

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

**A collection of stories
from the Indian Ocean**

**Exploring the people, politics and foreign
interests shaping the region's tuna fisheries**



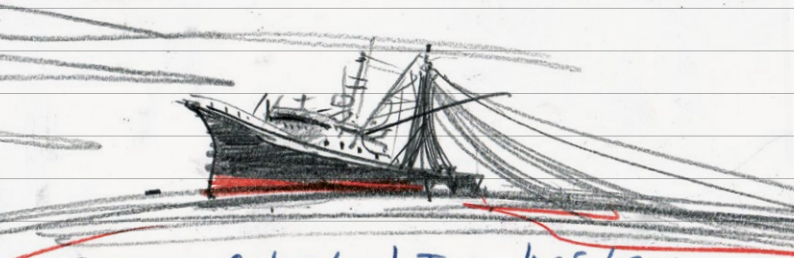
**BLUE
MARINE**
FOUNDATION

Introduction

I have a colleague, let's call him Jürg, who works in sustainability. One day, Jürg received an email from a financial consultant representing a wealthy family in the oil transport industry. They wanted to hire him to advise them on how they could gain maximum recognition and compensation for their responsible oil shipping practices. After a few video calls, Jürg was invited to Paris to meet their team. They booked his flights and there was someone with a sign waiting for him at the airport to take him to his swanky hotel. That evening a driver in a shiny Mercedes arrived to take him to the restaurant. Over several bottles of expensive wine, they discussed how businesses like theirs could receive the credit they felt they deserved while also making a difference, perhaps by setting up an NGO or even starting an eco-label.

Having worked in fisheries for many years, Jürg was all too aware of the harm caused by industry greenwashing machines masquerading as sustainability certifications and eco-labels and relayed these sentiments to his prospective new clients. The conversation naturally progressed to fisheries and to the Indian Ocean where he explained that prolonged industrial-scale overfishing was taking place, despite a significant portion of the catch being certified 'sustainable'.

He described how purse seine fishing is the region's dominant tuna gear type and how it involves setting huge nets, some two kilometres in length and more than 200 metres deep, around whole schools of fish. Once set, the net is drawn closed at the bottom, like a giant purse, trapping the tuna and countless other wild animals inside. The lion's share of Indian Ocean tropical tuna is caught in this way by industrial fleets owned by European companies. He explained that this is by no means the only way to catch tuna. In the Maldives, fishers have been using more selective, one-by-one methods like pole-and-line fishing for generations. Jürg's prospective new clients were very interested in all of this.



Once a school of Tuna has been spotted, a large circular wall of netting is deployed around them and sealed shut at the bottom.

The group concluded their dinner and agreed to meet at the client's five-star hotel the next morning to have breakfast and continue their conversation. Upon arrival, they informed Jürg that they actually had everything they needed, handed him €500 in cash and went their separate ways, agreeing to follow up in due course. Jürg flew home.



A few months later, a hit piece was published on a Brussels news site targeting those involved in pole-and-line tuna fishing and defending the methods of the rapacious industrial purse seine fleet. Jürg was surprised to see his name included in the piece, assigned to a strange quote that he didn't remember giving. He contacted the publication, confident that he would be able to clear up this misunderstanding.

To his surprise, there was no misunderstanding; they claimed to have a recording of him making the points they had published. Baffled, Jürg requested a copy of the recording and was taken aback to hear his own voice set against the background clatter of knives and forks, plates, glasses, and the general hum of patrons enjoying a Parisian dinner.

Realising the oil shipping magnates had surreptitiously recorded him, allowing him to be quoted out of context, he immediately reached out to them for an explanation. The email bounced back, undelivered. When he tried to check the details online, he found that the entire website, complete with pages full of smiling, professional faces, was no longer active. There was no trace of the organisation or those who had represented it in person just months before. Perhaps the faux philanthropists had hoped to get more industry dirt out of Jürg during their covert operation. Regardless, that's a lot of time and effort spent securing an underwhelming quote about one-by-one tuna fishing in the Indian Ocean. And that's often the first question that my friends and family ask when I recount these kinds of stories:

ALL THIS OVER TUNA?

THE SHORT ANSWER IS 'YES'.

The longer answer is that commercial tuna fisheries are worth well over ~~\$40 billion~~ globally¹. While a fair chunk of that comes from the Pacific, the Indian Ocean is by far the most important region for the European tuna fleet. They get a much better deal there than they would in the Pacific where coastal states have banded together to ensure that, through collective bargaining, they receive a fair price for the tuna in their waters. EU bilateral agreements, reflagging and private access arrangements have gone a long way towards ensuring that that doesn't happen in the Indian Ocean. The Seychelles is a prime example; there are now more Spanish-owned purse seine vessels flagged to the Seychelles than there are Spanish-owned purse seine vessels flagged to Spain in the region².

This has frequently led the Seychelles to toe the Spanish partido line (often against its own best interests) at meetings of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). The IOTC is the intergovernmental body that brings together coastal states like the Seychelles and distant-water fishing nations like the EU in an attempt to manage migratory tuna populations that are constantly on the move and belong to no one country. Over the course of their life, these valuable fish travel through different countries' waters and out onto the high seas, meaning that they require a great deal of international cooperation to be effectively managed.

This level of cooperation is in short supply at the IOTC, with the past decade marked by extensive overfishing, unjust quota allocations and an ever-widening divide between Indian Ocean coastal states who typically prioritise food security, sovereignty and the survival of their coastal communities, and distant-water fishing nations who show up with delegations bristling with lawyers and industry representatives to promote the economic interests of their own commercial fishing fleets.

Plenty of reports and papers have already been published that thoroughly and expertly explain the history, nuance and wider geopolitical context of this divide³. I won't be reinventing that particular wheel. Rather, this is just a small collection of some of the stories I've come across over the past few years. Individually they might be disregarded, but when taken together I think they go some way towards proving the old adage that, when it comes to the European fishing industry, there's no such thing as a free lunch and that, unlike Jürg, Indian Ocean coastal states are unlikely to come away unscathed from theirs.

PART ONE:

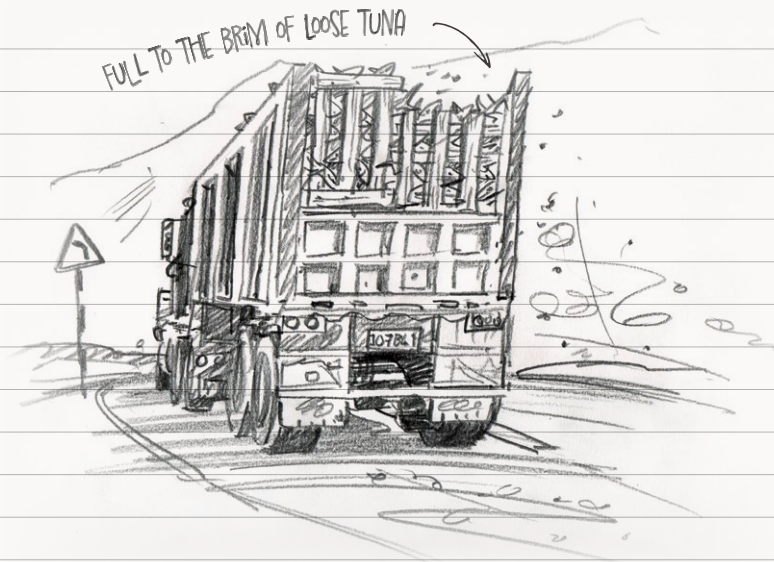
Welcome to paradise

If it weren't for my vampiric aversion to sunlight and steadfast determination never to get into the ocean unnecessarily, I suspect my coworkers would question my motivation for visiting Seychelles twice last year. Like many of my colleagues who also work in the world of regional fisheries management, I'm fortunate to travel to beautiful places for IOTC meetings invariably held in lavish island resorts. While we NGO representatives usually stay in AirBnBs a 20-minute shuttle ride away, I've nonetheless come to notice something they all have in common. No matter how salubrious and upmarket the place, there's always a hidden space they don't want you to see. Whether you're in a five-star hotel or an eco-friendly resort, if you look hard enough you're guaranteed to find an area around the back full of broken tiles, open bags of cement and piles of half-used mini soaps that shatter the façade.

And sure, that's probably on me for taking a shortcut through the fire escape to get to the carpark or for trying to find a secluded place to make a phone call away from the army of European tuna industry representatives that prowl the corridors of these meetings. But it does make for an apt analogy: if the Seychelles were a five-star eco-resort, its tuna industry would be

the polluted backyard full of cigarette butts and open tins of lead paint, putting it at risk of a negative Booking.com review.

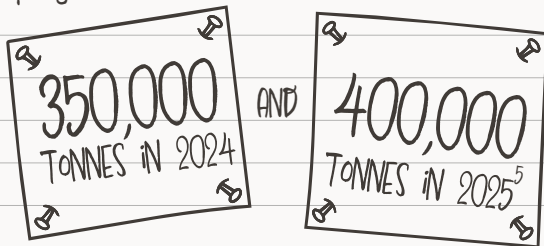
Just a few months ago, I was driving to an IOTC meeting in Seychelles at the height of morning rush-hour traffic. As ever, I'd left slightly late, hitting the Victoria gridlock at its peak. Happy just to be back in lovely Seychelles, I accepted my fate, even letting some vehicles in ahead of me. This gesture of karmic goodwill was repaid almost immediately when the truck that merged in front of me turned out to be full to the brim of loose tuna. Intrigued, and figuring I would be missing the morning session anyway, I decided to follow it to see where it was taking these hundreds of perfect-looking fish, forked tails poking through the bars of the truck, dead eyes staring at me as I tailedgated them around the island. We drove in convoy for ten minutes, all the way to the Providence landfill where I watched the truck take its bounty of dead wild animals to join the landfill's mountains of rotting waste. It felt criminal. Worse still, a friend sent me photos he had captured of a different truck doing the same thing in 2024. Turns out 478 tonnes of spoilt fish being taken to the landfill in six days even made the news in 2022¹. It was reported that these fish had been contaminated by hydraulic oil, but we can't know for sure why this terrible waste is still taking place years later.



Mountains of dead rotting fish aside, the influencers and travel brochures aren't wrong about Seychelles; the water is crystal clear and blue, the coconut drinks fresh and delicious, and the honeymooners in love and completely oblivious to the world around them. And it's a good thing they are, as I've always wondered what they think when their romantic sunset cocktail hour is interrupted by a giant purse seine vessel steaming across the otherwise perfect and unbroken skyline. These industrial tuna fishing vessels, some measuring over 100m in length, are the preferred fishing method of the EU-owned, distant-water fleet.

This fleet catches more tropical tuna than anyone else in the region, despite there being 29 members of the IOTC, the majority of which are coastal states dependent on fishing for food security and livelihoods.

If you listen to what the EU delegation has to say on the matter though, you wouldn't necessarily think that that was the case. The EU never misses an opportunity to lament the cuts made to its yellowfin tuna catch, largely ignoring the role it played in the stock becoming overfished in the first place. Looking at the EU's tropical tuna catch as a whole, you may even be tempted to sympathise; vessels flagged to Spain and France caught more than 300,000 tonnes of tuna in 2006 but were down to less than 200,000 in 2024. However, a closer look shows that the actual European fleet – those vessels owned by European companies but flagged to coastal states like Seychelles, Mauritius, Kenya, and Tanzania as well as Spain and France – actually caught more than

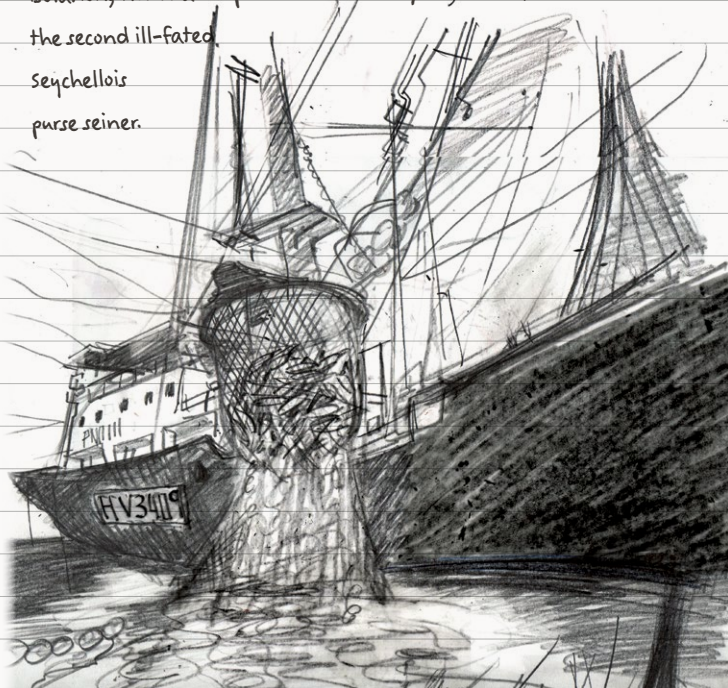


But why are these foreign-flagged floating fish factories constantly steaming past Seychelles' pristine white sand beaches like some kind of Eurovision flag parade?

That's because, in addition to being a bucket list holiday destination, Seychelles is also the nerve centre of Europe's Indian Ocean tuna empire. With a huge factory to receive their fish and plenty of subsidised fuel to keep them cruising up and down the Indian Ocean, these vessels never need to return to Galicia or the Basque Country where they were built; Seychelles is their home. And, like any good homeowner, the EU has invested significant time and capital into making Seychelles a comfortable base.

This began in the early 1980s, when Spanish and French purse seine fleets first arrived in the Western Indian Ocean, paying the Seychelles government to allow them to conduct industrial-scale commercial fishing operations in their pristine waters. These would later become taxpayer-subsidised access agreements between the EU and coastal states called 'Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements' – a term as dubious as the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea' or 'Compassionate Conservatism'. Without indirect subsidies like fishing access agreements and fuel tax concessions, all but two European tuna fishing companies would be unprofitable⁶.

Nonetheless, seeing how effective this style of fishing appeared for the Europeans, plans were set in motion in the late '80s to develop a Seychellois purse seine fleet, to allow the island nation to get in on the action too. The first ever Seychellois purse seiner, *Coxe*, was commissioned but never reached the Seychelles as it caught fire while still under construction in France in August 1989. Unfortunate but in isolation, not that suspicious. Enter *The Spirit of Coxe*, the second ill-fated Seychellois purse seiner.



This one actually reached the Indian Ocean before those in charge realised that it was too small and not built to withstand Indian Ocean conditions. After costing the Seychelles Marketing Board €7.7 million³, the second and final attempt at setting up a truly Seychellois purse seine tuna industry died, clearing the way for the Europeans to dominate the island state as they do to this day.

A new so-called Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement between the EU and the Seychelles was signed earlier this year and will run until 2030, despite the fact that access agreements like these can result in smaller fish, lower revenues for local fishers and a lack of seafood self-sufficiency for the coastal state⁵, and despite an ex-post assessment of a previous agreement stating:

For several years, the SFA [Seychelles Fisheries Authority] has raised doubts about the reliability of the reports submitted by European fishing fleets. These fleets have been suspected of failing to declare their full catches in the Seychelles' EEZ [exclusive economic zone] in order to reduce the amounts they would have to pay should they exceed the reference threshold set by the licence. These statistical discrepancies have led to strained relations between the European Union and the Seychelles.⁹

Seychelles was hoping for a 30% increase in the amount they receive from the EU to fish in their waters¹⁰. The EU started negotiations at 3%. President Patrick Herminie stated that Seychelles was ultimately "forced to concede to the 7%"¹¹.

Prior to this concession, a Member of the European Parliament stated that a "political game" was being played and warned Seychelles not to underestimate what they already had, making specific reference to the development of Port Victoria over the past 40 years¹².

While some of the EU's SFFA revenue has gone into maintaining Port Victoria as a major tuna landing site for the direct benefit of its Spanish and French purse seiners, the EU has also invested in Port Victoria directly, most recently to the tune of €77 million for the port's extension and modernisation in 2024¹³. We don't need to speculate as to the length of the strings attached to that kind of contribution; the EU's return on investment plays out in real time each year at meetings of the IOTC.

€77 MILLION
PORT EXTENSION

PART TWO:

Divide & Conquer

The situation described above is by no means unique to Seychelles. In many ways, Kenya's story is a lot sadder. For many years, Kenya was a shining example of bravery in the face of staunch opposition from the EU when it came to the management of Indian Ocean tuna populations. In addition to the (still ongoing) fight over whether or not distant-water fleets like the EU's should forever be allowed to claim Indian Ocean tuna as their own just because they've been doing so for decades, another highly contested issue is that of drifting fish aggregating devices, or 'FADs', used by the EU's industrial tuna purse seine fleet to catch tuna more efficiently.

Generally made up of a floating raft, a submerged 'tail' and a satellite buoy, these drifting FADs are both super high-tech, in that they can be tracked from miles away, and super low-tech, in that they perform pretty much the same function as an old coconut. Out in the open ocean, any floating object naturally attracts small fish seeking protection and shelter. These small fish attract larger fish like tuna, and gradually a whole swirling ecosystem develops below the surface.

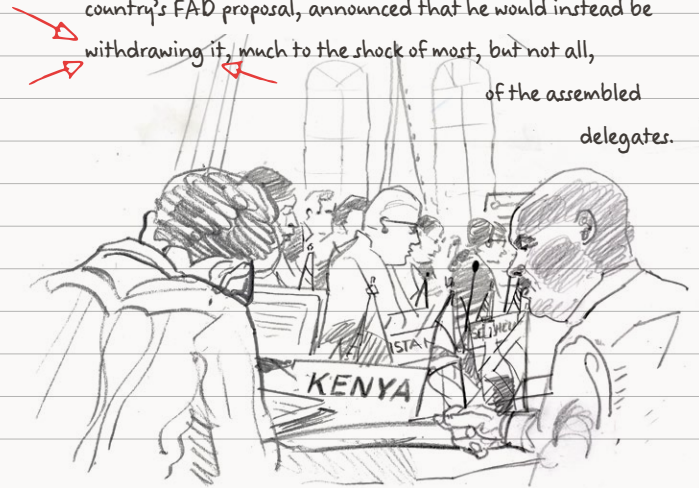
This simple natural phenomenon has been hijacked by commercial tuna purse seiners who collectively release thousands of FADs into the ocean each year, tracking them as they drift along ocean currents for months before

setting their huge nets around them, catching tuna, sharks and a plethora of other wild animals gathered below. I could write a whole section on the immense harm caused by drifting FADs but for now, trust me when I say they're the worst.



Kenya thought so too and in 2023 this led them to put forward a proposal to the IOTC to limit the use of these harmful devices. I won't go into detail on how Kenya had worked for years to develop and build support for this robust measure that mandated an annual 72-day closure period during which no FAD fishing would be permitted – the Indian Ocean is the only region lacking a seasonal closure¹⁴ – or how Kenya hosted a special session of the IOTC in Mombasa in February 2023 just to get this resolution adopted¹⁵. I also won't go into how, on the opening morning of the meeting, Kenya's Minister of Mining, Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs stood up to welcome everyone and, instead of promoting the adoption of his country's FAD proposal, announced that he would instead be withdrawing it, much to the shock of most, but not all,

of the assembled delegates.



Later reports alleged that "the European Commission had blackmailed Kenya at the highest level over 'blue economy' development aid money in order to obtain Kenya's withdrawal of its proposal on drifting FADs"¹⁶. Far from an isolated incident, it's not uncommon for coastal states to receive warnings from the EU, reminding them of the importance of their partnership and the need to be aligned¹⁷. Luckily, the proposal already had the support of a majority of coastal states, even after Kenya's ILO, and after three days of trying to reach consensus, a vote was called and the resolution was adopted by a two-thirds majority on the final day of the meeting.

The EU wasted very little time in coming to the aid of its industrial fleet by objecting to this democratically adopted resolution, meaning that none of its vessels would have to comply with the new rules. Entertainingly, the EU signed off its notice of objection by criticising the way in which the resolution had been adopted, (ie. by vote rather than by spending another three years failing to reach consensus), stating that it created a "worrying precedent"¹⁸. What Brussels officials may lack in long-term memory, they certainly make up for in irony; not only had the EU called for a vote in the past, but their vote in 2010 was the first time in the IOTC's history that a resolution

was adopted in this way, literally setting the very precedent that they found so worrying thirteen years later^{19,20}.

Luckily for them, being wildly hypocritical isn't against the law. But objecting to the FADs resolution was, and together with our friends at BLOOM, we took them to court for it and won. The result stated that the EU 'actively blocked' measures for stronger protection of the stocks, preventing these from being implemented in its own legal framework²¹. Both the European Commission and the Kingdom of Spain appealed the decision handed down by the European Court of Justice, so our fight continues.

Spain and the Commission appealing the ruling of the Court of Justice on FADs is certainly one of the bolder examples of EU institutions bending over backwards for their fishing industry, but it's by no means the only one. Back in March 2023, shortly after Kenya's FADs resolution was adopted against Kenya's will, I was watching the proceedings of the European Parliament's Committee on Fisheries and heard Spanish MEP Francisco José Millán Mon state that Kenya had announced its own objection to the drifting FADs resolution. This came as a surprise, as I was keeping a close eye on which Indian Ocean coastal states had caved to the EU pressure and objected, and Kenya had

not yet made the list. Millán Mon's announcement was made on the afternoon of Wednesday 1 March 2023. Kenya's formal objection was only published by the IOTC on Thursday 2 March 2023²². I wonder how he knew.

In the years leading up to the meeting in Kenya, it was clear that Spain and France were having a disproportionate influence on the EU's position at the IOTC. In an attempt to combat this, we reached out to representatives of other EU states like Germany, Austria and the Netherlands to make them aware of the situation. This was not too long after the end of the pandemic when everyone was still getting the hang of Zoom and not everyone was aware that when one forwards a meeting invite, the reply typically goes back to the original invite sender, not to the person who forwarded it.

In February 2022, an official from the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Nature learnt this the hard way when his colleague forwarded him our invitation to discuss the EU's position at the IOTC. Thinking he was responding to his colleague and not to me, the official responded by acknowledging that, while there are no Dutch-flagged vessels fishing for tuna in the Indian Ocean, there are quite a few French vessels operating there, and that those vessels

are owned by a French company which is entirely owned by Parlevliet & Van der Plas – a Dutch fishing company. He signed off by telling his colleague to listen to what we had to say as the situation would become politically tense for the Netherlands sooner or later.

He wasn't wrong; Parlevliet is one of the Dutch 'Big Five' – five companies that dominate European fisheries and represent a combined turnover of €24 billion²³.

Parlevliet owns Compagnie Française du Thon Oceanique (CFTO) – the French company he was referring to – which in turn owns a fleet of purse seiners operating in the Indian Ocean. Parlevliet also fully controls a tuna processing plant in Madagascar and one in Cote d'Ivoire. I personally hope that things *did* become politically tense for the Netherlands a year or so later when the EU had to pull out all the stops to prevent Kenya's FADs resolution from coming into effect.

It's not often that we're afforded such an unfiltered account of how things really work inside government institutions whose sole purpose appears to be defending the interests of a handful of wealthy fishing companies. That said, it's not the only time this has happened.

PART THREE:

Seychelles Signalgate

In July 2024, I sent a message to my London neighbourhood group chat that was actually meant for my partner – mildly embarrassing and a possible contributing factor to my move not long after. In March 2025, Pete Hegseth accidentally texted his Yemeni war plans to journalist Jeffrey Goldberg who published them in the Atlantic – an international scandal and early indicator of the accountability vacuum that would end up snowballing to the size of Greenland. Sitting somewhere in between these two things (admittedly quite a lot closer to my SW6 slip-up than to Signalgate) is what the Seychelles did in 2023.

Shortly after the explosive special session of the IOTC in Mombasa, the regularly scheduled annual IOTC meeting took place in Mauritius. Like Kenya had done, any IOTC member country can put forward a proposal for discussion and possible adoption at these meetings. Because they often get debated and dissected, proposals need to be submitted in Word-form in addition to traditional PDF.

Not only does this dual-format submission simplify the process of editing the text during the meetings, but sometimes it also gives you a sneak peek into the influence that the European fishing industry has on countries like Seychelles if they're careless enough to forget to remove their tracked changes before submitting.

Reading though endless, repetitive fisheries management proposals in advance of every IOTC meeting is always super fun. But opening up a Seychellois proposal expecting to find standard draft text and finding instead a document riddled with tracked changes made by representatives of two large Spanish tuna associations, as well as by the European umbrella group representing them, definitely added to the overall experience that year. We sent the document straight to the Guardian who did a great job of covering the industry's fingerprints as well as the fact that more than half of the EU's delegation to the IOTC was made up of fishing industry lobbyists²⁴. At that same IOTC meeting, representatives from all five major Spanish tuna fishing companies (Albacora, Pevasa, Echebasta, Atunsa and Inpesca) were named as advisors on the Seychelles delegation, in addition to two representatives of processing giant Thai Union.



It's possible that the humiliation caused by this oversight led one member of the Seychelles delegation to temporarily lose his mind at the IOTC meeting, throw caution to the wind and invite a diplomatic incident by posting online a photograph of the private computer screen of another coastal state delegate. The other delegate in question had been vocal in their support of measures to curb overfishing and the impacts of harmful drifting FADs. The Seychelles official posted the surreptitiously-captured photo of the other delegate's private WhatsApp correspondence, presumably taken while they had their back turned, to LinkedIn, complete with accusations of them being a "puppet".

I often lament the fact that I was destined to exist in the same timeline as LinkedIn, but it was admittedly incredible to see a member of the Seychelles delegation accusing someone else of being a puppet, having just uploaded tangible evidence of industry interference in their own internal affairs. The irony of this was clearly lost on the Seychelles delegate, as he left the post up until the IOTC chair said it should be removed. Fortunately, this allowed enough time to screenshot the post along with those who liked or commented on it, including but not limited to an EU Long Distance Advisory Council secretariat member, several representatives from French and Spanish fishing companies and even a member of the EU's delegation to the IOTC present at that same meeting in Mauritius.

I guess LinkedIn has its uses after all. ✓

PART FOUR:

Smoke and Fire

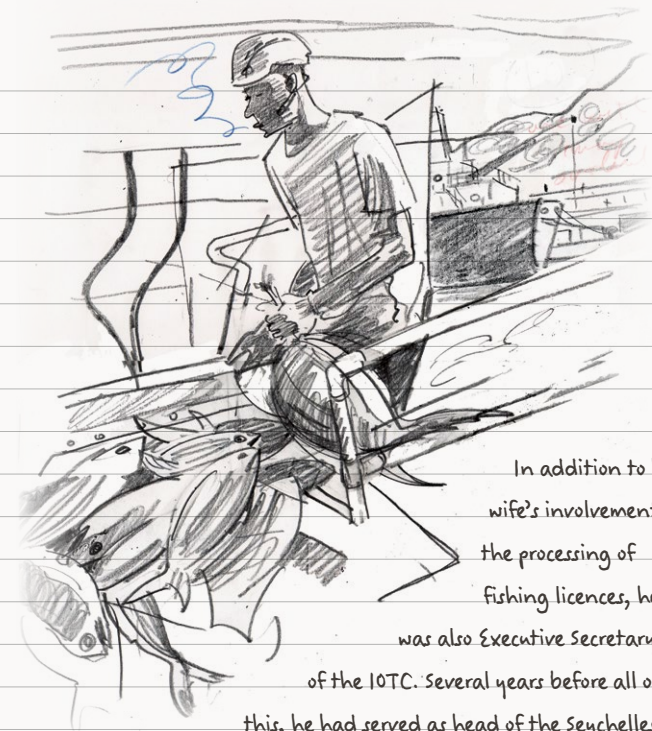
Sadly, this is by no means an isolated incident and, like mercury in tuna, controversy seems to accumulate the higher up the Seychelles food chain you go. In 2014, a mobile phone was found in the back of a taxi in Fiji. Stored on the phone was a harrowing ten-minute-long video of a group of men treading water in the open ocean attempting to cling to the wreckage of a tiny, overturned boat while being circled by several commercial fishing vessels. The pixelated video, filmed by someone on board one of the circling vessels, shows spurts of water shooting up as bullets slice through the sea, narrowly missing their

human targets. The camera zooms in on each person in turn as the pixels around them turn bright red – a “slow-motion slaughter at sea”²⁵. Chillingly, once the shooting stops, the camera then turns around and captures a group of men on the deck of one of the fishing vessels laughing and posing for selfies.



The coldblooded nature of the murders captured in the video led authorities, NGOs and journalists to work together to bring the perpetrators to justice and, following a lengthy investigation by the Outlaw Ocean Project, Trygg Mat Tracking, Interpol and others, the captain of the *Ping Shin 101* (the Taiwanese fishing vessel in the video) was arrested in 2020, convicted and sentenced to 26 years in prison²⁶. While it was revealed that the murders took place in the Indian Ocean, details around who the victims were or why they were killed are still not known for sure.

The *Ping Shin 101* is the vessel most commonly associated with the case. However, there were several other vessels captured in the footage, the most recognisable of which was the *Chun / 217*. In the years following the shooting, the vessel applied for a Seychelles fishing licence through a local agency linked to an individual who wore a number of interesting hats. While there's nothing to suggest this man had any involvement with the vessel at the time of the incident, his agency (registered under his wife's name) acted as the vessel's licensing agent in the years following. During this time, he held one of the most important positions in Indian Ocean fisheries.



In addition to his wife's involvement in the processing of fishing licences, he was also Executive Secretary of the IOTC. Several years before all of this, he had served as head of the Seychelles Fisheries Authority (SFA from here on) for seven years.

On the surface, the SFA does what it says on the tin – it manages and develops the island nation's fisheries. Only when you flip the tin over to read the fine print do you realise that the SFA isn't a simple arm of the government, it's a parastatal – "a financially autonomous State-Owned Enterprise"²¹ with a CEO and a bottom line.

A subsequent SFA CEO made the news some years later following allegations at an SFA party, which I will not repeat here. While the CEO and others at the party denied the allegations, the Chairman of the SFA reportedly confirmed that there was an investigation underway into the matter. Later that month, the Seychelles' Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Blue Economy announced that the CEO was leaving the SFA, stating that he reached the end of his contract the month prior. Before all of this, he had gone from being General Manager of the Seychelles Indian Ocean Tuna factory – one of the largest tuna canneries in the world and a joint partnership between the Thai Union Group and the Government of Seychelles – to being CEO of the SFA in the same year. That revolving door kept on revolving, as he went on to join a major Spanish tuna fishing company that owns several Seychelles-flagged purse seine vessels after leaving the SFA.

Moving closer to the present day, after last year's IOTC meeting in La Reunion, my friend and colleague JJ and I visited the Seychelles. We met up with some old friends and some new contacts and generally spent time learning about the complicated relationship between the industrial EU tuna industry and those working to protect the Seychelles' magnificent marine environment.

JJ also went diving and snorkelling, and I spent considerable time looking for shade and admiring the giant fruit bats that fly around day and night giving the island a distinctly spooky energy. The energy got significantly spookier when we received an email from the SFA, telling us to report to the Chief Immigration officer at the Department of Immigration.

This email came off the back of us contacting the SFA to ask whether we could check out the offloading process during our visit, to aid in our understanding of the fishery. While I wasn't expecting them to roll out the red carpet for us, I also wasn't expecting to hear my own name shouted at me by two immigration officials as I was leaving my hotel to get coffee. They told me to call JJ down from his room and proceeded to interrogate us both on our reasons for visiting Seychelles and who we were really working for. After assuring them we weren't enemies of the state, they gave us a warning and told us not to conduct any more meetings until they had concluded their investigation. JJ has worked in security and investigations for more than 20 years, covering conflict zones and communal violence across the globe, but has never encountered the kind of treatment that we experienced in Seychelles during our time there.

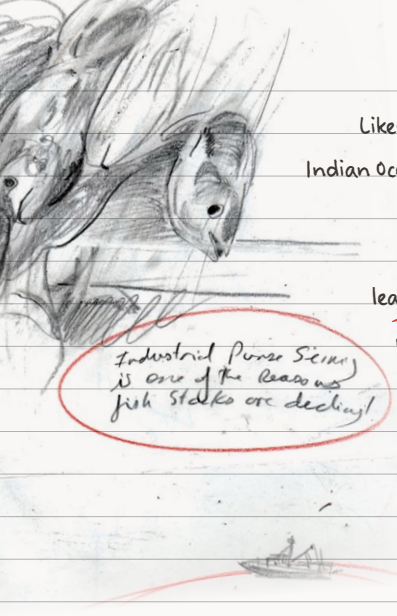
His overriding thought as we were leaving was that surely there can't be this much smoke without a fire.



PART FIVE:

Paradise Lost

During my most recent trip back to the UK, I visited a few local supermarkets, both to escape the oppressive London heat and to remind myself of the ease with which many of the UK's biggest retailers continue to embrace hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance by proudly promoting their FAD-free own-brand tuna while still selling FAD-caught brand names. I soon found what I was looking for – a John West tuna 'fridge pot', like a normal tin of tuna but made of single-use plastic. I flipped it over and was surprised to read, among the other codes and numbers, "~~INDIAN O. BIGEYE~~" and "~~SEYCHELLES~~". The Seychelles part isn't that surprising given the size of the Thai Union factory that produces John West products, but seeing a mighty bigeye tuna – a fish that can grow to two and a half metres in length and weigh more than 200kg – reduced to a tiny £1.50 fridge pot made me sad. It had likely found its way in there because it was caught as a juvenile, as most bigeye tunas caught by purse seine vessels in the Indian Ocean are²⁵.



Likewise, a staggering 97% of Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna caught by purse seiners around drifting FADs are juveniles²⁹ and at least 100,000 silky sharks, which are listed as 'vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List, end up as bycatch each year in the Indian Ocean purse seine industry alone, most of them juveniles too³⁰. In some regions, the retrieval

rate of drifting FADs is less than 10%³¹, with a recent study estimating that 1.41 million of them were released between 2007 and 2021, drifting across 37% of Earth's ocean surface³² before sinking and littering the seabed or washing up on the beaches and fragile coral reefs of coastal states. In 2021, Oxford University conservation biologist April Burt said of one of the Seychelles' most remote atolls:

ee We extrapolated data that showed over 500 tonnes of waste has accumulated on Aldabra Atoll alone, and more is arriving all the time. Eighty-three percent of the total plastic waste we cleaned up had come from industrial fishing – lines, ropes, nets and of course, FADs³³ oo

Both Princes and John West promised to stop sourcing tuna from vessels using FADs in 2011^{34,35} but have since backtracked on that commitment^{36,37}, making bigeye in fridge pots a reality well into 2026. When asked, Princes told us that they had replaced these commitments with new ones, including that all their branded tuna must be MSC certified³⁸. This tracks, as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) started facilitating the certification of destructive FAD fisheries as 'sustainable' in 2018 and, despite formal objections by us and many others, have never looked back. And why would they? More than 3.4 million tonnes of MSC-certified tuna are now landed annually, meaning that almost two-thirds of the global wild tuna catch now comes from MSC-engaged fisheries³⁹. Given that the MSC earns royalties on its blue tick logo placed on certified products including tuna, it all adds up to about (£)31.59 million⁴⁰ reasons for them to keep ignoring us and the growing body of evidence piling up against them.

Our friends at Shark Guardian compiled a great deal of evidence in their 2022 report *Slipping Through the Net* in which they allege that fisheries observers – the independent eyes and ears on vessels whose job it is to report on what really goes on at sea – recorded shark finning, mistreatment of protected species, high-grading (when smaller or lower-value fish are dumped back into the ocean to make room for more profitable catch),



observer
intimidation,
and widespread
misreporting
of catches and
bycatch on
board tuna
fishing vessels,
including
MSC-certified
vessels⁴¹. While
the MSC has
called these
allegations
“unfounded”,

they did identify “a small number of areas for improvement in data collection” following their investigations into the claims and stated they had implemented these changes⁴².

While the Shark Guardian report focused on tuna fleets operating in the Pacific, I recently spoke to an observer working on board Indian Ocean purse seine vessels who explained that on some vessels, instead of being returned to the water immediately, sharks that are caught and brought on board

are often left to suffocate and bake in the sun while the crew focuses on processing the tuna. He felt that it would only take two people to help the sharks and give them a chance of survival, but that, as an observer, he is not able to intervene. Worse still, he told me about how he had been bribed not to report a particularly disturbing bycatch incident – an issue that was reported by the observers in Shark Guardian’s report too.

I often hear it suggested that we will invent our way out of the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves; that better, more sophisticated technology will solve the problems we’re currently facing in marine conservation and beyond. A new, clever type of FAD that doesn’t entangle sharks (but does still attract millions of juvenile fish as intended), some innovative AI that analyses catch data to better understand where vessels shouldn’t fish (as long as we’re happy to trust the self-reported fisheries data it’s based on) or a novel, pioneering tool to predict how much fish distant-water fleets are really catching based on their satellite positioning (ignoring the fact that these vessels ‘go dark’ for weeks and months at a time with impunity).

When I reluctantly brought up on-board cameras, the observer informed me that there were already cameras on board when the bycatch incident and bribery took place and that the captain told him not to worry about them.

Conclusion

While it's impossible to tell every story, there are three final ones that deserve to make it in. The first is that of *Txori Argi* – a Spanish-flagged tuna purse seine vessel that was charged by Mozambique for fishing illegally in the coastal state's waters in 2012⁴³. It was reported that the vessel failed to send the mandatory entry report before entering Mozambique's waters and didn't have its fishing licence on board⁴⁴. After being brought into the Mozambican port of Nacala, inspectors found over 1,000 tonnes of tuna on board and a \$1.2 million penalty was issued⁴⁵.

While the captain claimed the ship had inadvertently drifted into national waters while chasing tuna, Mozambique took steps to place the vessel on the IOTC's illegal fishing list. Despite being notoriously tough on any countries suspected of illegal fishing, the EU came to the aid of one of its own, requesting that the IOTC Compliance Committee not blacklist the vessel⁴⁶. Ultimately, Inpesca (the Spanish company that owned the vessel) agreed to a reduced payment of \$700,000⁴⁷ and the issue went away, with *Txori Argi* free and fishing in the Indian Ocean to this day.

A few years later, it was South Africa's turn to highlight the EU's hypocrisy. In 2019, Blue Marine published a letter from the government of South Africa to the EU's Directorate General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, highlighting South Africa's concerns over the fact that Spain had reported multiple sets of catch figures for Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna, reporting one set to the IOTC and using another much lower set of figures on which to base its own quota payback for overfishing, as required by European law⁴⁸.

↖ The South African letter went on to say: ↗

↙ For a stock that is overfished and subject to overfishing, there needs to be a credible and reliable reporting mechanism, and it is disappointing to see that this is not the case for the EU-Spanish vessels in the Indian Ocean. This is a very concerning practice from one of the EU countries, and goes against the EU Common Fisheries Policy and corresponding regulations. In the meantime, the EU also has continuously called upon the developing coastal states in the Indian Ocean on the need to strengthen data reporting and to impose penalties for non-compliance. ↘



Later the same year, the IOTC's own Working Party on Tropical Tunas noted irregularities in Spain's catch figures. It was suspected that the EU had misreported yellowfin tuna (which had a catch limit applied to it) as bigeye tuna (which had no catch limit)⁴⁹. It's hard to resist pointing this out when the EU chartises other countries for objecting to resolutions put in place to protect tuna stocks. It's even harder to resist pointing out the extent to which EU-owned purse seine vessels have reflagged to these other countries, allowing them to directly benefit from this same accountability vacuum that the EU claims to oppose.

This brings us to the final example of European duplicity, and there can be no better case study than that of the ~~Omani fleet~~ ^{Spanish fleet}. Our report on the beneficial ownership of the European purse seine fleet from earlier this year proved the Spanish beneficial ownership of two of Oman's vessels⁵⁰. Three more vessels were added to the Omani fleet in January 2025. These three seiners were owned by French fishing company CFTO, which in turn was

(and still is) owned by our Dutch friends at Parlevliet. The vessels were sold to Rawang Al Salam International, an Omani company, but CFTO has retained operational control of them⁵¹.

Later in 2025, Oman chartered another two purse seine vessels, one flagged to Tanzania and the other flagged to Kenya at the time, but both owned and controlled by large Spanish fishing companies – Albacora and Inpesca respectively. These chartering agreements allowed the Spanish-owned vessels to make use of Oman's tuna quota, instead of Kenya's or Tanzania's or indeed Spain's. This kind of reshuffling by European-owned vessels to circumvent the catch limits imposed upon them by the IOTC is not uncommon or illegal. What does make this example unique is Oman's complete lack of a yellowfin tuna catch limit.

In 2014, the year before Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna was formally declared overfished, Oman caught just 7,208 tonnes of the valuable fish. Fast-forward ten years and in 2024 Oman's yellowfin catch exceeded 88,900 tonnes – a twelve-fold increase during a decade-long overfishing crisis.

This was made possible by Oman's objection to the current IOTC yellowfin tuna stock rebuilding plan, leaving it bound by an outdated version riddled with loopholes. One such loophole was that the Omani purse seine fleet had no catch limit at all for 2025.

The old, outdated resolution stated that a catch limit for the fleet would only come into effect after they reported catching more than 5,000 tonnes. Once they had exceeded that threshold, the amount by which they exceeded it would contribute to their new catch limit, providing a perverse incentive to wildly overshoot the 5,000 tonne mark in the first year in order to be allowed to continue catching as much as possible in the future.

Oman cleverly kept its yellowfin purse seine catches below 5,000 tonnes for the first few years until it had gathered enough purse seiners under its flag and chartering agreements to be able to shoot for the stars. And shoot they did. The IOTC recently published the catch figures for 2025 and Oman's purse seine fleet went from catching 2,355 tonnes of yellowfin tuna in 2024 to 17,570 tonnes in 2025.

This was an exceedingly predictable move and predict it we did in an information paper that we submitted to the IOTC in advance of this year's meeting in the Maldives⁵². Keeping that information paper in the public domain was no mean feat.

Oman's delegation to the IOTC features a particularly vocal European lawyer who tried his best to get our paper removed from the IOTC's website. He succeeded in getting it removed once, requiring us to resubmit it as an NGO statement. I think it's safe to say that almost no one reads the endless, repetitive NGO statements that are submitted to these meetings each year, but his continuous outraged references to our paper throughout the five-day Commission meeting made it perhaps our most-read submission yet.

The paper survived the week, but that didn't stop him from emailing me the very next working day with legal threats – a surprising move from a representative of a country like the Sultanate of Oman against a relatively small charity. And that was before we pointed out that Rawanq Al Salam International (the Omani company that bought the three French seiners mentioned earlier) has Egill Árnason at its helm – a former Samherji executive whose name has been linked to the infamous Fishrot scandal in which Samherji executives were accused of facilitating bribery payments to secure access to Namibian fishing quotas^{53,54}. Árnason has not been charged with or convicted of any offence in connection with the scandal and has denied any wrongdoing.

While many of these stories have focused on coastal states like Seychelles and Oman, the influence of European companies, European individuals and European political pressure cannot be overstated. Following decades of overfishing, some industrial fishing companies have seen the writing on the wall and are pivoting away from fishing and into new industries, reportedly reinvesting the money they've made from the exploitation of this public resource into areas like real estate that offer them longer-term stability.

Our friends at BLOOM put it perfectly: by doing so, these companies "embody the most harmful form of financialized capitalism, one that drives public decision-making to privatize profits while socializing losses at the public's expense"⁵⁵.

If nothing is done to change this model, there can be no doubt that once the fish are gone, the European interests will disappear with them onto greener pastures in other oceans or into other industries entirely, leaving the fishing communities that most depend on healthy oceans and healthy fish populations to foot the bill.

What's equally clear is how immensely solvable this problem is and how much of a difference would be made by improving transparency, reducing industrial fishing capacity and promoting equitable, precautionary catch distributions that prioritise the needs of developing coastal states over the development aspirations of commercial distant-water fleets. Until then, organisations like ours will continue to hold European industry and institutions to account wherever we can, from the aisles of UK supermarkets and the backstreets of Port Victoria, to crowded IOTC meeting rooms and the ethereal, Cathedral-like halls of the European Court of Justice.



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