub-regions was lower than the previous years (Figure 13). Juvenile density in the West sub-region was significantly linearly correlated with temperature ($p < 0.001$). Otherwise, there were no significant linear relationships of any abundance

metric with temperature (Figure 14). Although the relationship is parabolic in nature, no obvious parabolic relationships were noted. Because the relationship between temperature and seatrout populations in this region was non-linear, we used a logistic regression to identify the relationship between salinity, temperature, seagrass percent cover, and seatrout frequency of occurrence. There were no relationships with temperature when all of the data across all regions were pooled (Figure 15). This suggested that temperature currently had little effect on juvenile spotted seatrout population distributions in Florida Bay.

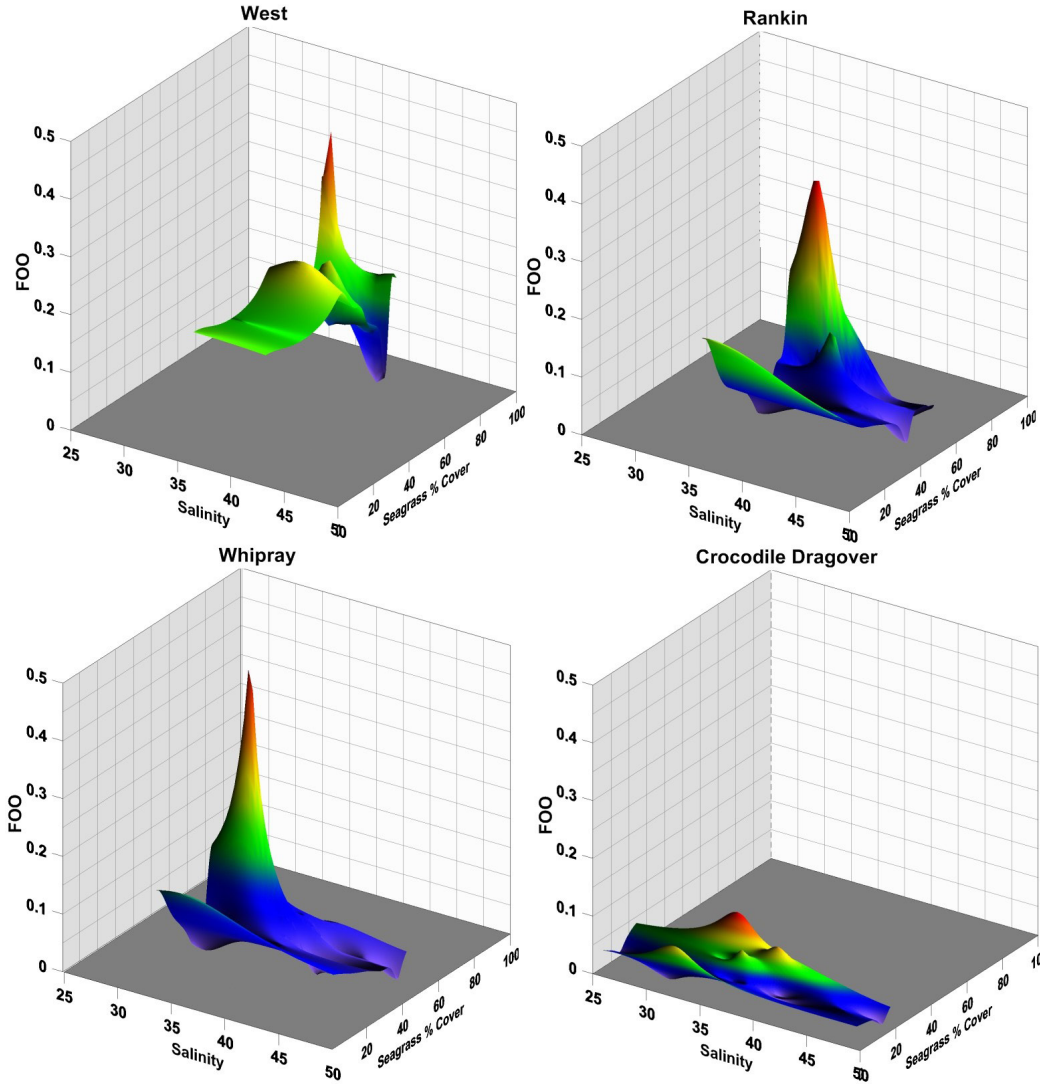


Figure 12. Contours depict annual juvenile spotted seatrout frequency of occurrence with annual mean salinity and annual mean seagrass percent cover within each sub-region.

3.6 Spotted Seatrout Diet based on Stomach Contents

We examined the stomach contents of 739 spotted seatrout < 100 mm length caught from 2010–2018. The results are grouped by the total biomass of each phylogenetic group found in the stomach (Figure 16). The three most abundant prey items found in the stomach were shrimp from the Family *Penaeidae*, rainwater killifish (*Lucania parva*), and shrimp from the infraorder *Caridea*. Among 16 other groupings of prey items, Anchovies (*Anchoa* and *Engraulidae*), Mojarra (*Gerreidae*), mullet (*Mugliidae*),

and crustaceans of the order *Amphipoda* were the next most abundant in biomass. Although penaeids were abundant, the only significant correlation was between seatrout frequency of occurrence and *Caridean* spp. biomass in stomach contents ($p = 0.007$). Seatrout frequency of occurrence was significantly correlated with the number of *Lucania parva* at the subset of collection sites ($p < 0.005$), but not with *Lucania parva* biomass in stomach contents. In addition to being a food source, *Lucania parva* may also share a preference for similar habitat.

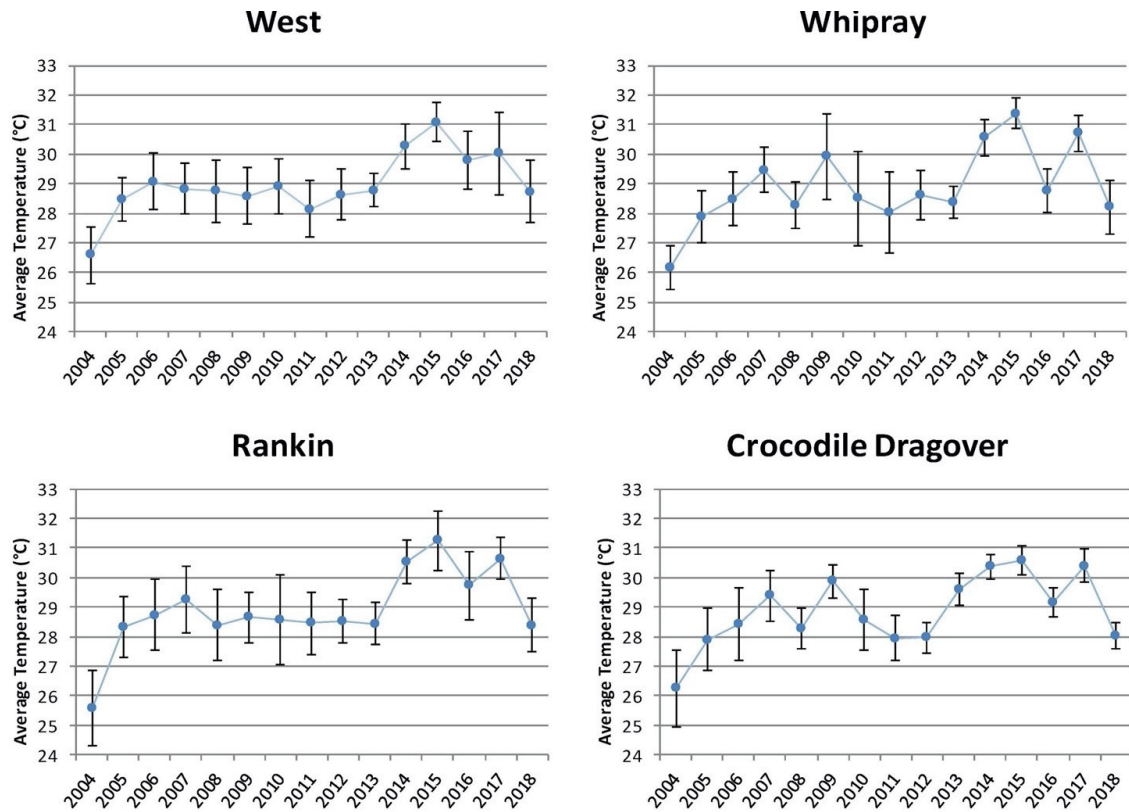


Figure 13. Average temperature and standard deviations at time of tow, by area, and by year.

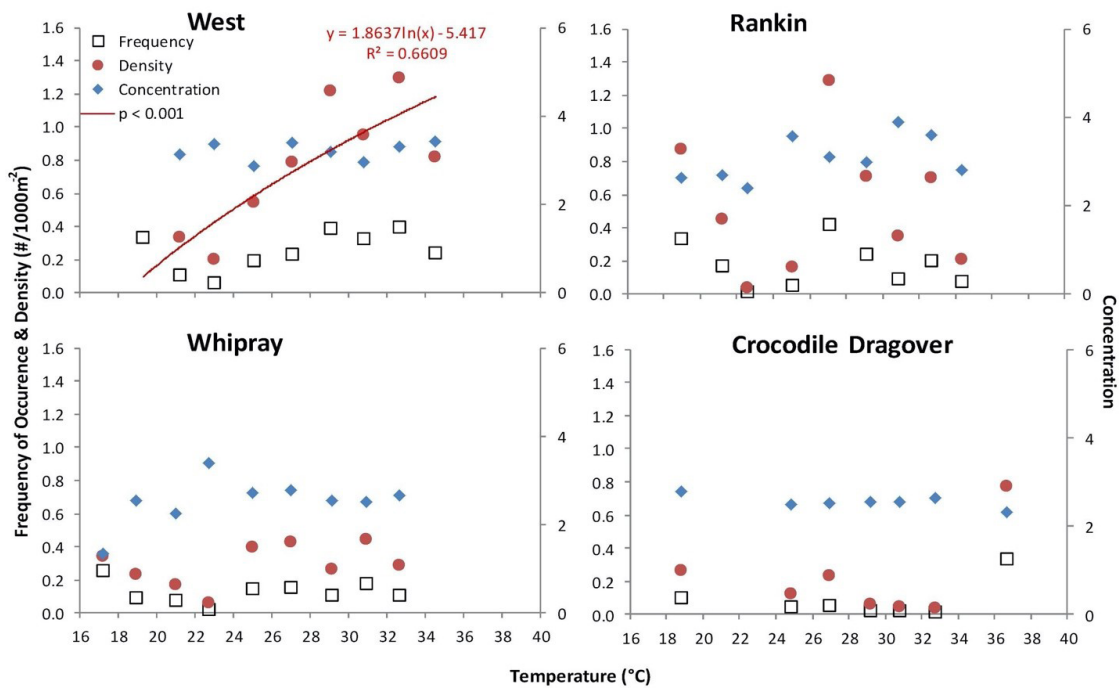


Figure 14. Scatter plots depict the correlation of the juvenile spotted seatrout population with temperature for each sub-region. The open black boxes are frequency of occurrence, blue diamonds are concentration, and red circles are density. Only significant regressions are depicted.

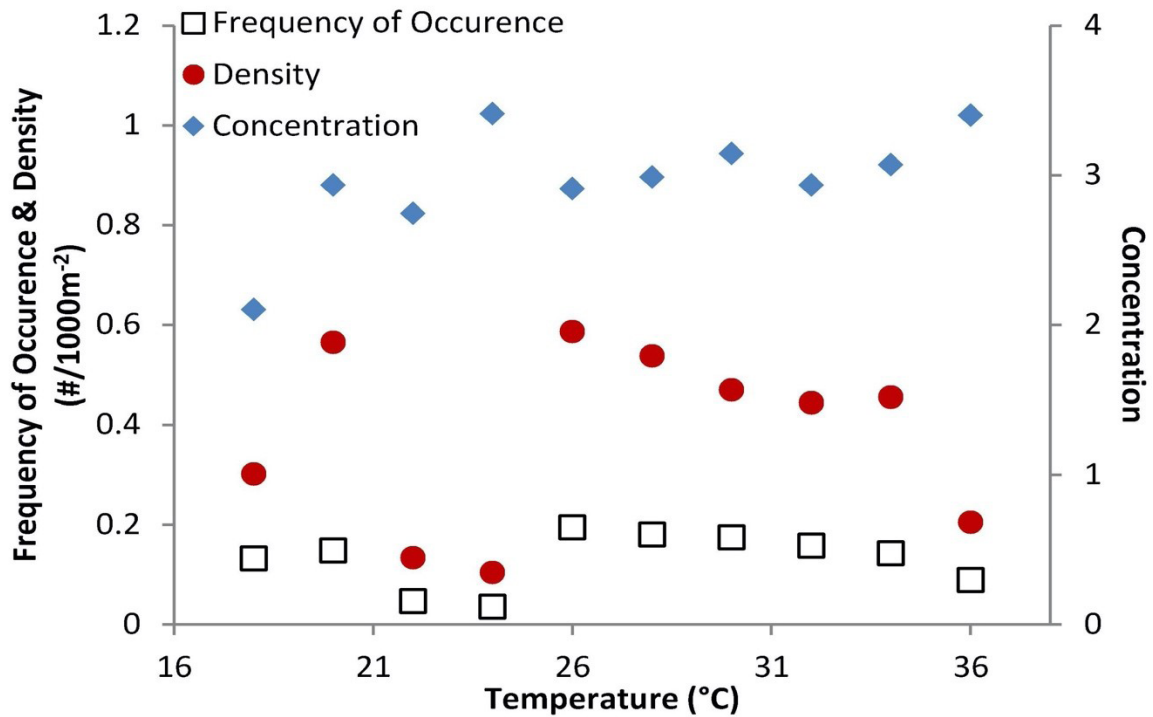


Figure 15. Scatter plot depicts the correlation of the juvenile spotted seatrout population with temperature for all sub-regions combined. The open black boxes are frequency of occurrence, blue diamonds are concentration, and red circles are density. Bins have ranges of 2°C.

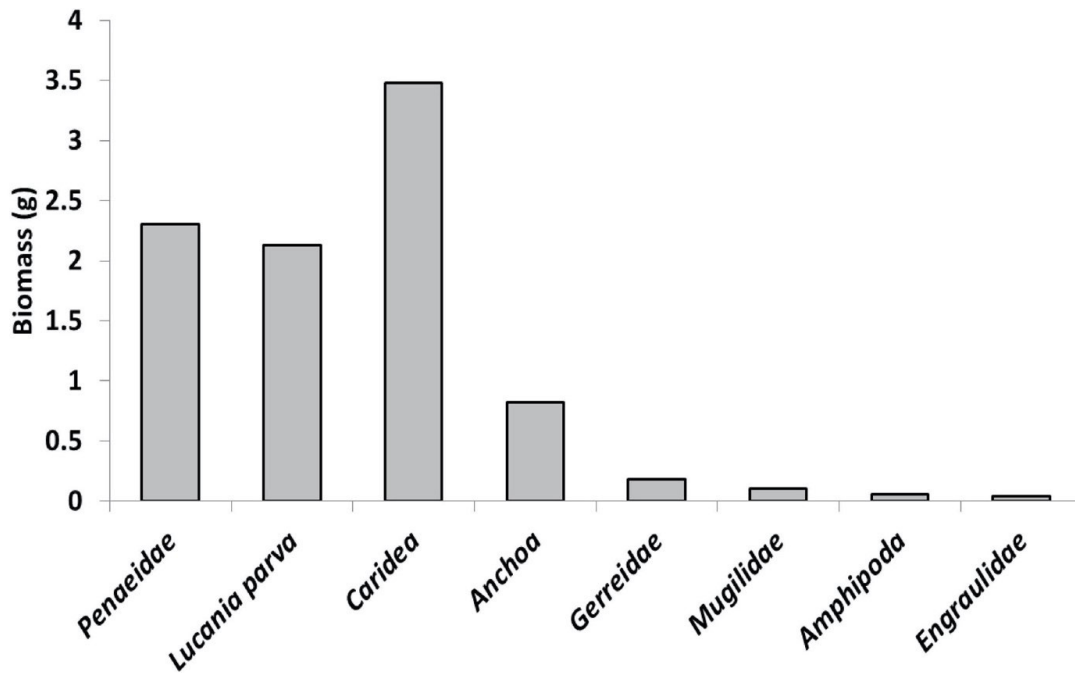


Figure 16. Total biomass (g) of stomach contents from 739 spotted seatrout <100 mm length as shown by phylogenetic grouping.

3.7 Juvenile *C. nebulosus* Performance Measure Development

A performance measure for juvenile spotted seatrout was accepted for use in July 2017. It has already been applied to evaluate the potential effect of Central Everglades Planning Project alternatives and the likely impact of future climate change scenarios (Kelble *et al.*, 2007; Kearney *et al.*, 2015).

3.8 Relationship of Other Sportfish to Salinity

Beginning in 2009, we expanded the project to collect information on other sportfish species within Florida Bay. Thus, we have ten years of information for many of these species. However, a smaller subset of these species has been enumerated since MAP sampling began in 2004 (Table 4). We investigated the relationship of the richness

(number of species per tow) of these species with salinity to the salinity preferences of several of the more common and fisheries-relevant species (Figure 17).

The richness of sportfish taxa (defined by Table 4) observed in the bay showed a significant dependence on salinity (Figure 17). The tows in which no sportfish were observed had significantly higher salinities (mean = 38.1, lower quartile = 33.5, upper quartile = 42.8, $p = 0.019$) than the overall salinity distribution (mean = 37.3, lower quartile = 33.3, upper quartile = 41.4). Stations where one (mean = 36.6, $p < 0.002$), three (mean = 36.4 $p = 0.046$), or more than eight (mean = 33.8, $p < 0.001$) sportfish taxa were observed had significantly lower salinities than stations where no sportfish were observed.

Salinity preferences for each sportfish taxa contribute to the overall diversity and can also contribute to the

Table 4. Salinity ranges and means with 95% confidence intervals and site sample size (n) for the 25 species that have been enumerated since the project's inception in 2004.

Code	Species Name	Common Name	Salinity Range	Mean + std	n
Sco	<i>Sciaenops ocellatus</i>	Redfish	30.5 - 36.7	34.1 ± 2.76	5
Hpa	<i>Haemulon parra</i>	Sailor's grunt	31.2 - 40.4	35.2 ± 3.38	7
Hyp	<i>Hypoplectrus unicolor</i>	Butter hamlet	26.5 - 40.3	35.5 ± 2.25	44
Bab	<i>Bairdiella batabana</i>	Blue croaker	28.8 - 39.4	34.5 ± 2.67	24
Pab	<i>Paralichthys albigutta</i>	Gulf flounder	29.0 - 43.2	35.5 ± 4.01	10
Chf	<i>Chaetodipterus faber</i>	Atlantic spadefish	25.0 - 47.0	34.9 ± 4.19	60
Poc	<i>Pogonias cromis</i>	Black drum	22.3 - 42.7	32.9 ± 7.62	5
Pal	<i>Paralichthys lethostigma</i>	Southern flounder	33.3 - 40.4	36.7 ± 2.31	10
Cyn	<i>Cynoscion nebulosus</i>	Spotted seatrout	16.0 - 52.5	35.7 ± 5.49	638
Has	<i>Haemulon sciurus</i>	Bluestriped grunt	23.5 - 45.0	36.5 ± 3.72	54
Mym	<i>Mycteroperca microlepis</i>	Gag grouper	28.5 - 44.0	36.4 ± 3.20	22
Scb	<i>Scorpaena brasiliensis</i>	Barbfish	28.7 - 42.6	35.4 ± 3.85	14
Sev	<i>Selene vomer</i>	Lookdown	27.4 - 44.5	37.0 ± 5.60	8
Occ	<i>Ocyurus chrysurus</i>	Yellowtail snapper	26.8 - 49.4	37.5 ± 4.80	44
Lus	<i>Lutjanus synagris</i>	Lane snapper	22.9 - 53.0	36.7 ± 4.40	891
Spa	<i>Syphraena barracuda</i>	Great barracuda	18.4 - 55.6	36.3 ± 6.73	702
Lug	<i>Lutjanus griseus</i>	Gray snapper	18.4 - 55.5	36.5 ± 4.91	1120
Ari	<i>Argopecten irradians</i>	Atlantic bay scallop	18.0 - 52.5	37.2 ± 5.28	303
Lum	<i>Lutjanus mahogoni</i>	Mahogany snapper	28.4 - 40.8	36.7 ± 3.87	13
Arp	<i>Archosargus probatocephalus</i>	Sheepshead	25.0 - 51.2	38.2 ± 4.30	101
Lam	<i>Lachnolaimus maximus</i>	Hogfish	30.0 - 49.4	38.2 ± 3.54	94
Hie	<i>Hippocampus erectus</i>	Spotted seahorse	23.9 - 57.0	38.8 ± 5.44	184
Lun	<i>Lutjanus analis</i>	Mutton snapper	30.2 - 44.0	36.8 ± 5.23	14
Paa	<i>Panulirus argus</i>	Caribbean spiny lobster	29.7 - 52.0	38.1 ± 5.24	66
Epi	<i>Epinephelus itajara</i>	Goliath grouper	35.5 - 44.5	39.9 ± 3.19	5

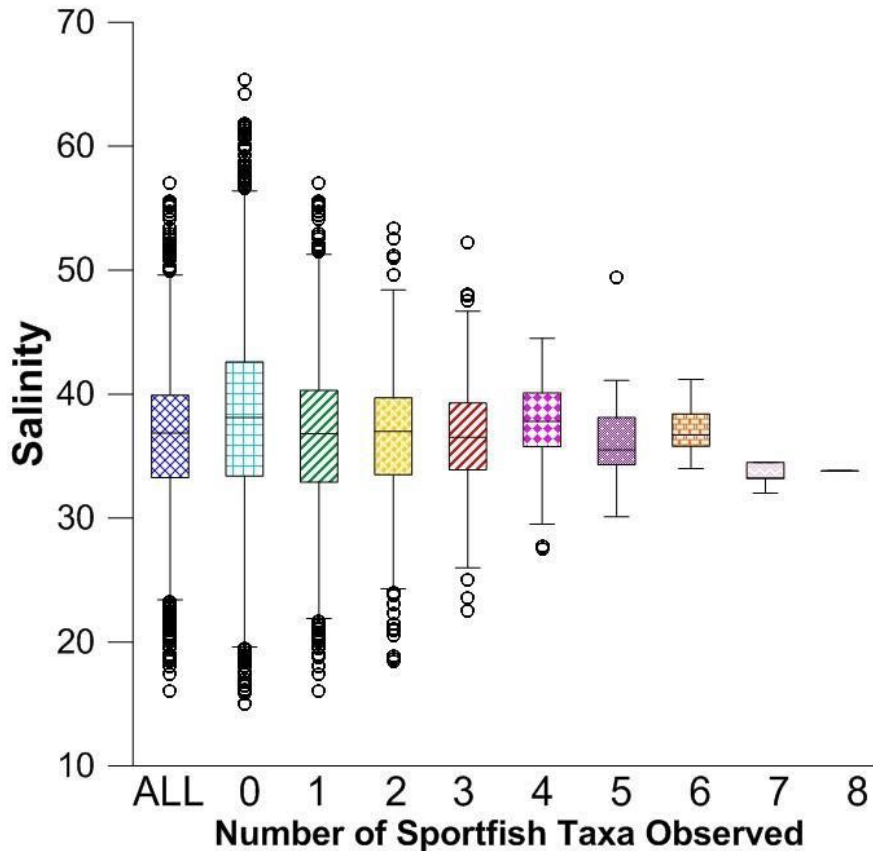


Figure 17. Box and whisker plot depicting the salinity range for the number of sportfish taxa observed in a tow (e.g., the second box and whisker plot from the left depicts the salinity range for tows where zero of the 25 sportfish taxa were observed). Data include all MAP observations (2004-2018). All Values is the range of all salinity values observed. The central line is the median, the boxes depict the range of 25th to 75th quartiles, the whiskers demark the minimum and maximum of non-outlier values, and the circles depict the outliers.

temporal and spatial distribution of the taxa. To examine species salinity preference, we used a subset of the sportfish taxa presented in Table 4 that focused on nine species with larger sample sizes and economic relevance. Not only were there significant differences in salinities where these taxa were present (Figure 17), but there were also significant distribution patterns (Figure 18). First, the upper quartile for salinity distributions of all taxa was less than the upper quartile for all salinity values, despite the approximately one order of magnitude larger sample size for all salinity values. This large sample size would constrict the quartile range. This suggests that these taxa are less commonly found in hypersaline conditions. Moreover, four taxa (Atlantic spadefish, spotted seatrout, grey snapper, and lane snapper) had salinity distributions

that were significantly ($\alpha = 0.05$) less than the overall salinity distribution (Figure 18). This suggests that if CERP is successful at mitigating hypersalinity, these taxa should become more common.

4. Lessons Learned

The development of a *Cassiopeia* bloom after the seagrass die-off is difficult to impossible to analyze because we were not systematically recording observations of *Cassiopeia*. This led us to re-examine the way we measured the benthic habitat associated with our data collections. In 2016, we began to measure biovolumes of *Cassiopeia*. In 2017, we attempted to measure seagrass and benthic habitat by taking continuous pictures of

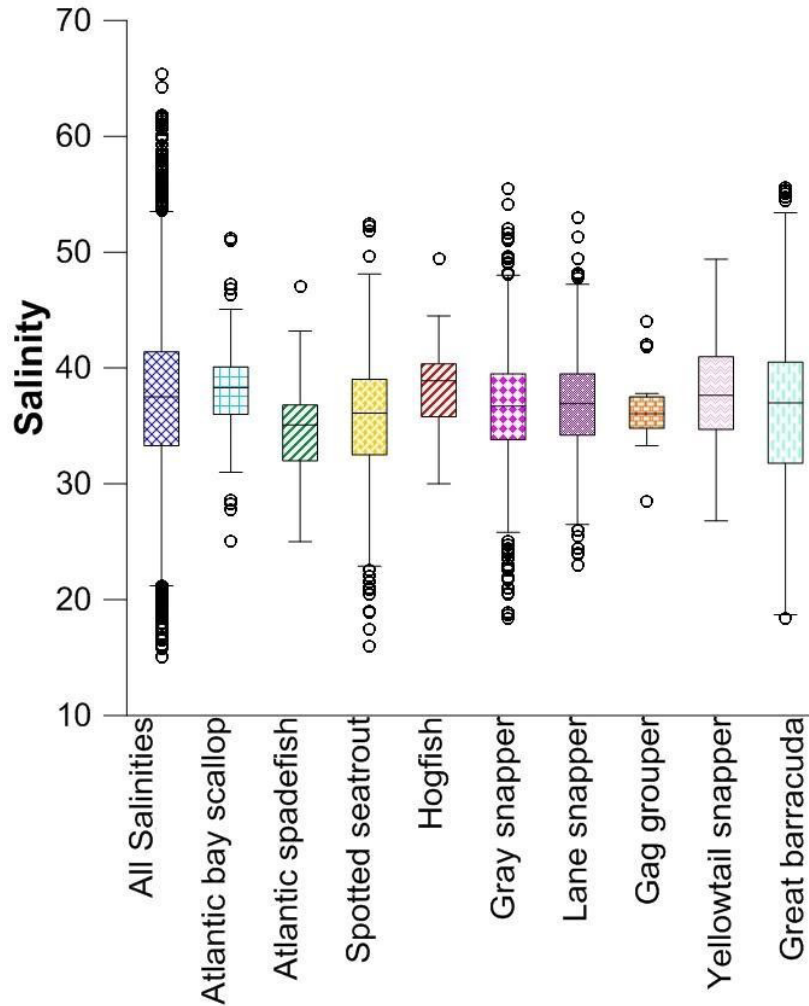


Figure 18. Box and whisker plot depicting the range of salinity values within which the identified sportfish species was observed. Data include all MAP observations (2004-2018). The central line is the median, the boxes depict the range of the lower to upper quartile, the whiskers demark the minimum and maximum of non-outlier values, and circles depict the outliers.

the bottom as we towed, but the camera apparatus suffered a severe malfunction and was not fixed during our sampling season. We operationalized a new camera system in the 2018 season and look forward to continued use of the camera to verify the accuracy of seagrass cover data collection. We will then create a mosaic of the area we towed from these pictures and analyze these images to calculate seagrass and macroalgal percent cover and *Cassiopeia* coverage.

We optimized our sampling protocol based upon the results of the first 10 years of sampling and the power analyses. The power analyses results suggested we collect the

following number of samples per year in each sub-region: 90 samples in West, 138 samples in Rankin, 114 samples in Whipray, and 120 samples in Crocodile Dragover. However, we were uncomfortable with the dramatic reduction in sampling effort (from approximately 150) for the West sub-region where the juvenile spotted seatrout population is mainly concentrated but highly variable. Therefore, starting in 2009, we collected 120 samples in the West sub-region, 138 samples in Rankin, 114 samples in Whipray, and 120 samples in Crocodile Dragover. This new sampling regime required the collection of 492 samples per year, an increase of 132 samples from the old sampling regime. In 2011, we began collecting

140 samples in West, 152 in Rankin, 134 in Whipray, and 140 in Crocodile Dragover for a total of 566 samples per year. This new sampling regime improved our ability to estimate the juvenile spotted seatrout population in the central areas of the bay, where the population is often low, but where the greatest change from CERP may occur.

To allow for this expansion in juvenile spotted seatrout sampling without increased cost, we altered the methodology for collecting seagrass data. A general linear model analysis showed only a minor dependency on seagrass, and this occurred when seagrass biomass increased to at least its 25th quartile. The only significant effect of seagrass appears to be when seagrass is sparse or non-existent, which reduces the concentration of juvenile spotted seatrout. Based upon this finding, we sampled seagrass via estimation of Braun-Blanquet abundance of each species using a 0.5 m² quadrat at nine points along the towline. This sampling methodology will likely still allow for the determination of seagrass and macroalgal abundance at the resolution necessary to examine and account for its effect on juvenile spotted seatrout. Furthermore, this methodology improves the disparity between sampling scales by two orders of magnitude for the trawl and seagrass sampling. To more accurately analyze seagrass abundance and its relationship to juvenile spotted seatrout abundance, starting in 2014 we recorded seagrass percent cover per quadrat directly instead of Braun-Blanquet abundance. This is because the

abundance/dominance scores fall on an ordinal scale, and typical statistical methods cannot be properly employed (Janos, 2006). Previous Braun-Blanquet scores were converted to percent cover for this analysis, and percent cover will be recorded directly moving forward.

In 2011, we began our sampling season in May, one month earlier, because our data for subsequent months suggested that we were not accurately capturing the onset of the juvenile *C. nebulosus* abundance peak, particularly in the West sub-region (**Figure 5**). We continued the May sampling beyond the 1-year trial in 2011 because we observed a high frequency of occurrence of juvenile *C. nebulosus* in West that year. In 2013, we sampled in April as another trial but captured no seatrout and so resumed the May start month in 2014. In 2018, we sampled in January and March to observe the latent effects of Hurricane Irma on juvenile seatrout.

Our analyses this year with our new water-quality-model-based hypersaline imaging confirmed that simulated natural system model conditions provide a sound restoration target for juvenile spotted seatrout abundance in each of our Florida Bay sampling sub-regions. Furthermore, the HSI model sufficiently discriminated between alternatives of the Central Everglades Project design and future without CERP, with regards to differences in juvenile spotted seatrout abundances.

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Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory

4301 Rickenbacker Causeway
Miami, FL 33149

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