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Preface

Comparative marine ecosystem structure and function: Descriptors and characteristics

The original idea to conduct multi-ecosystem comparisons among our set of collaborators began in September 2005, during the ICES Annual Science Conference in Aberdeen, Scotland. As part of the Norway–US bilateral agreement on cooperative research, a group of scientists from the Institute of Marine Research (IMR) in Norway and the United States' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) and the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) held an informal meeting to discuss research areas of mutual interest to all three institutions. Given the recent emphasis on Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management, the topic of ecosystem comparisons was identified as being a research area being pursued independently within all three laboratories. All agreed that cooperation between the two institutions would benefit and enhance the activities within each lab that were already underway. Thus, the decision was made to pursue a collaborative project among the three institutions on the topic of comparative ecosystems analysis.

In March 2006, scientists from IMR, NEFSC and AFSC held a research planning workshop at the NEFSC in Woods Hole USA. At this meeting, discussions resulted in two primary products concerning the agreed upon theme of ecosystem comparisons: (1) a proposal to the Norwegian Research Council for funding a longer-term bilateral collaboration between IMR and NMFS to conduct an ecosystem comparison project called MENU (Marine Ecosystems of Norway and the US) and (2) a proposal to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) to hold a Symposium on the topic of Ecosystem Comparisons at their 2007 annual meeting. Both proposals were accepted.

The following year, a MENU "hands-on" technical workshop was held in Bergen, Norway in March 2007. The participants from IMR, NEFSC and AFSC – representing data and modeling experts familiar with six separate marine ecosystems – met to share data, discuss methods of marine ecosystem comparisons, and actually execute comparative analyses. As a workshop product, five scientific papers, co-authored by a joint team of Norwegian and US scientists, were planned, outlined and initiated.

In the following fall, during the 2007 ICES Annual Science Conference in Helsinki, Finland, the accepted ICES proposal realized

fruition as a well-subscribed theme session on "Comparative Marine Ecosystem Structure and Function: Descriptors and Characteristics". The session, co-sponsored by the GLOBEC Ecosystem Studies of the Subarctic Seas (ESSAS) program and the North Pacific Marine Science Organization (PICES), successfully showcased 27 oral presentations and nine posters, nine presentations of which originated from the MENU project. The papers contained in this special issue, five of which result from the MENU project, are an outcome of the presentations given at the Helsinki Theme session. As was apparent at the Helsinki Theme session, there was both keen interest in the topic and abundant parallel, extant work underway in many other locales. Although the present volume originated out of MENU collaborations, it became apparent that we needed to include a broader set of ecosystems in this comparative context. Thus, the papers in this volume highlight some of the most modern applications of comparative marine ecosystem analysis.

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