



Shark Guardian Observer Statement on 27th IOTC Commission Meeting **Mauritius, 08-12 May 2023**

LONDON, 07 May 2023 – Shark Guardian is deeply concerned about the ongoing and out-of-control use of drifting fish aggregating devices (FADs) in the Indian Ocean, as well as the unsustainable and neo-colonial behaviour of the European Union (EU) at the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC).

The EU, which has a disproportionately loud voice at the IOTC, has been observed by civil society to be acting blatantly as a thinly disguised front for Spanish and French industrial tuna fisheries. It is our belief that the EU has proved itself to be a bad-faith actor having exerted undue and unethical political pressure on IOTC coastal member states at recent IOTC meetings, whilst purporting to act in a green and progressive fashion in line with European Green Deal ideals. This could not be further from the truth.

The EU's questionable behaviour at IOTC was demonstrated in the most dramatic way possible on the first day of the recent Sixth Special Session (SS6) of the IOTC Commission when Kenya withdrew its proposal for much stricter management measures on drifting FADs (Resolution 23-02), a proposal that it was formerly the lead proponent of. This was one of the most shameful and farcical episodes in IOTC history.

Shark Guardian deeply regrets that the Kenyan Fisheries Services, which was initially the chief proponent of Resolution 23-02, was side-lined and overruled by Kenya's Ministry of Mining, Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs, a ministry which clearly views tuna more as an extractive commodity to be mined as quickly as possible like fossil fuels or precious metals, than as a renewable resource provided by mother earth for the common good of humanity. This is short-sighted and directly contradicts Kenya's commitment to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No14, 'Life Under Water' which commits it to *"conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development."*

It is hard not to see the hand of the European Union behind Kenya's embarrassing U-turn from being the lead proponent of the Resolution 23-02 to objecting to it in less than a month. It's a fact that the European Commission's Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG MARE) is mandated to represent the interests of 450 million European citizens, not a handful of commercial entities in Spain and France. A mountain of scientific evidence exists to suggest that the EU's purse seine fishing fleet from Spain and France do not *"conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development"*. In fact, they do the exact opposite and will stop at nothing to maintain the chaotic *status quo* by extracting as much tuna as possible from the IOTC area of competence for profit and with

scant regard for shark populations, marine ecosystems, or indeed the Indian Ocean coastal populations who depend heavily on healthy fish stocks for their food security.

The EU's barbaric Indian Ocean plunder must stop. The continued lack of transparency and accountability of both the European Union and the mainly Spanish tuna fisheries for whom they do their bidding, beggars' belief.

Therefore, we follow with great interest an investigation by the French NGO Bloom which has resulted in a senior member of 'Europêche Tuna Group', a European fisheries lobby group, being targeted by a [judicial investigation by the French National Financial Prosecutor's Office](#) for illegal conflicts of interest within the context of the EU's involvement in Indian Ocean tuna fisheries.

Shark Guardian is also concerned about the unethical behaviour of corporate greenwashing champions Thai Union and Princes. These tuna processors purchase unsustainably caught tuna that is heavily laden with shark bycatch from European purse seine fisheries and then try their best to launder this dodgy tuna through the questionable Marine Stewardship Council 'Blue Tick' rubber stamp machine. With or without an MSC 'Blue Tick', tainted tuna from Thai Union and Princes is then sold on to an unsuspecting British public through supermarkets such as Tesco and Aldi. All of this happens as these processors renege daily on their past pledges to cut back on sourcing from these EU fisheries that use ecologically destructive drifting FADs. The British and European public are still largely unaware of this unfolding environmental disaster.

It should be drawn to the attention of all IOTC members that in 2017 Thai Union Europe, promised to the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) that they would cut their output of yellowfin tuna from the Indian Ocean by 20%. It is now 2023 and Thai Union Europe have still not made that promised cut:

<https://we.tl/t-vvegLjbFJE> (page 25)

"As part of the advocacy campaign calling for a reduction in the catch of yellowfin tuna in the Indian Ocean, [Thai Union Europe] made a public commitment to reduce the amount of yellowfin coming from the Indian Ocean in its supply chain by 20%."

Instead of protecting sharks by cutting their output of yellowfin tuna, Thai Union has chosen to hypnotise stakeholders with their greenwashing 'SeaChange' initiative. This initiative gaslights the public, the ESG ratings community (including the 'Dow Jones Sustainability Indices powered by S&P Global CSA'), global institutional investors such as The Vanguard Group and others who rely on the integrity of S&P Global's ESG ratings, the big international conservation NGOs and the global supermarket retailers.

Thai Union has a significant investment in the Seychelles in the form of a giant tuna cannery that processes unsustainable drifting FAD-caught tuna from OPAGAC, the Spanish organisation of frozen tuna producers. In 2017, Thai Union promised publicly in a joint statement with environmental NGO Greenpeace that it would halve by 2020 its sourcing from

industrial tuna fisheries that use harmful drifting FADs. Again, the world has waited six years for Thai Union to deliver on their commitment to Greenpeace, but to date, no meaningful action has been taken by the company in this regard:

<https://www.greenpeace.org/international/press-release/7207/thai-union-commits-to-more-sustainable-socially-responsible-seafood/>

https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-international-stateless/2018/05/1a40559a-180518_thai-union-greenpeace-summary-of-agreement-160518.pdf (see page 10)

"FAD reduction plan and increase of verified FAD-free supply - Thai Union commits to reduce the number of fish aggregating devices (FADs) used globally in its supply chains by an average of 50% by 2020, [...]"

Going back further, according to The Guardian newspaper, in 2011 Princes and John West pledged to phase out the use of purse seine nets and fish aggregating devices:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/oct/21/john-west-and-princes-accused-of-backtracking-on-tuna-commitments>

Twelve years later and the world is still waiting for this empty commitment to be fulfilled.

Unfortunately, this type of unethical behaviour is typical in the world of tuna. Time after time, again and again, unscrupulous suppliers of unsustainable industrial tuna continue to break their promises, hoping that everyone will simply forget about them. Thai Union and Princes keep pledging to switch their sourcing to drifting FAD free purse seine fisheries, yet the plain fact of the matter is they never do. These cynical companies benefit from the current *status quo* which is a chaotically dire lack of management and transparency in Indian Ocean fisheries. For fisheries in the Indian Ocean to be made truly sustainable, canned tuna producers must be mandated to independently develop the necessary tracking systems needed to not only ensure the full transparency and accountability of drifting FAD operations in their supply chains, but also to implement voluntary drifting FAD closures in those supply chains, instead of simply hiding behind government paralysis and inaction as an excuse for not taking environmental action to protect the marine biodiversity that even those large corporate entities ironically benefit from.

To that end, and unless it can be proved that drifting FADs can be better managed, or yet better still banned, Shark Guardian reserves the right to consider advising British consumers to refrain from buying Princes and John West tuna products from UK supermarkets such as Tesco and Aldi who have chequered reputations for ignoring public calls to ban the sale of unethical and unsustainable drifting FAD-caught tuna from their business operations.

Shark Guardian will continue calling on the British supermarket giants to stop selling drifting FAD-caught tuna from John West and Princes. We may also begin calling on British parliamentarians to help table legislation in the House of Commons to ban the commercial sale of drifting FAD caught tuna in the United Kingdom. Unless the endless and seemingly

intractable problem of shark bycatch and plastic pollution issues associated with drifting FADs can suddenly and miraculously be solved at short notice (which seems unlikely), a consumer boycott remains possible as a tactic of last resort.

We remain seriously concerned that the harmful environmental impacts associated with the drifting FADs used by industrial tuna purse seiners in their fishing operations are not going to be mitigated through normal RFMO channels. Consumer boycotts, whilst unpopular, remain a conservation tool of last resort, and Shark Guardian is reluctant to call for them. However, we are duty bound to do what is best in the interest of the threatened shark populations around the world, including in the Indian Ocean, and the recent neo-colonial antics of the EU at the IOTC leave us little choice.

We therefore call on all IOTC members to exercise their votes at the upcoming 27th IOTC Commission meeting judiciously, and according to their conscience, and to not be swayed by the neo-colonial strong arm tactics that are now normal for EU negotiators at the IOTC. We sincerely hope that all IOTC members will make the right decisions at the 27th IOTC Commission meeting so that a full recovery of the Indian Ocean's decimated silky shark and juvenile yellowfin tuna populations can be ensured, whilst protecting and restoring the fragile Indian Ocean ecosystems that they depend upon.

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