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## Tagging Atlantic bluefin tuna from a Mediterranean spawning ground using a purse seiner

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### Abstract :

Atlantic bluefin tuna, *Thunnus thynnus*, is as an emblematic and commercially valuable large pelagic species. In the past ten years, the purse seine fishery in the Mediterranean represents more than 50 % of the catch. Nowadays, purse seines target large fish and operate during the spawning season in the spawning grounds. Electronic tagging has shed a considerable amount of light on the ecology and behaviour of bluefin tuna over the past twenty years. However, such technique has rarely been applied on large bluefin tunas caught by the Mediterranean purse seine fishery despite its major importance. The logistical constraints related to this specific fishery, combined with the timing of migration of the fish and the requirements related to the handling of big fish have made adequate tagging from purse seines complex. Here we detail such an operation, designed to bridge the knowledge gap on the migratory behaviour of tunas targeted by the purse seine fishery. Three large bluefin tunas from the same school were tagged during the fishing operation of a French purse seine, resulting in a different migration pattern than previous deployments. The fish were tagged onboard in less than 2 min and efficiently, avoiding any subsequent mortality. These results contrast with those from tagging operations carried out in the Northwest Mediterranean, which underlies the importance of tagging operations from purse seines to obtain unbiased description of the movements of the eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna stock in the context of its management.

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## Highlights

- ▶ Tagging from purse seiners, the main fishery for bluefin tuna, is central to grasp its migrations. ▶ A protocol to handle large bluefin tunas and enable tagging in good condition from purse seines is described.
- ▶ Three large bluefin tunas were tagged onboard purse seiners from a spawning ground. ▶ The tracks were compared to tracks obtained previously from fish tagged in the Gulf of Lions with a similar method.
- ▶ The fish from the Gulf of Lions displayed different migration patterns.

**Keywords** : Large Atlantic bluefin tuna, Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stock, Electronic tagging, Purse seine Migrations

## 41 1.INTRODUCTION

42

43 Atlantic Bluefin Tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*, thereafter referred as BFT) is an emblematic species, whose  
44 individuals can migrate across the Atlantic Ocean (Block et al., 2001; Fromentin and Powers, 2005;  
45 Rooker et al., 2007). BFT is currently managed as two-stocks, Western and Eastern, by the  
46 International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), but the two stocks display a  
47 substantial amount of mixing (Puncher et al., 2018). The Eastern stock is much larger than the  
48 Western one and Eastern catches represent about 90% of the total catch (ICCAT 2018 - task I). After a  
49 complex history of over-exploitation, successive stock assessments since 2008 have shown that the  
50 Eastern stock was recovering and increasing quotas were adopted (ICCAT, 2017). In 2017, the TAC  
51 for the Eastern stock was set to be 28000 tons in 2018, 32000 tons in 2019 and 36000 tons by 2020.

52

53 The Eastern stock is exploited by 25 countries and 11 different types of gears. Most of the catch, 66%  
54 in 2017, is made in the Mediterranean and is largely dominated by the purse seiners. Purse seine  
55 catches represent more than 90% of the Mediterranean catches and have been representing more  
56 than 50% of the overall Eastern stock catches over the past ten years (ICCAT 2018 - task I). They  
57 operate during a reduced season in space and time, mostly during June and concentrate on the  
58 spawning aggregations in the Balearic Islands, around Sicily and Malta, further south to Tunisia and  
59 off Turkey in the East, Libyan waters being now unexploited. This fishery has been managed by strict  
60 control measures since the enforcement of the Recovery Plan in the mid 2000s (ICCAT, 2017). The  
61 Croatian purse seiners in the Adriatic differ from the other purse seiners as they exploit substantially  
62 smaller fish (< 4 year-old). Over the past ten years, the largest purse seiner catch has been France,  
63 followed by Tunisia and Spain, representing 25%, 17% and 14% of the purse seine catch,  
64 respectively. The BFT caught by the purse seine fishery is predominantly transferred to farms, where  
65 the fish are caged and fattened until harvested.

66

67 Since the late 1990s, electronic tagging has shed a considerable amount of light on the ecology of  
68 BFT (Block et al., 2005; Fromentin and Lopuszanski, 2014; Teo et al., 2007). Electronic tags log  
69 temperature, pressure and light and transmit this information via the Argos satellite system after a pre-  
70 defined duration before release, often set between a few months and one year. This data allows  
71 scientists to reconstruct the trajectory of the tagged fish in time and space. A large number of tags  
72 have been deployed on BFT since this technique existed, covering various fleets and parts of the  
73 species' life cycle, with the aim of describing as accurately as possible its migratory routes and  
74 understanding the variability of these migrations (Abascal et al., 2016; Aranda et al., 2013; Arregui et  
75 al., 2018; Cermeño et al., 2015; Fromentin and Lopuszanski, 2014; Galuardi et al., 2010; Galuardi and  
76 Lutcavage, 2012). Tagging data are useful for management (Hays et al., 2019) and ICCAT has its own  
77 tagging program coordinated by the Atlantic-Wide Research Program for Bluefin Tuna (GBYP). The  
78 tracks obtained by tags deployed on BFT are used by the ICCAT Standing Committee on Research  
79 and Statistics (SCRS) working group not only to improve the understanding on the ecology of the  
80 species, but also to calibrate spatially explicit models, for instance in the context of the Management  
81 Strategy Evaluation process (ICCAT MSE). Since the start of the use of this technique, and owing to a  
82 larger research effort, substantially more tags have been deployed in the Western Atlantic than in the  
83 Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean. This uneven tagging effort is the opposite to the catch intensity as  
84 the Western area only weighs about a tenth of the total catch.

85

86 Tagging BFT is not a trivial operation, specifically when the individual is large (e.g. > 70kg), as it  
87 requires a skilled crew, suitable boat and material to catch and appropriately handle these animals for  
88 tagging purpose (Rouyer et al., 2019). This constraints the ability of scientists to realize large-scale  
89 deployments of tags on large BFT and requires specific logistics. Rod and reel (recreative or  
90 professional) and traps are fishing gears that can provide fruitful opportunities for tagging BFT from  
91 the eastern stock. However this still leaves a deficiency of tagging in the main fishing segment, i. e.  
92 purse seined fish. Attempts for tagging purse seined BFT were made in the US coast (Wilson et al.,

93 2005), but tagging large fish from a purse seiner on the Mediterranean spawning grounds, the main  
94 and key fishing segment of the eastern stock, has not been covered by tagging activities carried out by  
95 the international scientific community.

96

97 The migratory behaviour of BFT is at the essence of the purse seine fishery, as it benefits from the  
98 spawning behaviour of BFT, which aggregates for spawning in specific areas over a short amount of  
99 time, typically mid-May to mid-July. In the northwestern Mediterranean BFT has been shown to display  
100 strong residency (Cermeño et al., 2015; Fromentin and Lopuszanski, 2014), whereas Atlantic  
101 individuals typically migrate within the Mediterranean in early spring and depart in July-August, often  
102 seen as catches by the Moroccan and Portuguese traps (Fromentin and Powers, 2005; Rooker et al.,  
103 2007). Catches of purse seiners are composed by fish gathering in the spawning grounds in the  
104 Mediterranean. Understanding the migrations routes of the BFT targeted by the purse seiners is  
105 therefore of importance for the fishery and the conservation of the species, specifically to assess the  
106 relative importance of BFT exiting the Mediterranean after spawning.

107

108 Here we describe a tagging operation designed as a first step to address these aspects. After previous  
109 work using farming cages to set-up a protocol to efficiently tag BFT (Rouyer et al., 2019), an attempt  
110 was made to transfer the protocol to a purse seiner during the 2018 fishing season to assess the  
111 feasibility of such an operation on larger fish. The French purse seiners operate in two main fishing  
112 grounds, the Balearic Islands and Malta, which are both well documented spawning grounds in the  
113 Mediterranean. Two French purse seiner operating off Malta were used for the operation. The tracks  
114 obtained from the tagged BFT are then compared to tracks obtained from tagging operations in the  
115 Gulf of Lions (french Mediterranean), which target a different component of the population in terms of  
116 age and behaviour. As tag data serve as input for connectivity/migration matrices used in spatially  
117 explicit models, it is critical to collect information about the migration patterns from large individuals  
118 targeted by purse seiners in the Mediterranean Sea.

## 119 2.MATERIAL AND RMETHODS

120

121 As tagging from a purse seiner involves complex logistics, the protocol has first been set-up in  
122 cooperation with a Maltese fattening farm, MFF Ltd and has been described in Rouyer et al., 2019.

123 Tagging from a cage allowed to remove important constraints, such as the variability of the  
124 meteorological conditions and the availability of fish, but also allowed to operate on fish with a lower  
125 stress level as they are used to be held in a confined space. The following sections describe the  
126 transposition of this protocol to a purse seiner.

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128

### 129 2.1.Purse seine set

130

131 The French purse seine fishery operates mostly south of the Balearic Islands and south of Malta. The  
132 purse seiner vessels that participated in this operation were the Saint Sophie François II (SSFII,  
133 ICCAT serial number ATEUFRA00064) and the Saint Sophie François III (SSFIII, ICCAT serial number  
134 ATEUFRA00065). The tagging team embarked on the purse seiner SSFIII from the harbour of  
135 Birzebugga (Malta), on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2018, to rejoin the other vessels scouting the waters south of  
136 Malta in search of BFT schools. The period was chosen late enough to avoid the bulk of the fishing  
137 season associated with a higher probability of recapture, but early enough so that the post-spawning  
138 migration was not at its highest and suitable meteorological conditions could be met. Flat sea and  
139 sunny clear sky not only facilitate the operation, but also ensure that the fish remain as calm as  
140 possible during the operation and would accept to be fed inside the purse seine for the tagging  
141 operation. Such conditions were met the next day, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2018 (Fig. 1). A school detected  
142 in the early morning was captured by SSFII. A transfer cage was organised to transfer the fish the next  
143 day, which left the whole day for the tagging trials. Dinghies were deployed around the purse seine to  
144 maintain it opened until the transfer cage arrived.

145

146

## 147 2.2. Personnel and equipment

148

149 The purse-seiner SSFIII worked with his sistership SSFII and both crews, 13 people each, are  
150 combined during the fishing and subsequent caging operations. Both ships have large decks and are  
151 equipped with cranes. A piece of synthetic turf and a thick mattress were laid onto the free deck space,  
152 so that the fish could be positioned appropriately for the tagging operation without hurting its lateral  
153 line (Fig. 2). The location on the deck was also chosen so that the head of the fish could easily be  
154 accessed by a sea water pump to supply the fish with oxygen while being held out of the water. One  
155 crane was equipped with a stretcher specifically designed for such an operation, made of smooth  
156 material to avoid scraping the fish skin and punctured with holes to let the water through. The stretcher  
157 opening was equipped with a chain so that the fish could easily be maneuvered into it, whereas its  
158 other end was closed with a rope, so that the fish would be held on the stretcher while being  
159 maneuvered in the water and lifted onto the deck. The rope was designed to be easy to remove once  
160 the fish needed to be released back into the sea. One crew member was tasked with operating the  
161 handline. Two scientists were assigned the task to deploy the tags. One scientist was tasked with  
162 covering the eyes and maintaining the water pipe into the mouth of the tuna and another one with  
163 measuring the fish (curved forked length). Two crew members were tasked with removing the hook  
164 with as much care as possible to avoid injuries. Three divers helped to maneuver the fish into the  
165 stretcher placed into the water. One crew member operated the crane with the stretcher to move the  
166 fish on the deck and in and out of the water as quickly and smoothly as possible. The ICCAT Regional  
167 Observers on each of the fishing boat were present during the whole operation.

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169

## 170 2.3. Tagging

171

172 Wildlife Computers' minipats were used for the deployments. They were programmed to remain  
173 attached on the fish over the course of one year. The tether was 15cm long and equipped with a large  
174 Domeier anchor. A second anchor was added to reduce the lateral movements of the tag that could  
175 hurt the fish and reduce deployment times (Fromentin and Lopuszanski, 2014). The main anchor of  
176 the tags was inserted onto the base of the second dorsal fin. This location enables the anchor to get  
177 tangled into hard bones, which increases the probability of long retention times (Cort et al., 2010). The  
178 second anchor was directly inserted into the flesh. Chlorhexidine was used to treat all the material  
179 before deployments.

180

181 The fish caught in the purse seine was fed with frozen sardine in order to induce feeding behaviour. A  
182 long handline was prepared with hooks used by maltese longliners. A buoy was attached to the  
183 mainline to help keeping the tuna at the surface. The hook was baited with frozen sardine and the line  
184 was deployed in the purse seine. The purse seine was deployed to about 500m long and the fishing  
185 boat was far from the center of the seine. Thus, the handline was deployed using a small boat placed  
186 into the purse seine while baiting with frozen sardine, which concentrated the tunas and induced  
187 feeding behaviour. The line was left sinking a few seconds and was towed back towards the purse  
188 seiner. Once a tuna took the bait, the fish was towed back by the fishermen as quickly and smoothly  
189 as possible to avoid exhaustion of the fish or to break the line. The school caught by the purse seiner  
190 was composed of large fish, whose acceleration when taking the bait was so intense that the line often  
191 broke. Once the fish was close enough to the purse seiner, the stretcher was deployed and the divers  
192 maneuvered the fish into it. The stretcher was then lifted onto the mattress on the deck, where the  
193 eyes of the tuna were immediately covered with a wet cloth and the water pipe inserted into its mouth.  
194 While the hook was being removed, the tag was deployed onto the fish. The stretcher was then hauled  
195 back into the water, outside of the purse seine, the rope of the stretcher opening was undone and the  
196 fish was released.



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199 2.4. Comparison to tracks obtained from the Gulf of Lions

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201 A dataset of 44 tracks obtained from deployments on BFT in the Gulf of Lions by a recreative rod and  
202 reel fishery was used to compare to the tracks obtained from the present tagging operation with purse  
203 seiners. This dataset was acquired through deployments made between 2007 and 2015 in  
204 cooperation with recreational fishermen, off Marseille, after the spawning season, from August through  
205 to November (Fig. 1). Full details about the methodology of the deployments are available in  
206 (Fromentin and Lopuszanski, 2014). The tracks from the dataset were simply plotted next to the tracks  
207 obtained from the present operation to highlight differences in their dynamics.

## 208 3.RESULTS

209

210

### 211 3.1.Tagging operation

212

213 About 15 BFT were hooked on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 2018. The handlines prepared were just about strong  
214 enough to handle the large animals but most of the lines broke, the crimps used to tie the line slipped  
215 and/or the hooks were bent open. Three BFT of 226 (BFT1), 189 (BFT2) and 206 cm (BFT3) straight  
216 fork length were caught at 11h30, 14h30 and 15h30 respectively. The three fish did not fight more than  
217 15 minutes each time and were towed smoothly towards the divers who could maneuver it into the  
218 stretcher. Once a fish was hauled onto the deck, less than 2 minutes were needed to intubate it, cover  
219 his eyes with a soft and wet cloth and remove the hook from its mouth as carefully as possible. The  
220 fish was then measured and tagged before being released into the water. No tagging-induced mortality  
221 was observed.

222

223

### 224 3.2.Tracks

225

226 The retention times were 72 days, 62 days and 32 days for BFT1-3 respectively (Table 1). No  
227 premature release was observed. Tags either indicated that the release pin broke or were recaptured.  
228 BFT-2 appeared to have been recaptured by a fisherman in the Alboran sea as the tag moved onshore  
229 following a straight line after it popped-up (Fig. 3). No tag was physically recovered. The GPE3 state-  
230 space model algorithm from Wildlife computers was used to estimate the geolocation of the fish from  
231 the tag data. BFT1 and BFT3 showed comparable dynamics as both fish reached the Alboran Sea in  
232 about a month. They both went west of Sicily and south of Sardinia and via the Balearic Islands. BFT1  
233 seemed to have passed more northern than BFT3 as it went via the island of Menorca before going

234 more south passing Majorca and south of Ibiza, whereas BFT3 went more directly south of Ibiza,  
235 around where another major fishing ground is located. BFT1 reached the straight of Gibraltar three to  
236 four days before BFT3. Whereas BFT3 was recaptured at this point, BFT1 exited the Mediterranean  
237 and followed the continental shelf along the Portuguese and Spanish coasts up to the Bay of Biscay  
238 where it stayed for about three weeks from late July to the middle of August 2018. BFT1 then  
239 continued its route towards Ireland where the release pin broke. BFT2 contrasted with these two  
240 routes. The fish did not attempt any large scale movement, so whilst BFT1 and BFT3 were setting off  
241 for the Atlantic, BFT2 went south into Libyan waters where it stayed two months until the tag popped-  
242 off in late August.

243

244

245 3.3.Comparison to the Gulf of Lions dataset

246

247 The 44 tracks from tagging operations realized in the Gulf of Lions between 2007 and 2015 were  
248 plotted next to the tracks obtained from the purse seiner deployment reported here. This dataset  
249 spans fish of various sizes (up to 237cm) comparable to the ones tagged from the purse seiner and  
250 exhibit times at liberty of up to a year. The fish were tagged after the spawning season, from late July  
251 to November off the city of Marseille. Not one single fish from this dataset made its way out of the  
252 Mediterranean. The closest attempt was a fish that just crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and  
253 immediately after headed back to the Gulf of Lions, close to where it was tagged. This contrasted with  
254 the present results that displayed one fish exiting the Mediterranean an another one that seemed to be  
255 on its way to do so before it was captured.

#### 256 4.DISCUSSION

257

258 The operation described here presents a successful tagging attempt of large BFT in one of their  
259 Mediterranean spawning ground, during the spawning season. The tags deployed during this  
260 operation document the migration of individuals targeted by the largest fishery segment operating on  
261 BFT. A past operation using purse seiners in the US coast used harpoons to tag the animals (Wilson et  
262 al., 2005). Our results show that tagging large individuals from the spawning grounds on the deck of  
263 purse seiners is possible. The tracks obtained from these deployments contrast with the results  
264 obtained by tagging operations performed in other areas, periods and gears. This manuscript  
265 underlines the importance of such operations to fully grasp the migratory behaviour of BFT in the  
266 Mediterranean.

267

268 Results obtained from other tagging operations in the northwest Mediterranean have displayed  
269 relatively strong fidelity to the Mediterranean (Cermeño et al., 2015; Fromentin and Lopuszanski,  
270 2014). In contrast, the results obtained in the present manuscript tend to suggest migrations outside of  
271 the Mediterranean, but this will have to be confirmed by more tracks. These different patterns can be  
272 explained by different factors, one being the period of the operation. Post-spawning tagging operations  
273 are often favoured as tagging before the purse seine fishing season is increasing the likelihood of  
274 early recaptures that reduces the probability of long tracks. In addition, a large number of tagging  
275 operations in the Mediterranean are carried out in cooperation with recreative fisheries, which also  
276 operate more easily in summer (Cermeño et al., 2015; Fromentin and Lopuszanski, 2014; Stokesbury  
277 et al., 2007). This induces a bias on the migratory patterns captured by the tags deployed, as tagging  
278 BFT after the spawning season targets fish that did not migrate outside the Mediterranean, such as  
279 BFT2. In addition, recreative fisheries operate nearer to shore than professional ones where large  
280 schools are less frequent. The group dynamics captured is thus likely to be different compared to the  
281 group dynamics of individuals from the spawning grounds, where large aggregation of fish are

282 commonly encountered. Tags deployed from the spawning grounds and during the spawning season  
283 therefore target individuals likely to have a different behaviour than the fish targeted by recreative  
284 fisheries. One fish over the three released was recaptured, but not enough tags were deployed to  
285 strictly assess whether a larger amount of early recaptures happened than during other periods.  
286 Regarding deployment times, a salient aspect was the failure of the release system of the tag (“pin-  
287 break”) that impaired the retention times achieved by the tags deployed during the operation.

288

289 Given the right conditions and the right technique, tagging from a purse seiner can be an advantage in  
290 terms of logistics, as purse seiners often catch a very large amount of BFT in less than a day. The first  
291 attempt described in the present manuscript show that 3 fish could be tagged in less than an hour of  
292 cumulative time, although the technique presented has also a lot of room for improvement, as only  
293 three tunas were tagged when about 15 of them had actually been hooked. Compared to the  
294 operation carried out in fattening cages (Rouyer et al., 2019), decking the tunas from the purse seine  
295 proved to be much more complex. The main problematic aspect was the size and the strength of the  
296 individuals captured that broke the handlines deployed. Improving the strength of the material used for  
297 the handlines, shock-leader and hooks, should improve this aspect for future operations. Yet, the  
298 technique still enabled the decking of a fish estimated to weigh 250kg (BFT1) in less than 15mn. The  
299 rate at which the tunas were taking the baits suggested that 15 fish tagged during one day is not an  
300 unrealistic target given that the right meteorological conditions are met. Such large scale deployments  
301 repeated on different schools would provide a unique source of insights into BFT migratory behaviour.

302

303 Besides bridging a gap by describing the migratory behaviour of BFT targeted by the largest fishery  
304 and being appropriate for large scale release and group dynamics studies, tagging BFT from the  
305 spawning grounds is an opportunity to draw a clearer picture of BFT migrations. Spawning grounds,  
306 where the purse seine fishery operates, are areas where BFT from different size classes and  
307 potentially different behaviour mix (Fromentin and Powers, 2005; Mather et al., 1995; Rooker et al.,

308 2007). Tagging from such an area could therefore allow scientists to capture a large range of migratory  
309 behaviours, which would draw a clearer picture of the relative importance between resident individuals  
310 and individuals migrating outside of the Mediterranean. Our results illustrate this aspect, as it showed  
311 that fish from the same school, and whose tagging conditions were as similar as possible, displayed  
312 very different migratory patterns. The trajectory of BFT1 was consistent with observations of BFT  
313 migrating to northern latitudes during the recent past years, as the fish went straight to Ireland after  
314 spending some time in the Bay of Biscay. BFT3 seemed to also exit the Mediterranean, whereas BFT2  
315 displayed a more residential behaviour in Libyan waters.

316

317 From a management point of view, and in the context of climate change, understanding the migratory  
318 behaviour of BFT is of key importance. For instance, within ICCAT, the ongoing Management Strategy  
319 Evaluation process uses spatially explicit model that requires migration rates between areas to  
320 capture the movement of the stock. ICCAT therefore encourages tagging activities, as accurately  
321 depicting migrations and exchange rates between areas from the major fisheries segments is of key  
322 importance. The operation described here is thus an important step to enable the international  
323 scientific community to move forward in that direction, providing information from the largest BFT  
324 fishing segment.

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335 TABLE

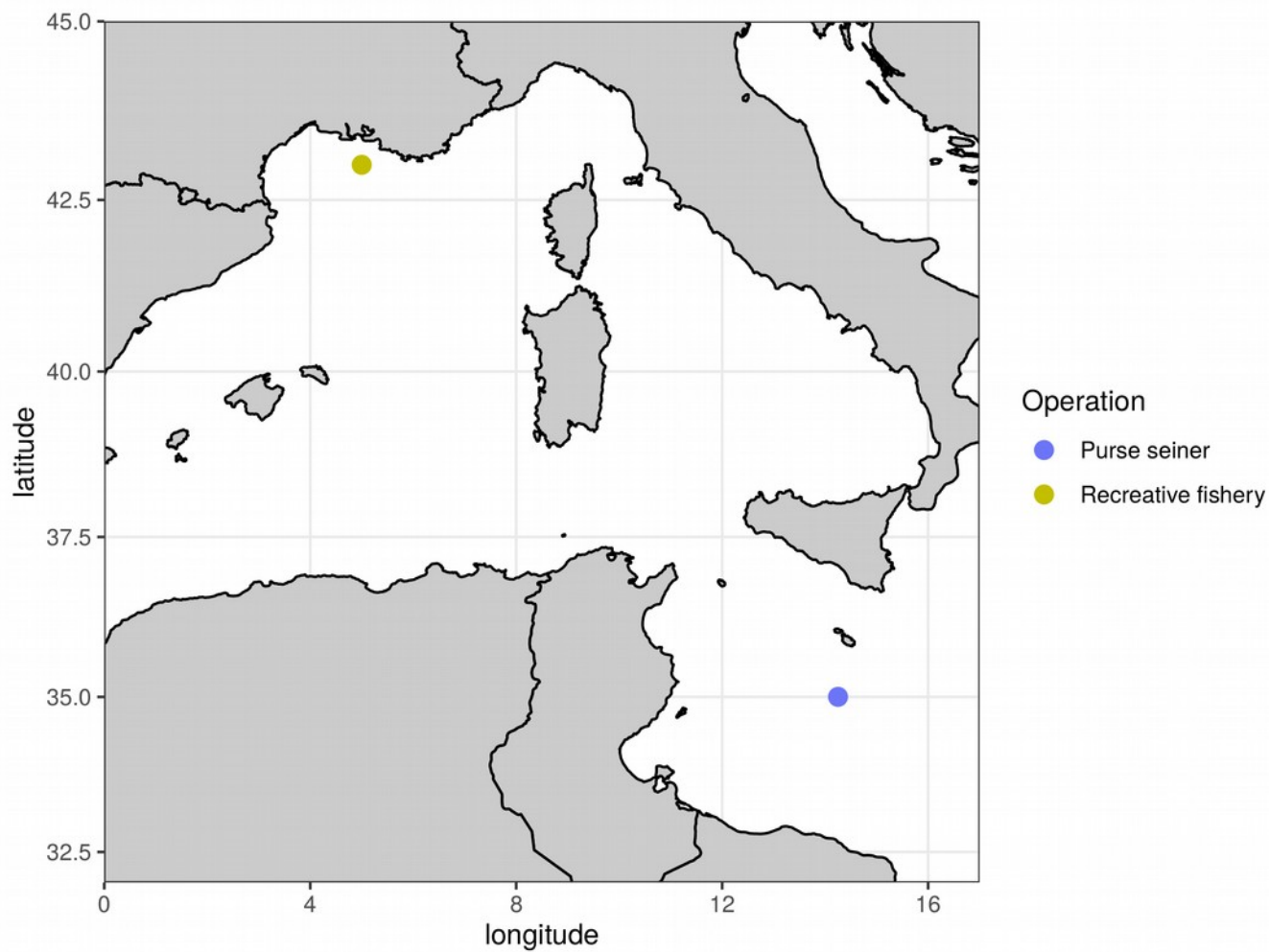
336

337 Table 1: Information about the three tags deployed.

Tag	Straight fork length (cm)	Time of tagging	Time at liberty (days)
BFT1	226	11h30	72
BFT2	189	14h30	62
BFT3	206	15h30	32

338

339 FIGURE LEGENDS



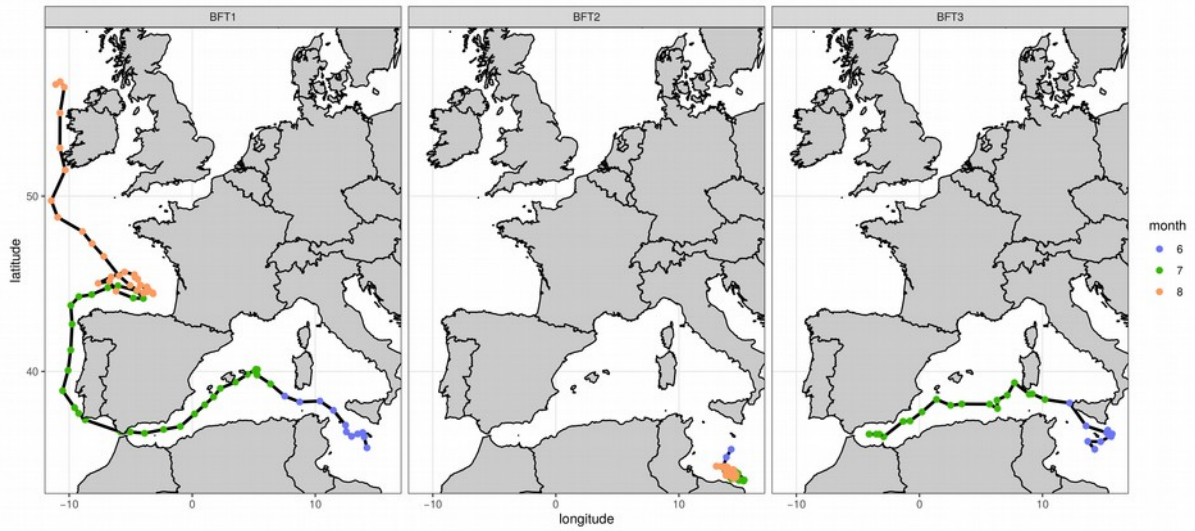
341 Figure 1: Location of purse seiner and recreative fishery tagging operations.

342

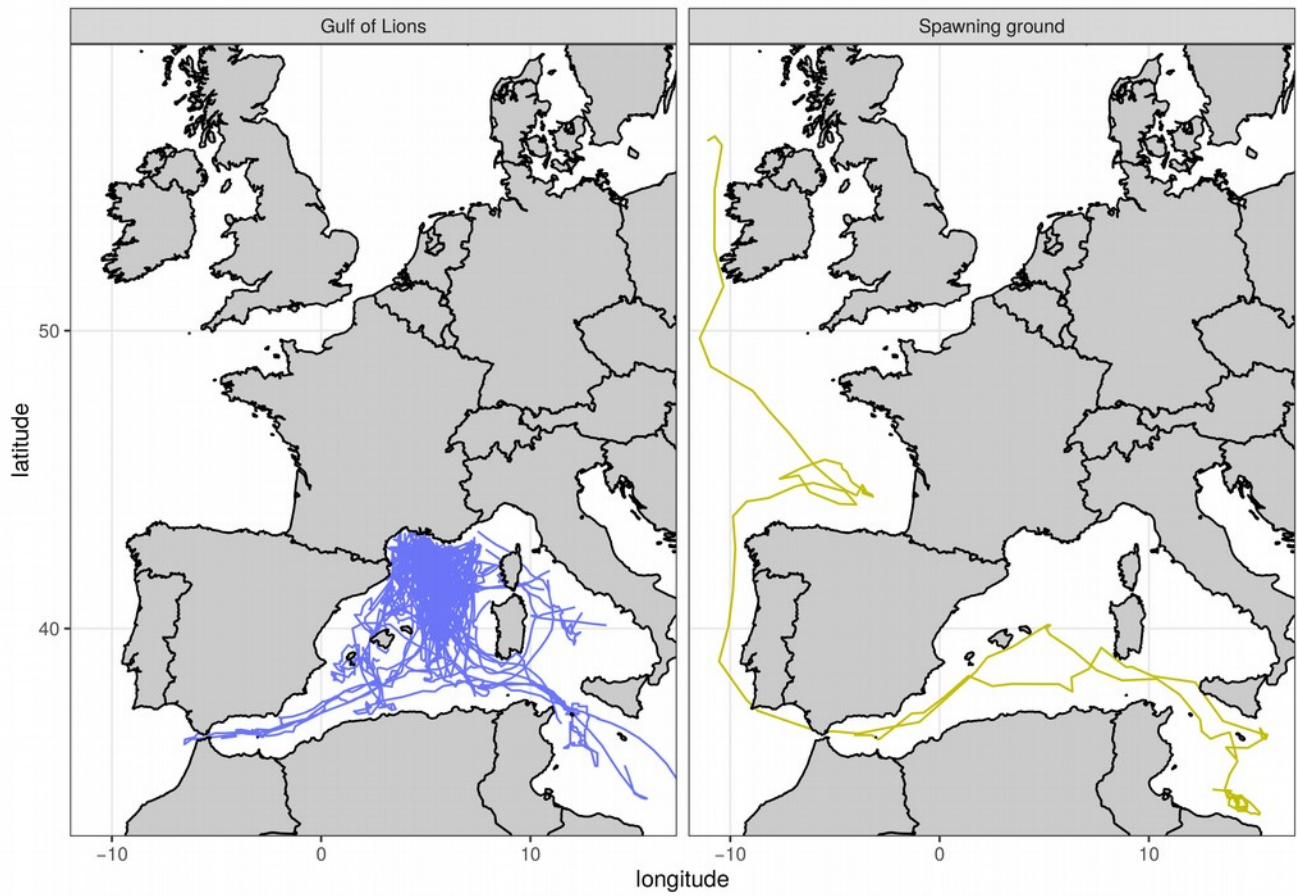


344 Figure 2: Main steps of the tagging operation. From top left to bottom right. A school of tunas  
345 was captured by the purse seiner SSFII. The purse seine was maintained open while waiting  
346 to transfer the fish into a cage. A dinghy was placed in the purse seine to deploy the baited  
347 handline, which was left to sink a few seconds and then slowly towed from the vessel. Once a  
348 tuna was hooked, it was towed in as fast and smoothly as possible. A clean space over the  
349 deck was prepared with a mattress and a water pipe. Once the tuna was close enough to the  
350 boat, three divers manoeuvred the fish inside a stretcher attached to a crane. The fish was  
351 then hauled onto the deck and then tagged using a double anchorage. It was immediately  
352 released outside of the purse seine.

353



355 Figure 3: Tracks of the fish tagged during the operation obtained from Wildlife Computer's  
356 GPE3 algorithm.  
357



359 Figure 4: Comparison of the tracks obtained from the tagging operations in the Gulf of Lions  
360 and from the Purse Seiner.