

Remote sensing of the Subtropical Front in the Southeast Pacific and the ecology of Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*

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Submitted 2022-12-05 to the Special Issue on Application of Remote Sensing in Fisheries
published in *Fishes* (MDPI)

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Abstract. The Subtropical Front (STF) plays a key role in the ecology of Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*. Nonetheless, there are few remote sensing studies of the STF in the open Southeast Pacific Ocean, and almost all of them have been conducted by satellite oceanographers in Russia and Ukraine to support respective large-scale fisheries of jack mackerel in this region. We reviewed these studies that documented long-term seasonal and interannual variability of the STF from sea surface temperature (SST) and sea surface height (SSH) data. We also mapped the STF from satellite sea surface salinity (SSS) data of the SMOS mission (2012-2019). The Subtropical Front consists of two fronts -- North and South STF about 500 km apart - - that border the Subtropical Frontal Zone (STFZ) in-between. The STF is density-compensated, with spatially divergent manifestations in temperature and salinity. In the temperature field, the STF extends in the WNW to ESE direction in the Southeast Pacific. In the salinity field, the STFZ appears as a broad frontal zone, extending zonally between 30-35°S across the entire South Pacific. Three major types of satellite data – SST, SSH, and SSS – can be used to locate the STF. The SSH data is most advantageous with regard to the jack mackerel fisheries owing to the all-weather capability of satellite altimetry and the radical improvement of the spatial resolution of SSH data in the near future. Despite the dearth of dedicated *in situ* studies of the South Pacific STFZ, there is a broad consensus regarding the STFZ being the principal spawning and nursing ground of *T. murphyi* as well as a major migration corridor between Chile and New Zealand.

Keywords: Front, Southern Ocean, Subtropical Front, Subtropical Convergence, Subtropical Frontal Zone, Remote sensing, Satellite oceanography, SMOS, Marine ecology, Fisheries, Chilean jack mackerel, *Trachurus murphyi*

1. Introduction

The subtropical-subantarctic belt of the South Pacific, especially its central part between 30°S and 45°S, is the least studied region of the World Ocean. The extreme remoteness of this area challenged sea-going oceanographers before the advent of satellite oceanography. Meanwhile, this region became a major fishing ground after a discovery in the 1970s of a huge stock of Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*. Catches of *T. murphyi* in the South Pacific reached 5 Mt by 1995 – a huge number given the total global fish catch of 100 Mt at the time. Clearly, the 5Mt/year catch was unsustainable. As a result of overfishing and poor recruitment exacerbated by complex interactions between fishing, climate, and stock dynamics, the jack mackerel fishery collapsed ([Lima et al., 2020](#)). Now this fishery is tightly regulated, owing in a large part to the creation of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO). Once fully recovered, the jack mackerel fishery will become one of the world's most important *sustainable* deep-blue fisheries. The protection and conservation of this valuable resource provides a strong impetus for marine ecology studies.

The main oceanographic feature of this region is the Subtropical Front (STF) associated with the South Pacific Current and extended WSW-ENE across the entire South Pacific as reported by [Stramma et al. \(1995\)](#) from hydrographic section data. [Belkin \(1988\)](#) documented the STF in the South Pacific between New Zealand and 126°W, where the STF was found to consist of two parallel fronts 400-500 km apart, termed the North and South STF (NSTF and SSTF respectively), that border the Subtropical Frontal Zone (STFZ) in-between. In a follow-up study, [Belkin \(1993\)](#) identified a similar STFZ in the South Atlantic. Finally, when [Belkin and Gordon \(1996\)](#) discovered the North STF in the South Indian Ocean, the concept of a *circumpolar* STFZ in the Southern Ocean was born ([Fig. 1](#)).

The STFZ is well observed in the SW Pacific, between Tasmania and the Chatham Islands. By contrast, very few oceanographic expeditions explored the STFZ east of the Chatham Islands, across the Central South Pacific, up to the SE Pacific, where the STFZ was systematically studied by Chilean scientists ([Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005a](#); [Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005b](#); [Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005c](#)). In the west, the spatial density of CTD data drops off precipitously east of the Chatham Islands (east of 175°W). In the east, the CTD data density drops off west of 100°W-110°W. Thus, the vast area between 175°W and 110°W is data poor. The western and central parts of this area, between New Zealand and 126°W, were covered by a large-scale oceanographic survey during the R/V *Dmitriy Mendeleev* Cruise 34 ([Belkin, 1988](#); [Belkin, Gritsenko, and Kryukov, 1988](#); [Belkin, Gusev, and Levin, 1988](#); [Vinogradov and Flint, 1988](#)). This survey conducted in early 1985 remains the only dedicated multi-disciplinary oceanographic study of the Central South/Southeast Pacific to date. In the 1990s-2000s, high-quality CTD data were acquired during the World Ocean Circulation Experiment (WOCE) when a few meridional CTD sections were occupied across the South Pacific STFZ, including the Southeast Pacific ([Tsuchiya and Talley, 1996](#); [Tsuchiya and Talley, 1998](#)). Nonetheless, the *in-situ* data coverage of the STFZ region remains patchy to date. The dearth of quality *in-situ* data explains why no review of the South Pacific STFZ was ever attempted. The paucity of *in-situ* data was partly mitigated by remote sensing from satellites. The availability of satellite data that lends itself to mapping the STFZ was the main impetus for the remote sensing studies reviewed in this paper.

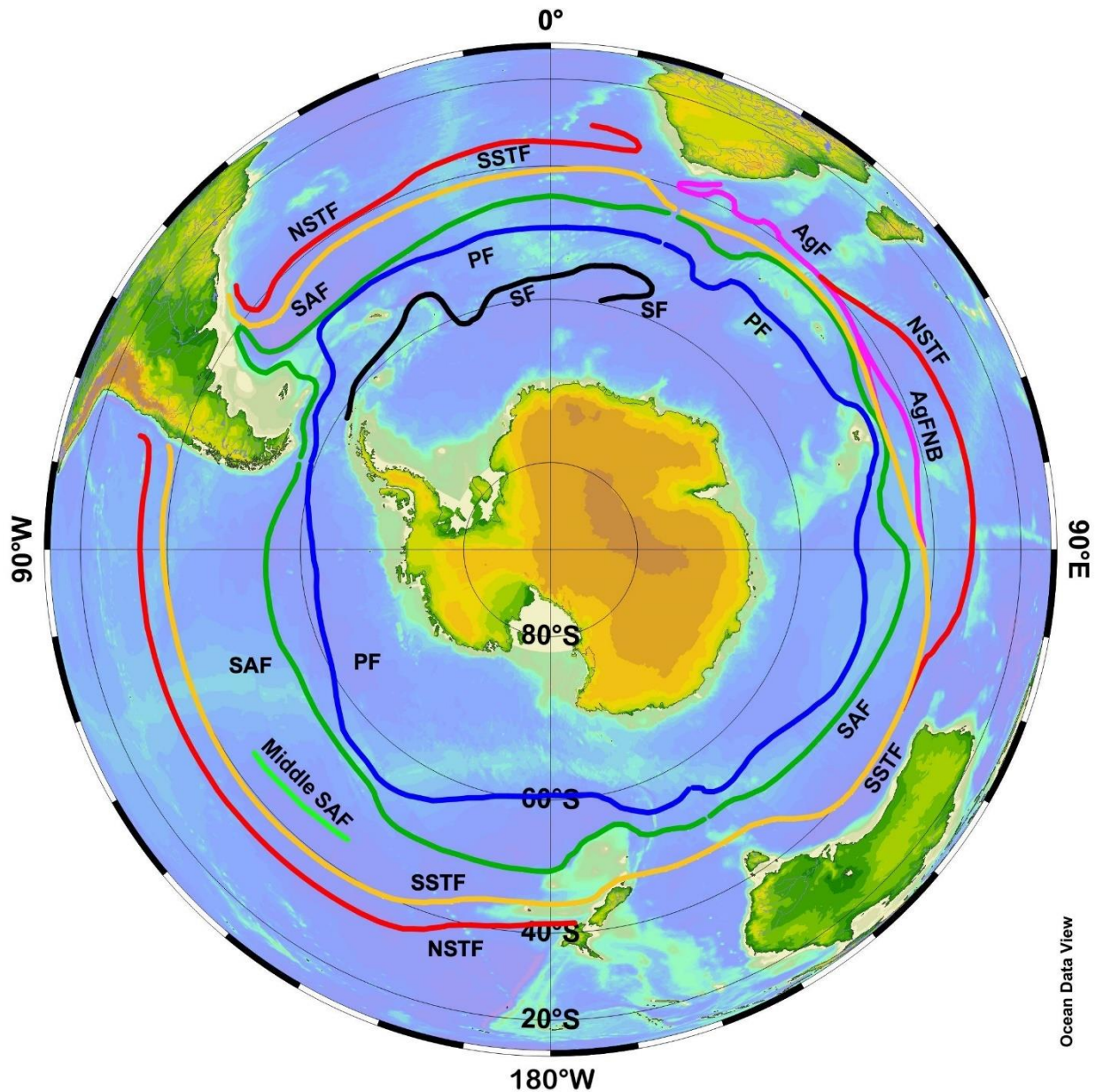


Fig. 1. Southern Ocean fronts (modified after [Belkin and Gordon, 1996, Fig. 5](#)). Acronyms: AgF, Agulhas Front; AgFNB, Northern Branch of the Agulhas Front; NSTF/SSTF, North/South Subtropical Front; SAF, Subantarctic Front; PF, Polar Front; SF, Scotia Front. Map created by Daphne Johnson with the Ocean Data View (ODV) software ([Schlitzer, 2022](#)).

Another strong motivation for this work was the need to elucidate relations between the STFZ and ecology of Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*. In general, the ecological importance of the Southern Ocean STFZ has been widely recognized (e.g., [González Carman et al., 2019](#); [Clay et al., 2017](#)). In particular, the spatial association between the STF/STFZ and Chilean jack mackerel was recognized early on ([Evseenko, 1987](#); [Bailey, 1989](#)). Nonetheless, the role played by the South Pacific STFZ in the ecology of *T. murphyi* has not been emphasized in numerous ecological and fisheries oceanography studies (reviewed, among others, by [Gerlotto](#)

[and Dioses, 2013](#)). In many studies of *T. murphyi*, the South Pacific STFZ and its role were simply ignored. The present review is an attempt to rectify this situation.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows:

Section 2 covers Data and Methods.

Section 3 covers the satellite oceanography of the STFZ in the Southeast Pacific.

Section 4 covers the STFZ's role in the ecology of Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*.

Section 5 covers Discussion.

Section 6 covers Summary.

2. Data and Method

The majority of remote sensing studies of the central and eastern parts of the South Pacific STFZ were conducted in Russia and Ukraine and published almost exclusively in Russian. While the extreme westernmost and easternmost sectors were covered by studies conducted, respectively, in New Zealand and Chile, the vast swath of the South Pacific between the respective EEZs has not been a subject of peer-reviewed remote sensing studies by other countries except Russia and Ukraine. The present review is focused on this valuable information resource, which up to date remained largely untapped by the international community. Most studies reviewed in Section 3 used sea surface temperature (SST) satellite radiometer data while some used sea surface height (SSH) satellite altimetry data ([Table 1](#)); preliminary results based on sea surface salinity (SSS) from satellites ([Belkin and Shen, 2022](#)) are presented and briefly discussed in Section 5.

Table 1. Remote sensing studies of STFZ in the Southeast Pacific

*Acronyms and abbreviations: Var., Variable; MCSST, Multi-channel SST.

Source	Var.*	Sensor; Satellite	Period	Region	Resolution
Artamonov, Skripaleva 2006	SST	AVHRR	1985-2002	84°W	54 km, 1 mo.
Artamonov, Skripaleva 2008	SST	AVHRR	1985-2002	140°W-72°W	54 km, 1 mo.
Artamonov et al. 2009	SST	AVHRR	1985-2002	S. Ocean	54 km, 1 mo.
Gordeeva, Malinin 2006	SST	Misc.	1982-2003	100°W-77°W	111 km, 1 mo.
Krasnoborodko 2017	SST	Misc.	1971-2000	170°W-85°W	111 km, 1 mo.
Lebedev, Sirota 2007	SSH	TOPEX/Poseidon	1992-2003	110°W-80°W	111 km, 1 day
Lebedev, Sirota 2007	SST	MCSST*	1992-2003	110°W-80°W	18 km, 1 week
Malinin, Gordeeva 2009	SST	Misc.	1982-2003	100°W-77°W	111 km, 1 mo.
Sirota et al. 2004	SSH	TOPEX/Poseidon	1992-2003	109°W-90°W	111 km, 1 day

The Russian-language satellite oceanography papers ([Table 1](#)) constitute the only massive information source on this region to date. Given the potential value of this information and wide availability of computer translation, it is somewhat surprising that the information contained in these studies has never been synthesized. The main goal of the remote sensing studies reviewed in this paper was to provide an oceanographic background for Russian and Ukrainian fisheries that targeted a huge stock of the Chilean jack mackerel (*Trachurus murphyi*) west of the Chilean EEZ. The actual surge of Russian-Ukrainian remote sensing studies of the South Pacific STFZ began in the 2000s, that is many years after the collapse of the *T. murphyi* fisheries in the 1990s. A few research groups have been active at the same time, located in Moscow and Kaliningrad in Russia

and Sevastopol in Ukraine. These groups used similar methodological approaches to the STF detection: The STF was sought as the locus of maximum meridional gradient along a series of meridians, mostly in the SE Pacific.

3. Satellite oceanography of the STFZ in the Southeast Pacific

The below literature survey proceeds chronologically and includes all satellite oceanography papers on this region that are freely accessible on the Web to date (November 2022). No effort was spared to make this survey truly comprehensive; therefore, any omission is not intentional.

[Sirota et al. \(2004\)](#) mapped the South Pacific Current (SPC) as the locus of maximum gradients of dynamic topography (SSH), leaving aside the thorny issue of discrepancy between the locations of STF determined from hydrographic data (temperature and salinity) vs. those determined from SSH data (so-called “dynamic STF”; [Graham and DeBoer, 2013](#)). The discrepancy between the hydrographic STF and dynamic STF is caused by the density-compensated nature of the STF ([Stramma et al., 1995](#); [Tippins and Tomczak, 2003](#)). [Sirota et al. \(2004\)](#) used SSH data from the TOPEX/Poseidon satellite altimetry mission in 1992-2003 to map maximum SSH gradients in the South Pacific between 109°W and 90°W ([Fig. 2, top and middle panels](#)). The SPC was found to be nearly zonal between 109°W and 90°W, with a slight non-zonal spatial trend from 36°S in the west to 37°S in the east, across the study area. The slight deviation of the SPC from a strictly zonal trend contrasts with the distinct WNW-ESE trend of the STF determined from SST data and described below. The relative stability of the SPC path around 100°W noted by [Sirota et al. \(2004\)](#) is enigmatic as there is no steep topography that would stabilize the SPC path in this area.

In a follow-up study, [Lebedev and Sirota \(2007\)](#) expanded the study area eastward up to 80°W ([Fig. 2, bottom panel](#)). Also, in addition to mapping the SPC from the TOPEX/Poseidon SSH data (1992-2003), they mapped the STF from multi-channel SST data, MCSST. In both cases, the SPC and STF paths are nearly zonal and close to one another. The northward bend of the SPC east of 85°W is caused by the topographic deflection owing to the proximity of the South American continent. The *nearly zonal* path of STF determined by [Lebedev and Sirota \(2007\)](#) from MCSST is inconsistent with the *strongly non-zonal* path of STF in the same area determined by other researchers as discussed below.

Yu. V. Artamonov and collaborators ([Artamonov and Skripaleva, 2006](#); [Artamonov and Skripaleva, 2008](#); [Artamonov et al., 2009](#)) identified fronts with local maxima of meridional SST gradient. In a pilot study, [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2006\)](#) detected the STF along 84°W. Instead of a single STF as expected, they found two fronts separated by 3° of latitude. This two-front structure is remarkably consistent with the double-front structure (North and South STF) found by [Belkin \(1988\)](#) farther west. [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2006\)](#) reported seasonal variability of both fronts, including their latitude, meridional SST gradient, and axial SST ([Fig. 3](#)). Importantly, the axial SST of the NSTF/SSTF varies seasonally between 15.5-18°C and 14-15.5°C, respectively.

In a follow-up study, [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2008\)](#) mapped SST fronts of the Southeast Pacific east of 145°W ([Fig. 4](#) and [Fig. 5](#)). In addition to the northern branch and main branch of the STF identified by [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2006\)](#) along 84°W, [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2008\)](#) identified the southern branch of the STF.

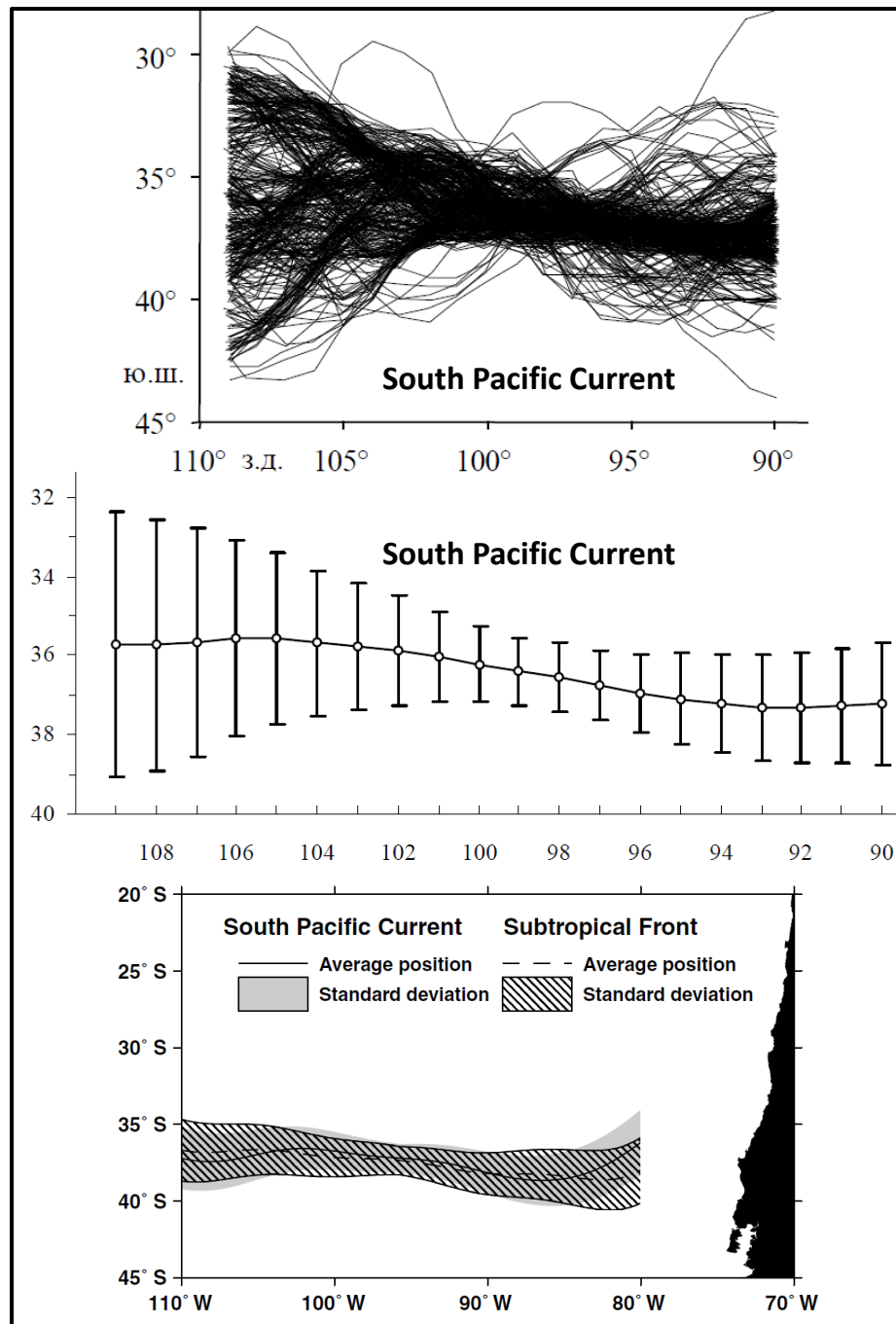


Fig. 2. Top panel: Location of the South Pacific Current (SPC) based on weekly maps of satellite altimeter SSH data from the TOPEX/Poseidon mission (1992-2003). Modified after [Sirota et al. \(2004, Fig. 21\)](#). **Middle panel:** Long-term mean and standard deviation of the SPC path. Modified after [Sirota et al. \(2004, Fig. 22\)](#). **Bottom panel:** Average position and standard deviation of the SPC based on the TOPEX/Poseidon satellite altimeter SSH data (1992-2003) and the Subtropical Front based on MCSST data (1982-2000). Modified after [Lebedev and Sirota \(2007, Fig. 4\)](#).

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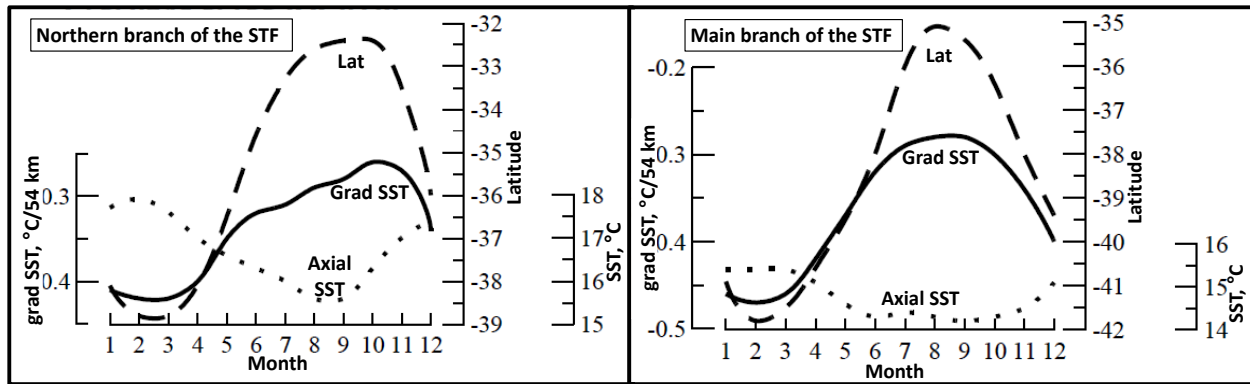


Fig. 3. Seasonal variability of the STF at 84°W. Modified after [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2006, Fig. 3\)](#).

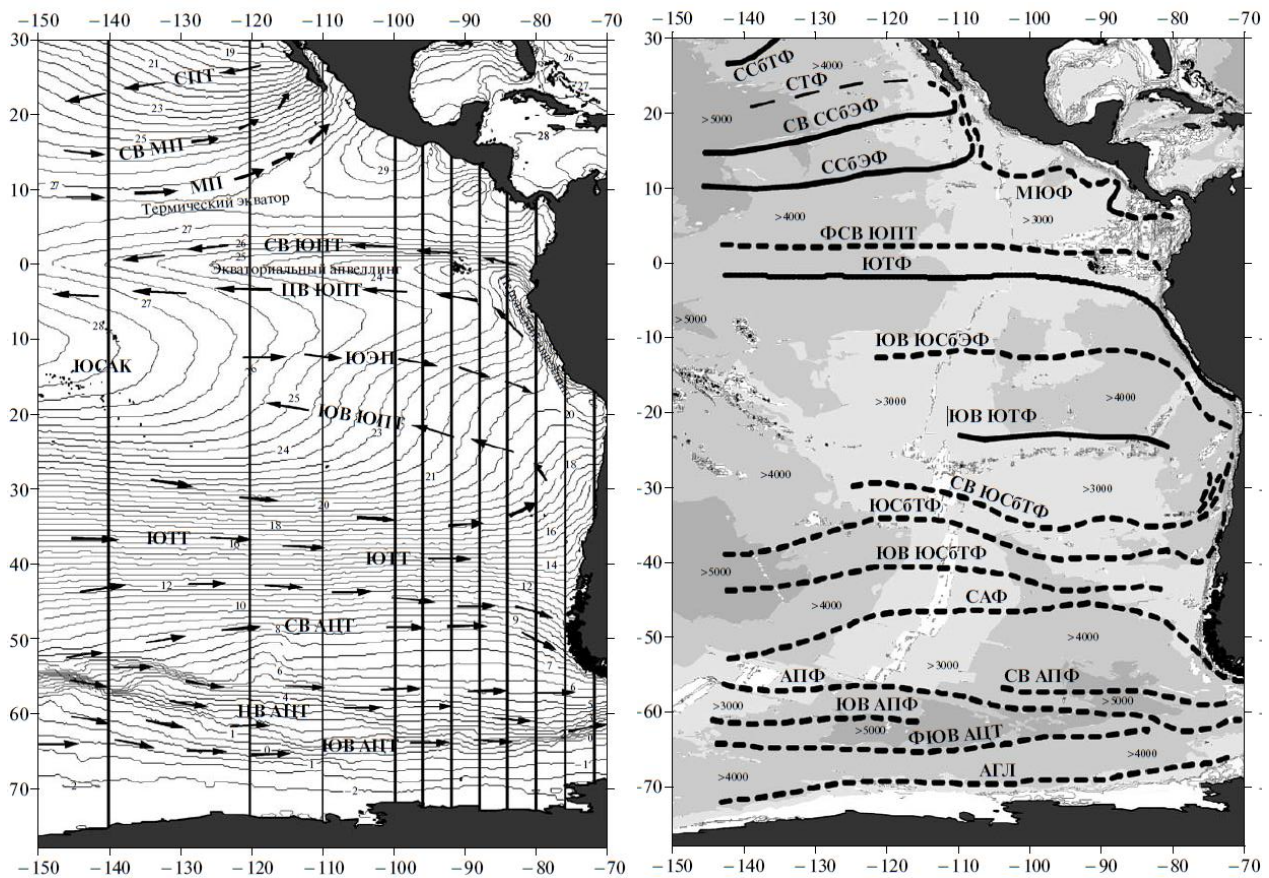


Fig. 4. Currents, SST, and SST fronts of the East Pacific Ocean. **Left panel:** Current directions (arrows) and SST (isotherms). **Right panel:** SST fronts over bathymetry. Modified after [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2008, Fig. 2\)](#).

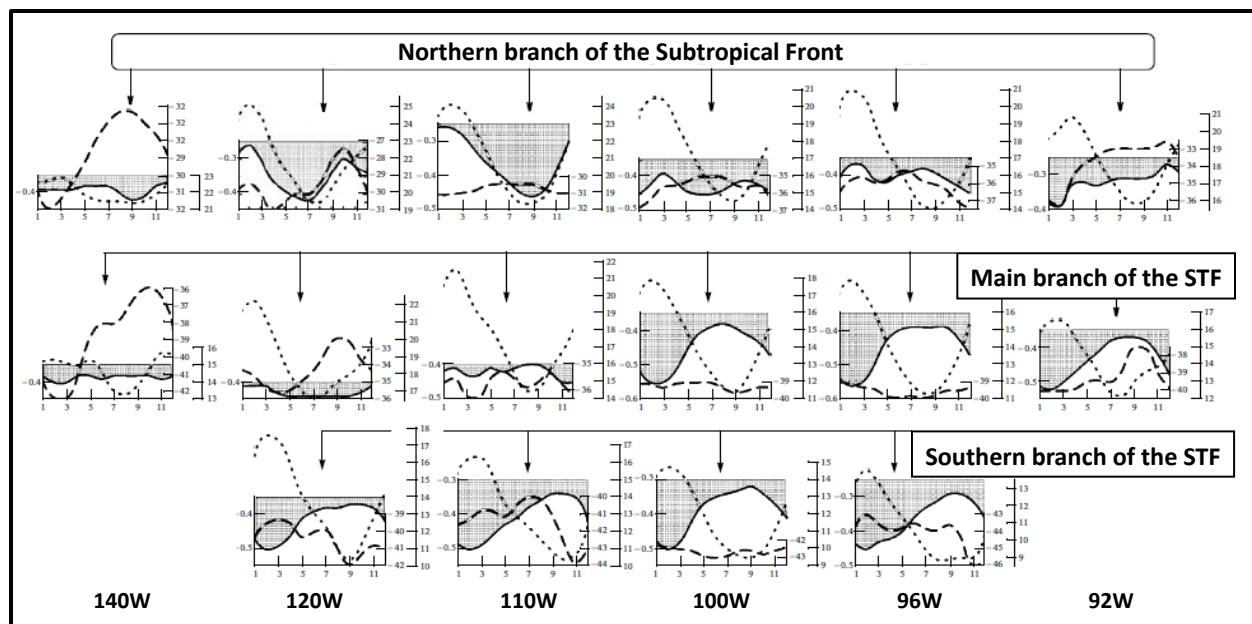


Fig. 5. Seasonal variability of SST fronts in the South Pacific along six meridians (from left to right): 140°W, 120°W, 110°W, 100°W, 96°W, and 92°W. Frontal paths (front axis) are shown with dashed lines, cross-frontal SST gradient – with solid lines, axial SST of fronts – with dotted lines. Modified after [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2008, Fig. 6\)](#).

[Artamonov et al. \(2009\)](#) expanded their study across the entire Southern Ocean. In the South Pacific, they mapped SST fronts along 170°E, 170°W, 140°W, 110°W, and 84°W from the Pathfinder AVHRR SST data, 1985-2002. However, this study is less detailed vs. [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2008\)](#), especially in the South Pacific.

Meanwhile, [Gordeeva and Malinin \(2006\)](#) studied the STF's space-time variability from SST data. They documented the long-term mean path of the STF ([Fig. 6](#)), revealing a marked *non-zonal* WNW-ESE spatial trend from 38°S at 100°W down to 42°S at 78°W, contrasting with the near-*zonal* STF path in [Sirota et al. \(2004\)](#) and [Lebedev and Sirota \(2007\)](#) ([Fig. 2](#)).

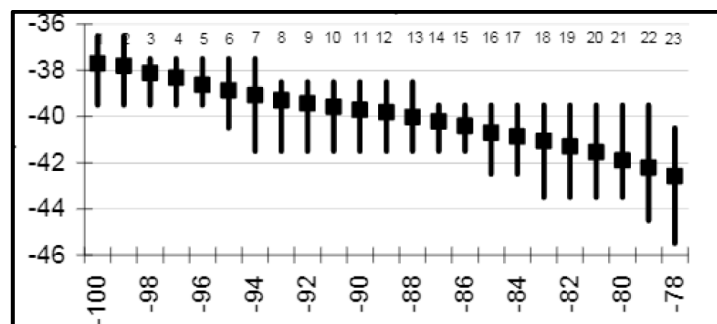


Fig. 6. Long-term mean path and variability of the STF from SST data. Modified after [Gordeeva and Malinin \(2006, Fig. 3\)](#).

[Gordeeva and Malinin \(2006\)](#) also documented the seasonal variability of the STF. The front migrates from its northernmost location in winter to its southernmost location in summer, with an annual amplitude of seasonal migrations of less than 3° of latitude ([Fig. 7](#)), which is consistent

with similar results by [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2008\)](#). This consistency throws some doubt onto the six-degree-of-latitude annual amplitude of seasonal migrations along 84°W determined earlier by [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2006\)](#).

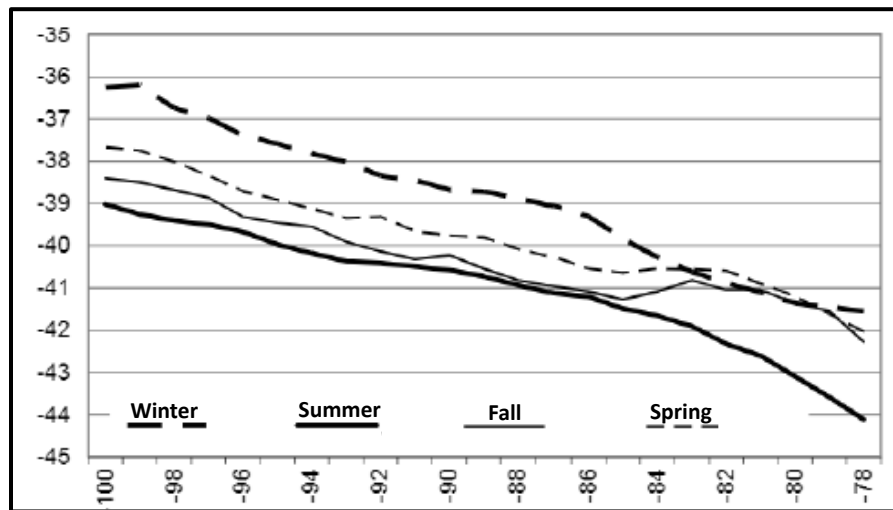


Fig. 7. Seasonal migrations of the STF from SST data. Modified after [Gordeeva and Malinin \(2006, Fig. 5a\)](#).

[Gordeeva and Malinin \(2006\)](#) also studied seasonal and spatial variability of cross-frontal SST gradient ([Fig. 8](#)). Across the entire study area (100°W-78°W), the cross-frontal gradient peaks during the austral summer and weakens during the austral winter, which is opposite to the findings by [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2006\)](#) and [Artamonov and Skripaleva \(2008\)](#) presented above, especially with regard to the main and southern branch of the STF that feature very weak cross-frontal gradients during the austral summer (February-March).

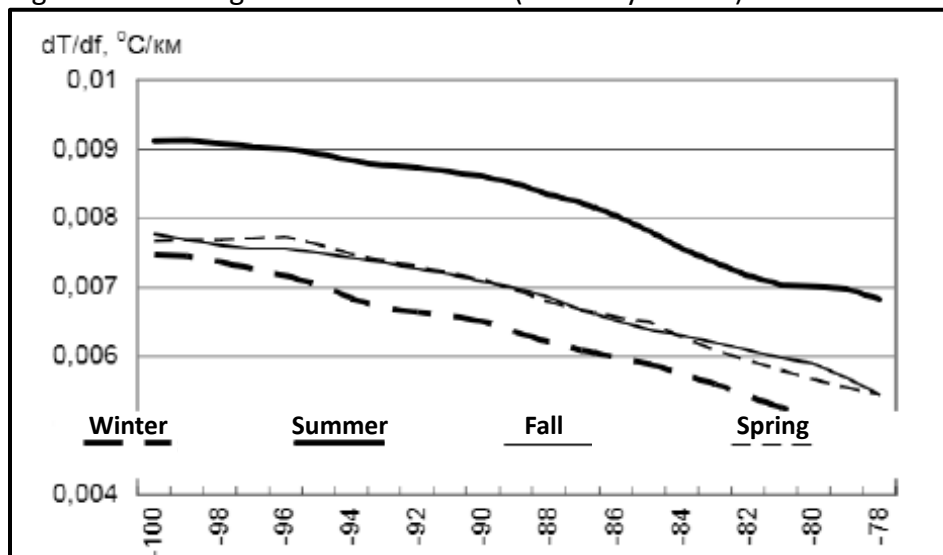


Fig. 8. Seasonal variability of cross-frontal (meridional) SST gradient. Modified after [Gordeeva and Malinin \(2006, Fig. 5b\)](#).

[Malinin and Gordeeva \(2009\)](#) estimated interannual migrations of the STF along 84.5°W and 78.5°W from SST data ([Fig. 9](#)). They noted a significant north-south migration of the STF between 1982 and 2006, when the front first dipped from 38.5°S to 42°S, then bounced back. This study is the only one of its kind to focus on the long-term variability of the South Pacific STFZ. Therefore, a follow-up study based on much longer datasets available today is urgently needed.

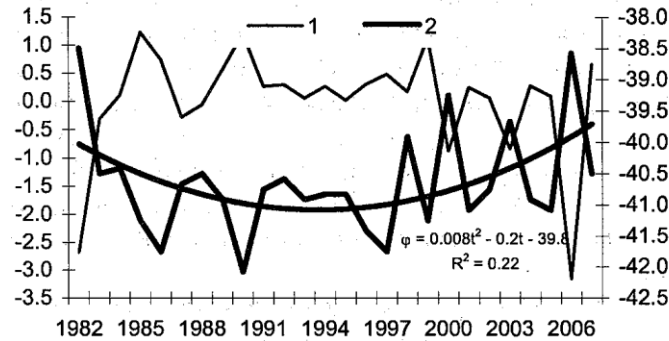


Fig. 9. Interannual shifts of the STF along 84.5°W. The front's latitude is shown with heavy line (2) and right-hand scale, while the first EOF is shown with thin line (1) and left-hand scale. After [Malinin and Gordeeva \(2009, Fig. 4.24\)](#).

[Krasnoborodko \(2017\)](#) studied the STF from SST data in the SE Pacific along five meridians between 105°W and 85°W ([Fig. 10](#)). The most notable result of this study is the strong non-zonal WNW-ESE trend of the STF, from 34°S-37°S at 105°W down to 40°S-43°S at 85°W. Thus, the spatial orientation of the STF in this study agrees quite precisely with the STF climatology by [Gordeeva and Malinin \(2006\)](#) presented above.

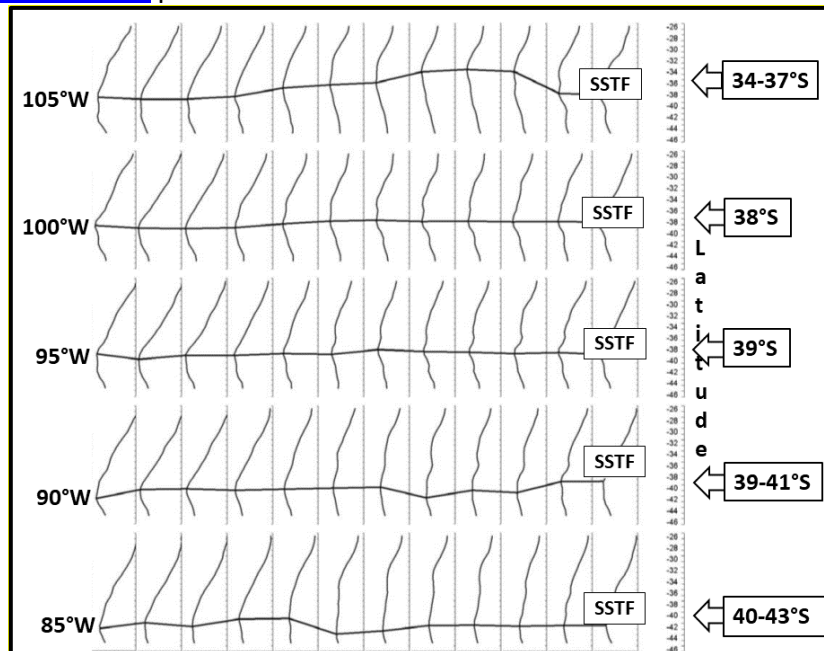


Fig. 10. Space-time variability of the SSTF from climatic SST data averaged on a regular 1° x 1° grid over 1970-2000. Cross-frontal SST gradient (X-axis) is plotted vs. latitude (Y-axis) for each month, from January on the left to December on the right. Gradient scale is 1°C per one degree of latitude. Modified after [Krasnoborodko \(2017, Fig. 2\)](#).

4. Subtropical Front and the ecology of Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*

Jack mackerel spawning in the Subtropical Frontal Zone: The key role of the Subtropical Front in the ecology of Chilean jack mackerel (CJM) *Trachurus murphyi* in the South Pacific was recognized early on. Based on the collections of *T. murphyi* larvae made off Peru in 1982 and in the central and western South Pacific in 1985, [Evseenko \(1987\)](#) pointed out that the spawning area of jack mackerel in the open ocean is confined to the “Subtropical Convergence Zone” (STCZ, the term replaced here by STFZ). The open ocean larvae analyzed by [Evseenko \(1987\)](#) were collected during the same cruise when the STFZ was mapped between New Zealand and 126°W (R/V *Dmitriy Mendelejev* Cruise 34; [Belkin, 1988](#); [Vinogradov and Flint, 1988](#)) ([Fig. 11](#)). Evseenko put the larvae distribution into an oceanographic context by adding to the larvae map the extreme seasonal locations of the 16°C isotherm in winter (August) and summer (March) (*ibid.*, [Fig. 4](#)). Assuming (reasonably) that the larvae caught at 139°W were brought from the west by an eastward current along the STFZ, Evseenko concluded that the spawning area extends westward up to 150-160°W.

The main conclusion by [Evseenko \(1987\)](#) about the CJM spawning within the STCZ was confirmed with a much larger data set by [Bailey \(1989\)](#) who noted (*ibid.*, p. 273): “The predominance of *T. murphyi* in the diet of albacore suggests that the jack mackerel are abundant between latitudes 34°S and 41°S, longitudes 127°W and 165°W during the austral summer.” [Bailey \(1989\)](#) extended the jack mackerel spawning area westward up to the Chatham Rise, presented evidence of the transpacific distribution of jack mackerel along the Subtropical Convergence Zone, and concluded (*ibid.*, p. 277): “It is apparent that *Trachurus murphyi* is found and likely spawn across the South Pacific from New Zealand to Chile.” The strong spatial correlation between the Subtropical Front (Convergence) and CJM spawning/nursing grounds has been confirmed in numerous studies ([Núñez et al., 2004](#); [Cubillos et al., 2008](#); [Núñez et al., 2010](#); [Vásquez et al., 2013](#)). Based on data collected in >200 research and fisheries expeditions, [Elizarov et al. \(1993\)](#) have documented the CJM range and coined the term “**jack mackerel belt**” to describe the distribution of *T. murphyi* in the South Pacific. [Elizarov et al. \(1993\)](#) presented two maps showing the entire jack mackerel distribution range that encompasses a wide zonal belt (“distribution belt”) between 34-35°S and 48-50°S ([Fig. 12 a, b](#)) and two maps showing a narrow zonal belt (“spawning belt”) between 34°S and 41°S ([Fig. 12 c, d](#)), the latter coinciding with the STFZ ([Fig. 1](#) and [Fig. 11](#)). The spawning belt is in-between the summer and winter locations of the 16°C isotherm as postulated by [Evseenko \(1987, Fig. 4\)](#). The annual north-south shift of the 16°C isotherm is about five degrees of latitude (between 35-40°S) as evident from monthly SST maps ([Fig. 13](#)) ([Malinin and Gordeeva, 2009, Fig. 5.7 and Fig. 5.8](#)). Thus, the annual envelope of the 16°C isotherm (35-40°S) coincides with both the STFZ ([Fig. 1](#) and [Fig. 11](#)) and CJM spawning belt ([Fig. 12 c, d](#)).

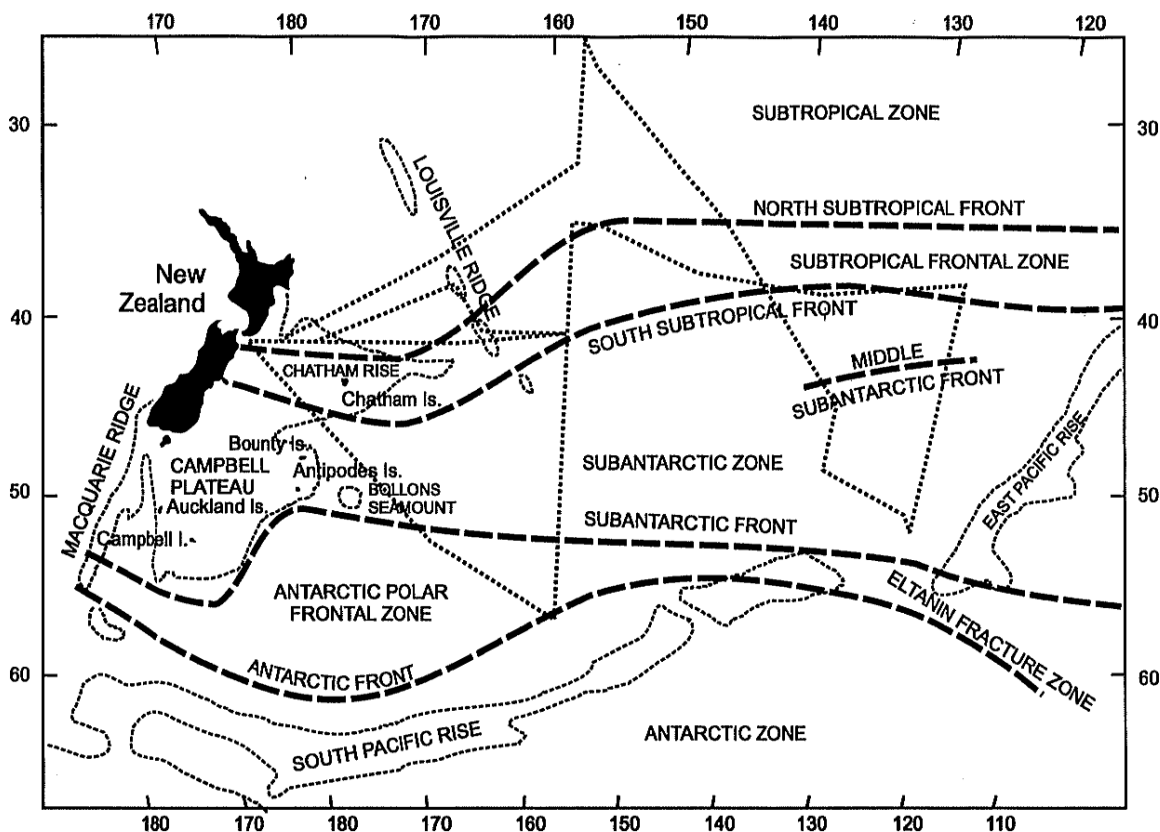


Fig. 11. Fronts of the South Pacific (Belkin, 1988, Fig. 1.4). Dotted line, 3000 m isobath. Short-dashed line, R/V *Dmitriy Mendeleev* Cruise 34.

Population structure of jack mackerel and along-STF connectivity: [Evseenko \(1987\)](#) considered three hypotheses: (1) single population, (2) separate inshore and offshore populations, and (3) offshore population dependent on the inshore population. [Evseenko \(1987\)](#) settled at the 3rd hypothesis by eliminating the first two. The population structure of jack mackerel in the South Pacific remained a hotly debated topic ever since ([Serra, 1991](#); [Taylor, 2002](#); [Cárdenas et al., 2009](#); [Ashford et al., 2011](#); [Gerlotto et al., 2012](#); [Vásquez et al., 2013](#); [Zhu et al., 2014](#); [Dragon et al., 2017](#); [Parada et al., 2017](#); [Gerlotto et al., 2021](#)).

The eastward South Pacific Current ([Stramma et al., 1995](#)) associated with the STF provides physical connectivity (“the along-STF connectivity”) across the South Pacific, where in the open ocean there are no barriers (e.g., submarine ridges) that would help create circulation cells with isolated populations. In the Southwest Pacific, the Louisville Seamount Chain may constrain deep-water and abyssal circulation but not the upper layer (0-300 m) circulation, which is most important to jack mackerel. Only in the easternmost Southeast Pacific, the Juan Fernandez Archipelago serves as a partial barrier to the westerlies and South Pacific Current, creating a low-wind, slow-current area in the wake of the islands, between the archipelago and Chile. This area may serve as an ichthyoplankton retention zone. It’s in this general area west of Central Chile where [Nuñez et al. \(2010\)](#) reported by far the largest concentrations of eggs and larvae of *T. murphyi* found during November-December.

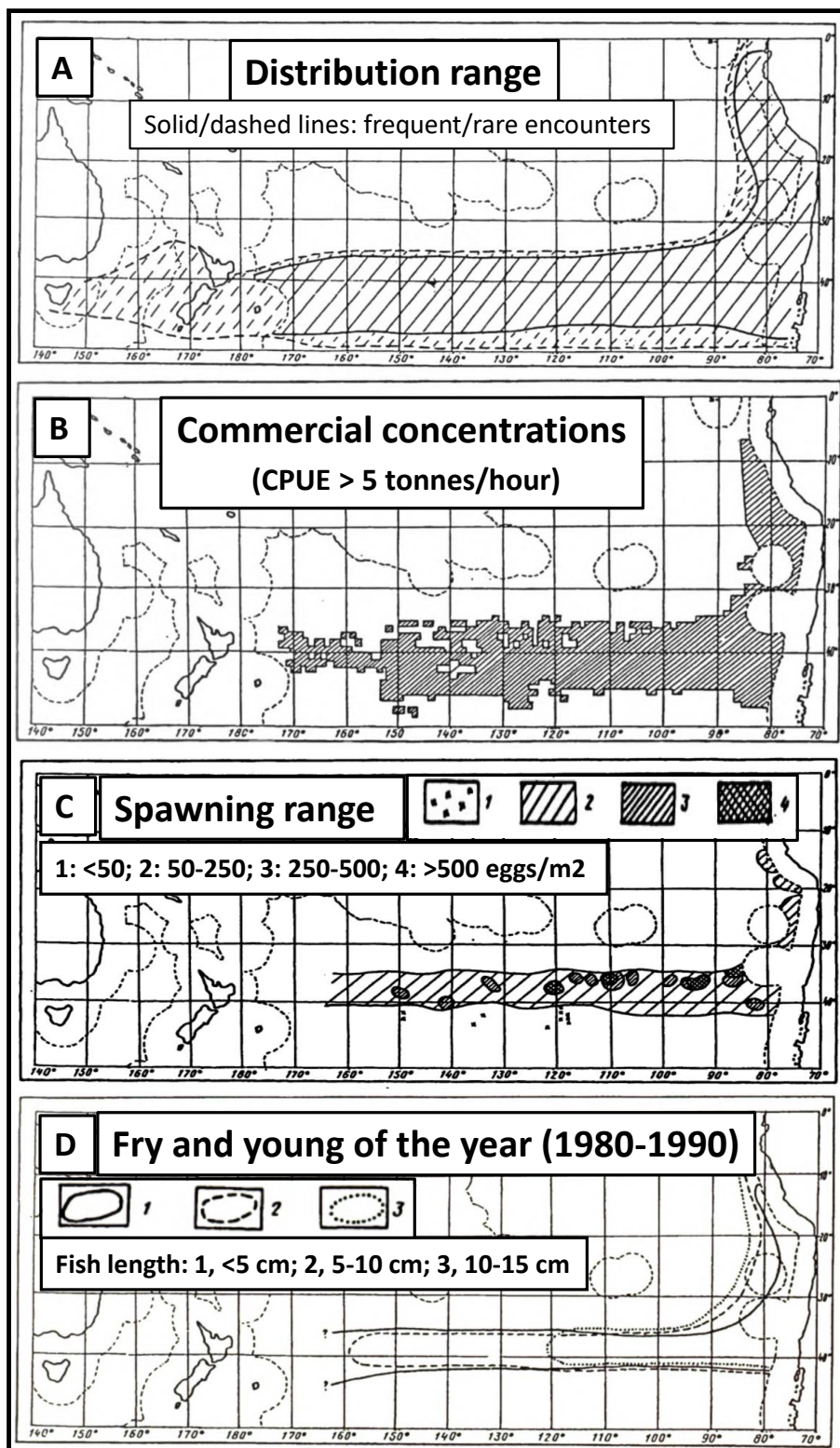


Fig. 12. Distribution range (A), CPUE (B), spawning range (C), and fry/juveniles (D) of *T. murphyi* (Elizarov et al., 1993, Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively).

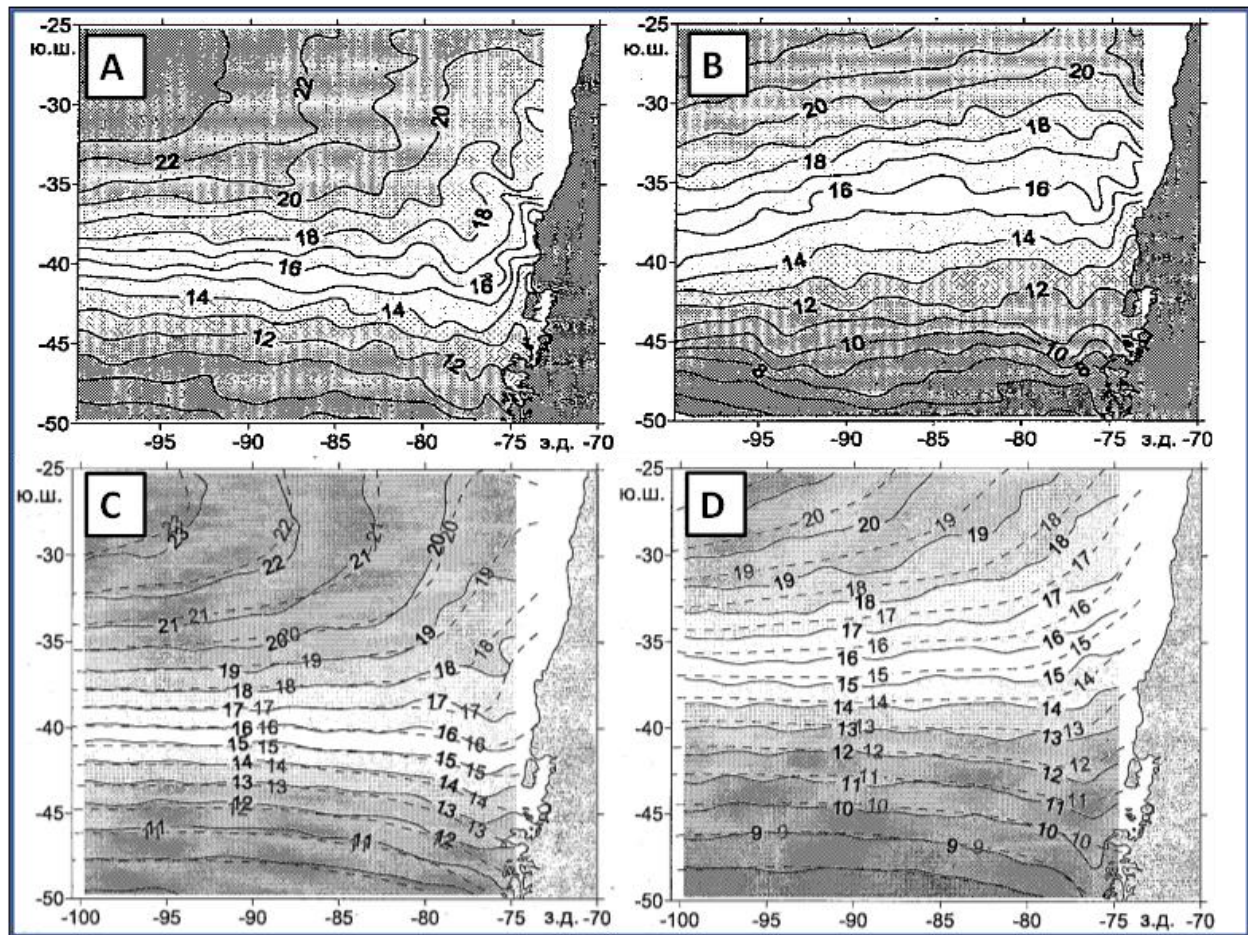


Fig. 13. Monthly SST distributions in the SE Pacific. Modified after [Malinin and Gordeeva \(2009, Figs. 5.7 and 5.8\)](#). (A), March 1982; (B), December 1986; (C), January (long-term mean); (D), June (long-term mean). Data sources: A and B, SODA; C and D, SODA (solid lines) and RESM (dashes). The 16°C isotherm migrates seasonally between 35°S in winter and 40°S in summer. These latitudes approximate, respectively, the North STF and South STF that act as physical boundaries of the Chilean jack mackerel spawning belt ([Fig. 12 c, d](#)).

Drawing upon an extensive review of fisheries and biological data, [Serra \(1991\)](#) postulated the existence of two self-sustaining populations, one off Peru and another off Chile, with a boundary between the two stocks “somewhere off southern Peru” (*ibid.*, p. 79). The two-stock concept by [Serra \(1991\)](#) has been the organizing focus of many studies, particularly in South America (Julian Ashford, pers. comm., 2021). With regard to the STF, the two-stock concept is of less importance than the “metapopulation” concept (e.g., [Gerlotto et al., 2012](#); [Gerlotto et al., 2021](#)), in which the along-STF connectivity plays a key role. As pointed out by Julian Ashford (pers. comm., 2021), “rather than discrete populations separated by boundaries, the otolith chemistry indicated nucleus chemistry in NZ fish consistent with origin along the STF. The chemistry also suggested that transport in the STF connected life history habitats in the Southeastern Pacific; and

heterogeneity was due to extensive mixing between fish from the large spawning zone and smaller, more ephemeral groups surviving in areas with similar conditions along the coast off Chile and Peru.”

Jack mackerel distribution and Subtropical Front: Despite the common recognition of the important role played by the STFZ in the ecology of jack mackerel, very few field studies to date are based on dedicated oceanographic surveys of the STFZ. Instead, most studies resorted to fishery-dependent data from commercial fisheries augmented by remote sensing data such as SST, SSH, and CHL (e.g., [Bertrand et al., 2016](#); [Li et al., 2016](#); [Parada et al., 2017](#)). The spatial association between the STFZ and *T. murphyi* is revealed by fishing fleet distribution data. During the maximum extent of Russian fisheries in 1978-1992 ([Fig. 14](#)) the fleet distribution in the open ocean was spatially congruent with the STFZ, extending zonally across the entire South Pacific from the Chilean EEZ to the New Zealand EEZ in the 34°S-48°S zonal band, aligned with and encompassing the STFZ. The 14-degree latitudinal span of the fleet distribution in [Fig. 14](#) exceeds the 5-degree latitudinal span of the STFZ ([Fig. 11](#)) by extending south, down to 48°S, into colder subantarctic waters, where adult fish forage for larger prey ([Vinogradov M.E. et al., 1991](#)).

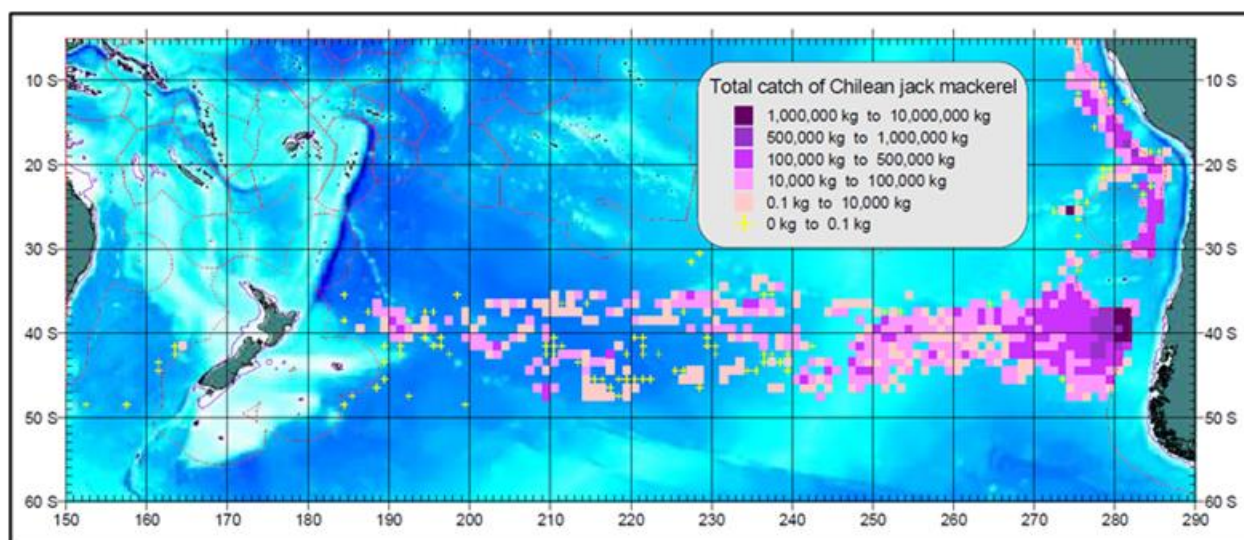


Fig. 14. Catches of *T. murphyi* by Russian fisheries vessels in 1978-1992 ([Trotsenko et al., 2006](#)). Reproduced after [Timokhin and Kukharev \(2008, Fig. 2\)](#).

[Soldat et al. \(2008\)](#) presented quarterly maps ([Fig. 15](#)) that imply a rather strong concentration of Russian fishing vessels within a relatively narrow zonal band just a few hundred km wide at a time, extending from Chile westward into the Central South Pacific. This zonal band shifts seasonally, with the annual amplitude of seasonal south-to-north shifts of up to 14° of latitude, from 49°S during the 1st quarter to 35°S during the 4th quarter, in 1982-1991. Distribution of Chinese fishing vessels ([Li et al., 2013](#); [Li et al., 2016](#); [Feng et al., 2021](#)) reveals a similar pattern, with the fishing fleet shifting seasonally south-to-north by 10° of latitude, from 47°S in March to 37°S in July, in 2013-2017 ([Feng et al., 2021, Fig. 1](#)). The most detailed annual distribution maps of European fisheries in 2007-2009 ([Corten, 2009, Figs. 4-6](#)) reveal steady

month-to-month northward progression of the fleet from 47°S in April to 30°S in October, apparently following seasonal migrations of *T. murphyi*.

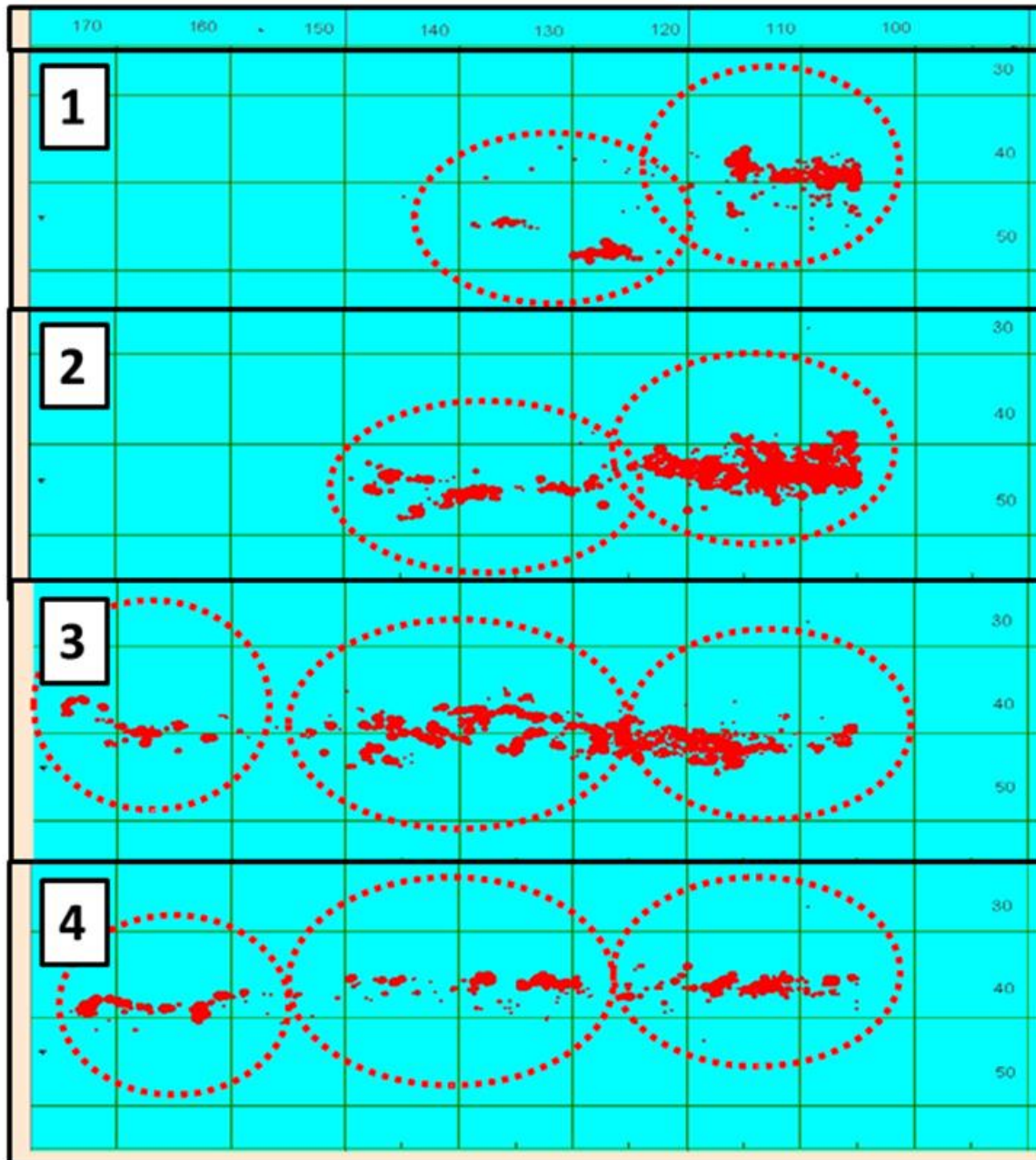


Fig. 15. Quarterly maps of Chilean jack mackerel catches by Russian vessels in 1982-1991. Modified after [Soldat et al. \(2008\)](#).

Climatological monthly maps of jack mackerel habitat probability by [Bertrand et al. \(2016\)](#) reveal a trans-ocean zonal belt of elevated probabilities in the 35-50°S range (*ibid.*, [Fig. 3](#)) aligned with the STFZ envelope ([Fig. 11](#)). This belt experiences seasonal meridional shifts by about 7-8° of latitude (*ibid.*, [Fig. 4](#)). With regards to interannual variability of its location, this zonal belt appears robust (*ibid.*, [Fig. 6](#)). The long-term stability of the STFZ location is consistent with Russian

fishery distribution data. When after a 10-year hiatus the Russian fishery resumed its operations in the Southeast Pacific in 2002, the spatial pattern of the fishery remained intact ([Vinogradov V.I. et al., 2013](#)). The maximum CPUE values were recorded within a narrow zonal belt between 34°S-37°S ([Fig. 16](#)) nearly collocated with the STFZ ([Fig. 11](#)). The affinity of *T. murphyi* to the STFZ seemed to increase westward ([Fig. 16](#)).

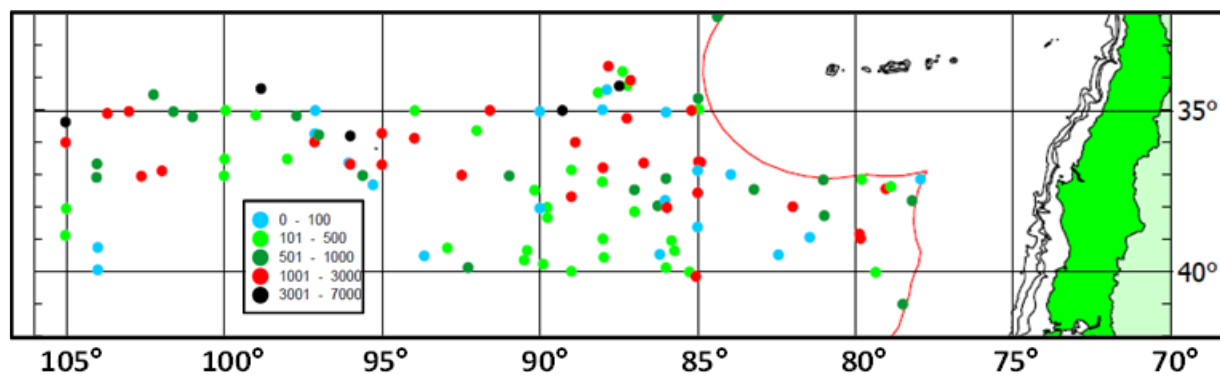


Fig. 16. Catches of *T. murphyi* (CPUE, kg/hour) in October 2002-January 2003 during the RF/V *Atlantida* Cruise 53. Modified after [Vinogradov V.I. et al. \(2013, Fig. 1\)](#). The maximum CPUE values (>1000 kg/hour) were recorded within a narrow zonal band between 34°S and 37°S nearly collocated with the STFZ ([Fig. 11](#)).

A caveat is warranted regarding possible interpretations of seasonal shifts of fisheries that are often ascribed to the concurrent shifts of the STF. According to this view, the fisheries follow the fish that follow the STF. There are two problems with this interpretation. First, the annual amplitude of seasonal north-south shifts of the STF in the Southeast Pacific is between 1.5° and 3° of latitude, depending on longitude ([Fig. 7](#)). Meanwhile, as noted above, the annual amplitude of seasonal south-to-north shifts of Russian, Chinese, and European fisheries in the Southeast Pacific is up to, respectively, 14°, 10°, and 17° of latitude. Clearly, there is a radical mismatch between the magnitudes of the seasonal shifts of the fisheries and STF.

The second problem is that the seasonal north-south migrations of jack mackerel are not necessarily caused by the water temperature. Moreover, they are not *primarily* caused by the water temperature. As pointed out, among others, by [Vinogradov M.E. et al. \(1991\)](#), adult fish move south, into colder subantarctic water, in search of larger prey: “The feeding area appears to be between 45 and 50°S, where rich feeding grounds are found, providing the most effective foraging. Thus, it should be assumed that seasonal migrations of jack mackerel are determined not by following the displacement of a hydrological “front” but are associated with the seasonal change of feeding grounds, different for juveniles and adult fish.” [Taylor \(2002\)](#) summed up the [Vinogradov M.E. et al. \(1991\)](#) conclusions as follows: “Spawning aggregations of jack mackerel occur to the north in waters of the subtropical frontal zone (STFZ) at the frontal break at about 40°S, characterized by small food warm water (summer SST is 16-18°C), and less seasonal change in plankton biomass than the more southerly zone. Between 45 and 50°S is the feeding zone characterized by rich areas of larger food items. Thus, it follows that seasonal migrations are not due to following the shifts of hydrological fronts, but are associated with seasonal changes in feeding area, which are different for the young and adults.”

Subtropical Front and spawning grounds of jack mackerel: The spawning grounds of jack mackerel are associated with a relatively narrow SST range of 15-19°C typical of the STFZ ([Cubillos et al., 2008](#); [Dragon et al., 2017](#)). Based on four ship surveys in oceanic waters (32°S-39°S, 75°W-92°W) off central Chile in November-December 1998-2001, [Cubillos et al. \(2008, p. 268\)](#) concluded that “suitable conditions for spawning could be related to SSTs higher than 15-16°C. In fact, it is probable that these temperatures are related to the ‘subtropical frontal zone’, to the north of 40°S... In terms of the spawning boundaries, the offshore boundary was never resolved by the surveys, but the main spawning was maximal at 35°S and sea surface temperatures higher than 15-16°C.” Consistent with other works, numerous Russian studies (including earlier papers reviewed by [Taylor \(2002\)](#)) relate the spatial distribution of jack mackerel larvae and juveniles with SST of 15-19°C typical of the STFZ. Spawning at fronts can be advantageous for fishes owing to the rapid dispersal of fish eggs by current jets associated with most fronts.

Adult fishes leave the Subtropical Frontal Zone to forage in colder subantarctic waters: Numerous studies focused on temperature ranges preferred by *T. murphyi* during different life stages, often using SST and certain temperature indices as proxies. There is a consensus regarding *T. murphyi* spawning at relatively high temperatures typical of the northern periphery of the STFZ. Juveniles remain in or near the STFZ, where they feed mostly on small prey ([Fig. 12 c, d](#)) ([Elizarov et al., 1993](#)). Adult fish spend most of their time in colder waters typical of the southern periphery of the STFZ and northern part of the subantarctic zone, south of the STFZ, down to 48°S in the SE Pacific, where they feed on larger prey ([Vinogradov M.E. et al., 1991](#)). Since adult fishes forage in northern subantarctic waters south of the STFZ, higher CPUEs are associated with colder SST of 12-15°C ([Li et al., 2013](#)). Seasonal variability of optimum SST ranges associated with highest CPUEs (based on Chinese fishery-dependent data) is documented by [Li et al. \(2016\)](#): Seasonal distributions of SST are approximately Gaussian (except summer), with modal SST of 19°C, 13°C, 14°C, and 15°C in summer, fall, winter, and spring, respectively (*ibid.*, Fig. 2). The modal SSTs determined by [Li et al. \(2016\)](#) are within the optimum SST ranges determined by [Zhang et al. \(2015\)](#): 15-19°C in summer, 13-15°C in fall, 12-14°C in winter, and 13-16°C in spring. The main fishing area off central-southern Chile is usually demarcated by the 15°C isotherm ([Arcos et al., 2001](#); [Li et al., 2013](#); [Li et al., 2016](#)).

Jack mackerel's affinity to the Subtropical Front: Based on Russian fishery data from austral winter 2020, [Dubishchuk \(2021\)](#) reported elevated catches of *T. murphyi* associated with a narrow range of SST (<1°C) identified as the STF and spatially confined to just one-degree range of latitudes. Indeed, the maximum catches were linked to SST between 14.9°C and 15.2°C observed between 26°S and 27°S ([Fig. 17](#)). North of 26°S, in warmer waters (SST>15.5°C), catches decreased, whereas south of 27°S, in colder waters (SST<14.7°C), jack mackerel was nearly absent ([Dubishchuk, 2021](#)). The extremely narrow range of SST associated with maximum CPUE is suggestive of jack mackerel seeking the water mass convergence embedded into the front and probably using water temperature as a cue. Such front-related convergences feature elevated concentrations of zooplankton (main staple of jack mackerel) and are typically accompanied by enhanced cross-frontal gradients of properties.

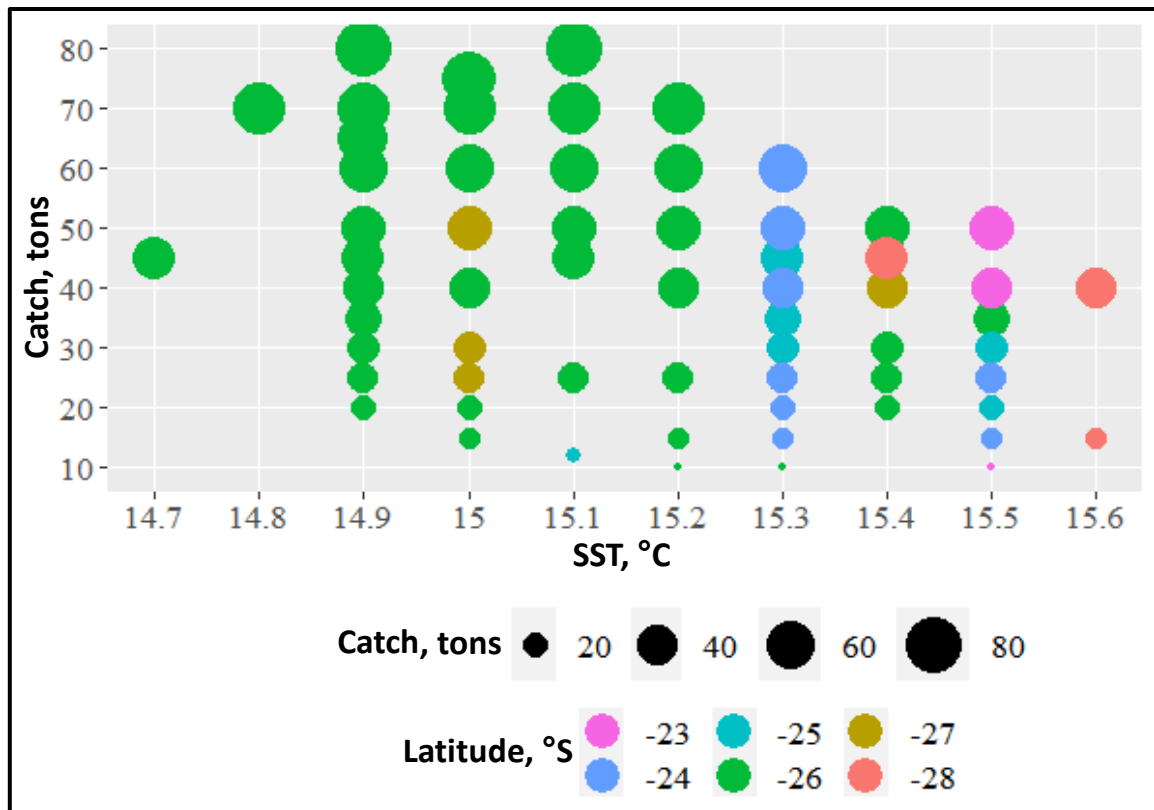


Fig. 17. Average catches of *T. murphyi* per trawling operation versus latitude and SST during austral winter 2020 (mid-August through early October) in the vicinity of the STF off central Chile (23-29°S, 74-76°W) ([Dubishchuk, 2021, Fig. 4](#)). All latitudes are rounded down; for example, 23 means the 23.00-23.99 range.

Migration of jack mackerel along the Subtropical Front: The jack mackerel's length and age in the South Pacific increase westward (e.g., [Horn and Maolagáin, 2021](#)). The most obvious explanation of this trend is the westward migration of jack mackerel. The eastward South Pacific Current (approximately collocated with the STFZ) is rather sluggish, with mean surface velocities of 2 cm/s east of 100°W according to [Chaigneau and Pizarro \(2005b\)](#) and geostrophic transport of 2 to 5 Sv ([Stramma et al., 1995](#)). Therefore, the jack mackerel could swim long distances against this current without expending too much energy fighting the opposing current. [Horn and Maolagáin \(2021\)](#) analyzed otoliths from *T. murphyi* collected off New Zealand in 2007-2019 and concluded that there were at least two invasions of jack mackerel from the high seas into the New Zealand waters. The STFZ is the most plausible path taken by the immigrant *T. murphyi* coming toward New Zealand from the east.

There are two alternative mechanisms facilitating the westward migration of jack mackerel in the South Pacific: (1) westward countercurrent ([McGinnis, 1974](#)); (2) westward propagation of mesoscale eddies ([Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005a](#)). These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are rather complementary. [McGinnis \(1974\)](#) mapped spatial distribution of lanternfish larvae that revealed a distinct trend of westward increase of larval age. Since the larvae are poor swimmers, they are passive tracers of ocean currents. Thus, McGinnis concluded that the larvae are carried to the west by a westward current that flows against the broad

eastward West Wind Drift. [Deacon \(1977\)](#) supported McGinnis' hypothesis by pointing out the existence of a westward wedge of low-salinity water in the subantarctic zone west of Chile as a proof of a westward current. The low-salinity wedge originates off the Chilean coast owing to the copious amount of precipitation falling onto the western slopes of the Andes and feeding numerous rivers draining the slopes ([Dávila et al., 2002](#); [Saldías et al., 2019](#)). For an alternative, model-based explanation of the westward wedge of low salinity see [Karstensen \(2004\)](#).

The existence of a westward current was further supported by [Neshyba and Fonseca \(1980\)](#) and [Uribe et al. \(1982\)](#) who conducted an oceanographic survey based on a meridional high-resolution (11 km) XBT section along 92°W, from 45° to 35°S, in February 1979, and presented physical evidence of a counterflow to the eastward West Wind Drift corroborated by biological evidence based on the biogeography of phytoplankton sampled during the oceanographic survey, particularly the pennate diatom *Nitzschia longissimi*, which is “generally associated with shallow coastal waters and which comprises a major fraction of the phytoplankton assemblage near the frontal zone [STFZ] but within the low-salinity tongue.” ([Uribe et al., 1982, p. 1229](#)).

Another mechanism that explains the observed length/age distribution of Chilean jack mackerel in the South Pacific is the westward movement of mesoscale eddies (“eddy trains”) generated off Chile ([Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005a](#); [Belmadani et al., 2017](#); [Belmadani et al., 2021](#)). For any marine animal (including fish) inside a mesoscale eddy in this region, traveling westward with the eddy is energetically advantageous vs. swimming against the eastward currents that dominate this region. In addition to the “free ride” inside westward-moving mesoscale eddies, fish may seek out such eddies owing to the prey concentration inside mesoscale eddies. The affinity of various marine animals, including fish, to mesoscale eddies has been documented in numerous studies, some of them reviewed by [Belkin \(2021\)](#).

The continuous migration along the STFZ is consistent with the concept of a single population (or pelagic meta-population) of jack mackerel encompassing the entire subtropical-subantarctic belt between Chile and New Zealand ([Cárdenas et al., 2009](#); [Bertrand et al., 2016](#)). An alternative concept envisions a few distinct populations (or sub-populations) of *T. murphyi* within the STFZ ([Elizarov et al., 1993](#); [Soldat et al., 2008](#); [Ashford et al., 2011](#); [Gerlotto et al., 2012](#); [Dragon et al., 2017](#); [Parada et al., 2017](#)). From a purely oceanographic viewpoint, the multi-stock hypothesis lacks strong support. Indeed, the relatively smooth bathymetry inside this latitudinal belt could not play any substantial role in the presumed isolation of such individual stocks from one another. There are no meridional topographic barriers (steep submarine ridges or seamount chains like the Louisville Seamount Chain in the SW Pacific) that could facilitate the emergence of isolated circulation cells in the upper few hundred meters that could serve as habitats of choice for isolated populations of *T. murphyi*.

Nonetheless, seamounts in the 33-39°S, 105-120°W area could play a certain role in the formation of a partly isolated spawning/nursery ground ([Parada et al., 2017](#)), especially because this area is traversed by the STFZ ([Belkin, 1988](#); [Tsuchiya and Talley, 1996](#); [Tsuchiya and Talley, 1998](#); [Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005c](#)) and associated South Pacific Current ([Stramma et al., 1995](#); [Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005b](#)). These seamounts can impede the westward propagation of mesoscale eddies emanated from the Chile-Peru Current ([Chaigneau and Pizarro, 2005a](#)), thereby contributing to the formation of a shadow zone of eddy activity ([Parada et al., 2017](#)) favorable for the existence of an isolated population of *T. murphyi*.

5. Discussion

Spatial discordance between temperature and salinity manifestations of the STF: All remote sensing studies based on SST data and reviewed in Section 3 arrived at the same spatial trend: Namely, in the Southeast Pacific, the SST-based STF/STFZ extends from WNW to ESE. At the same time, studies based on *in-situ* hydrographic data ([Stramma et al., 1995](#); [Koshlyakov and Tarakanov, 2005](#)) arrived at a different spatial trend: Across the entire South Pacific, the salinity-based STF/STFZ extends from WSW to ENE. The dynamic STF (identified with maximum gradient of SSH) is approximately zonal across the Southeast Pacific (see Section 3), thus being spatially dissociated from either the temperature or salinity manifestations of the STF. The spatial discordance between thermohaline and dynamic manifestations of the STF in the Southern Ocean was previously reported by [Stramma and Peterson \(1990\)](#), [Stramma \(1992\)](#), [Stramma and Lutjeharms \(1997\)](#), [James et al. \(2002\)](#), [Tippins and Tomczak \(2003\)](#), [Wong and Johnson \(2003\)](#), [Hamilton \(2006\)](#), and [Graham and de Boer \(2013\)](#), and was attributed to the density compensation of temperature and salinity across the STF. This phenomenon was also observed in the North Pacific, where thermohaline fronts in the upper mixed layer on horizontal scales from 20 m to 10 km were found to be density-compensated ([Rudnick and Ferrari, 1999](#)).

Recently, [Belkin and Shen \(2022\)](#) explored the potential of satellite SSS data application for front mapping in the Southern Ocean, particularly with regard to the STF mapping. Using SMOS data from 2012-2019, we studied seasonal and interannual variability of the SSS manifestation of the circumpolar STFZ. Here we present two maps (SSS and grad SSS) from the Southeast Pacific ([Fig. 18](#)). The grad SSS map ([Fig. 18, bottom panel](#)) shows the STFZ as a broad (5° of latitude) zonal frontal zone between 30°S and 35°S. Monthly maps of grad SSS (not shown) reveal an intricate internal structure of the STFZ consisting of multiple disconnected frontal segments. These maps also show relatively small (1-2° of latitude) seasonal north-south shifts of the SSS-defined STFZ.

Salinity data in fish ecology: Very few population models to date used salinity and salinity gradient as explanatory variables even though the STF is well known as a distinct salinity front ([Belkin, 1988](#); [Stramma et al., 1995](#); [Koshlyakov and Tarakanov, 2005](#)). Therefore, owing to the important ecological role of the STF, salinity and salinity gradients should be included into population models. Surprisingly though, this is not always the case, even in the most recent studies (e.g., [Vásquez et al., 2020](#)). For example, using habitat suitability index (HSI) models to examine spatial patterns of *Dosidicus gigas* (Humboldt squid) and *Trachurus murphyi* off Chile, [Feng et al. \(2022\)](#) used SSS for *D. gigas* but not for *T. murphyi* even though SSS data for the latter was available. In most case studies, the dearth of salinity data remains a major impediment to the inclusion of salinity into various models. Even when XBT data are collected every 30 to 40 km along shipping lanes crossing the STFZ, salinity data are collected less frequently by expensive XCTDs ([Wong and Johnson, 2003](#)). The data paucity problem could be solved by the development of automated flow-through thermosalinographs (TSG) for fishing fleets operating in the STFZ. The full potential of satellite SSS data should be utilized as well. Our current study has shown that satellite SSS data can be used to map large-scale fronts in the Southern Ocean ([Belkin and Shen, 2022](#)) ([Fig. 18](#)).

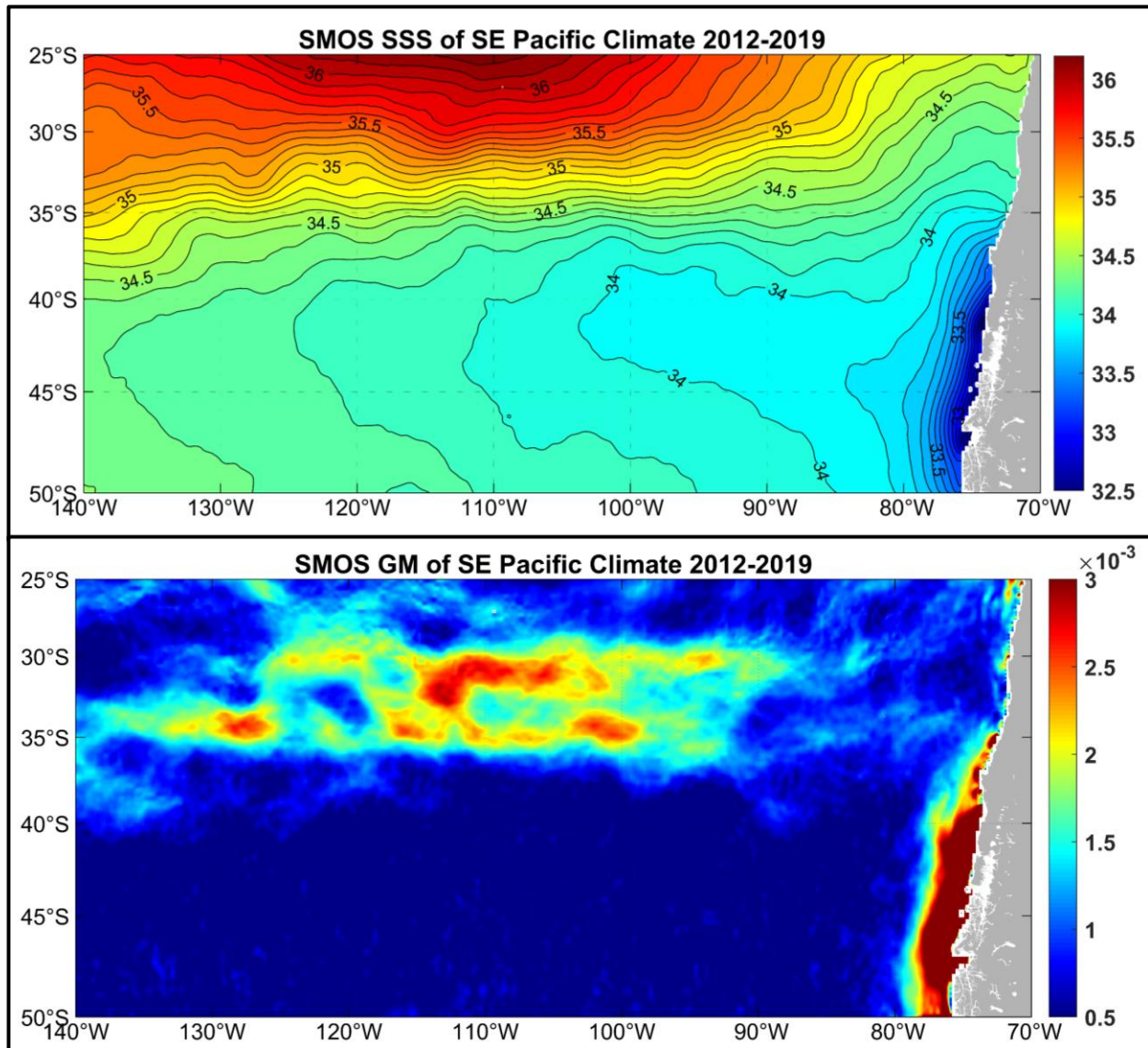


Fig. 18. Long-term annual mean sea surface salinity (SSS) (*top*) and SSS gradient magnitude GM (*bottom*) from SMOS satellite data, 2012-2019. Adapted from [Belkin and Shen \(2022\)](#).

Fronts (gradients) in population models: The existing population models of jack mackerel include temperature among other explanatory environmental variables. None of the existing population models of jack mackerel includes fronts or gradients as proxies of fronts. At the same time, anecdotal evidence mounts of fishers actively seeking out **fronts as habitats of choice** for jack mackerel, at least during certain life stages. For example, during the R/V *Dmitry Mendeleev* Cruise 34 in 1985, surface temperature and salinity fronts in the Central South Pacific were documented continuously underway using a flow-through thermosalinograph connected to the ship's water intake ([Belkin, 1988](#); [Belkin, Gritsenko, and Kryukov, 1988](#); [Belkin, Gusev, and Levin, 1988](#)). The coordinates and TS-ranges of the fronts crossed by R/V *Dmitry Mendeleev* were radioed daily to the nearby MV *Pioner Nikolaeva* (large freezer-trawler), where Dr. Nikolai

Shurunov used the front data to target jack mackerel and improve the efficiency of the ship's fishing operations.

Front data in marine ecology and fisheries: A strong case can be made for using front data in marine ecology and fisheries. The systematic use of satellite data and state-of-the-art front detection algorithms (reviewed recently by [Belkin \(2021\)](#)) would likely have a synergetic effect. Technically and logistically, all components are available for an efficient implementation of a front-centric computerized system for jack mackerel fisheries. For instance, [Gordeeva and Zharova \(2016\)](#) used SST and SSH data to provide STF forecasts in assistance to the Chilean jack mackerel fisheries in the Southeast Pacific. The most difficult aspect of a forecast system is the need to account for qualitatively different strategies used by jack mackerel during different life stages. For example, a strong link between jack mackerel and STF during spawning does not exist later during nursing and foraging stages, when adult fish leave the STF and move south for colder subantarctic waters with larger prey items. This is a generic species-specific problem of marine animals moving across the ocean realm between different life stages, sometimes migrating from one large-scale front to another (as pointed out, among others, by [Belkin et al. \(2014\)](#)).

6. Summary

In the South Pacific, the Subtropical Front consists of two fronts -- North and South STF -- that bound the Subtropical Frontal Zone (STFZ) in-between. The STF plays a key role in the ecology of the Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi* that spawn at the STF and migrate along the STF from Chile up to New Zealand. The STF is density-compensated, with spatially divergent manifestations in temperature and salinity. Several studies of the STF from satellite SST data reveal a robust spatial trend from WNW to ESE in the Southeast Pacific. In the salinity field, the STF's orientation is different as the haline STF extends from WSW to ENE across the entire South Pacific. Various data on *T. murphyi* distribution in the South Pacific (including spatial data on spawning and catch statistics) are consistent with *T. murphyi* spawning, nursing, foraging, and migrating within the STFZ; adult fishes forage mostly in colder subantarctic waters south of the STFZ. Three major types of remote sensing data – SST, SSH, and SSS – can be used to locate the STFZ. The SSH data is most advantageous with regard to the jack mackerel fisheries owing to the all-weather capability of satellite altimetry and the radical improvement of the spatial resolution of SSH data in the near future.

Acknowledgments. Julian Ashford made important suggestions that helped improve this manuscript. Daphne Johnson created the circumpolar frontal map in [Fig. 1](#) with the ODV software. Drs. Arkhipov, Artamonov, Dubishchuk, Glubokov, Gordeeva, Krasnoborodko, Lebedev, Malinin, and Vinogradov gave their kind permissions to reproduce (with modifications) numerous figures from their publications. David Peterman provided a PDF of Elizarov et al. (1993), from which four maps were reproduced. Igor Belkin is most grateful to his colleagues, participants in the R/V *Dmitriy Mendelejev* Cruise 34 (Mikhail Vinogradov, Chief Scientist), during which the Subtropical Frontal Zone in the South Pacific was discovered. While working on this paper, Igor Belkin and Xin-Tang Shen were supported by the College of Marine Science and Technology, Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, China.

Data Availability Statement. No new data have been created for this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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