



## MEDIA RELEASE

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### TUNA-PRICE-FIXING

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*Lausanne, 18 June 2020* - On Tuesday, Chris Lischewski, the driving force behind the creation of the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation (ISSF), received a three-year prison sentence in the United States for fixing the price of canned tuna. The former CEO of Bumble Bee Sea Foods is now disgraced beyond recovery.

The story behind this one-billion-dollar price fixing scandal, the biggest and most outrageous industrial subterfuge since Enron, is complex. It involves a web of opportunism and mixed agendas. And what still needs to be exposed is the role of NGOs in facilitating this mega crime.

ISSF lives on even though three of its corporate founders, StarKist, Bumble Bee Sea Foods and Chicken of the Sea, have been found guilty of conspiring to cheat American consumers out of the benefits of competition. Separately, another founding member, World Wildlife Fund (WWF), is being investigated for funding, assisting, and/or turning a blind eye to rape, murder and/or terrorism in Africa in pursuit of its fortress conservation crusade.

On the surface, it made absolutely no sense for tuna producers to get into bed with WWF's satellite ISSF. In 2010, WWF orchestrated a proposal at CITES COP15 to list bluefin tuna in Appendix I. If it had not been inept at managing its relationship with the European Union, WWF might have succeeded or at least come close to destroying the industry altogether. In the wake of this near disaster, tuna producers were expected to mount a counter offensive, perhaps even withdraw from ISSF. Instead, in what seemed like a tactical blunder on his part, Lischewski promoted the virtues of collaborating with WWF, ISSF and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which was another WWF creation.

In 2013, Chris Lischewski, as the then chairman of ISSF, announced the first line of canned seafood products in the USA endorsed by environmental NGOs. From then on, to his delight, Bumble Bee Seafood's tuna products bore both the MSC certified albacore and light (aka its ecolabel) and the WWF panda logo. The reality was that, regardless of appearances, three seemingly altruistic NGOs and three major corporations needed each other. For different reasons, they were all on the make. And all of them were more than prepared to disguise this fact by appearing to be virtuous.

The love-in between Bumble Bee and WWF came at a high price. In return for putting a halo around Bumble's tuna tins in the United States, WWF charged 13 cents per can. From this 'reputation for cash swap', WWF expected to raise USD one million per year. Lischewski even boasted that if Bumble Bee came up short, it would make up the difference. Supposedly, the money was meant to fund WWF's efforts to 'protect' marine life and expand 'sustainable' fishing practices globally.

What we didn't know - and perhaps WWF also didn't know - was that the now convicted tuna companies were colluding in a conspiracy, mostly at the initiative of Lischewski, at around the same time. For decades, "The Big Three", as insiders call them, had waged a vicious price war, which they ended by agreeing to covertly and illegally coordinate the current and future price of canned tuna in the USA. A charitable way of looking at this is that WWF thought that it was using Lischewski, when in fact he was really playing them.

ISSF was the perfect foil. The Big Three's joint membership of ISSF gave them numerous opportunities to conspire without raising suspicion. From Lischewski's perspective, what better way was there for a bunch of price-fixing crooks to pull the wool over the eyes of American consumers than to wrap their goods in the glow of NGO and global institutional imprimatur.

Given that Lischewski was the chairman of ISSF, a founding member of the Oceans Caucus Foundation, a participant in the Global Oceans Conference and the World Bank's Blue Ribbon Panel for the Global Partnership for Oceans, nobody was better placed than he was to pull off such a con trick.

To be fair, Chris Lischewski made sure that his co-conspirators – StarKist and Chicken of the Sea – also secured the same bragging rights, as well as the guaranteed returns that came from price fixing. So, it's hard not to conclude that garnering branded brownie points on their cans of tuna was as much a part of their strategy as the price fixing.

In 2017, StarKist boasted about how the MSC eco-label was growing the tuna market in the USA. In 2018, Chicken of the Sea was proud to declare that its tuna brand Genova was on sale, backed by the MSC ecolabel, at Walmart, Kroger, Albertson, Costco, and many other retailers across the United States. Conveniently, MSC's marketing backed up The Big Three by declaring that "from ocean to plate, our MSC-certified tuna and salmon can be traced back to a certified sustainable source and fishing practice."

The conspiracy to fix the prices of canned tuna has been, thankfully, brutally punished. The pretentious claims of the main actors have also been exposed as hollow. And, on personal note, I am as pleased as punch that Lischewski's place of abode is going to be a tad less luxurious than the suite he occupied during INFOFISH meetings, at the Shangri-La Hotel in Bangkok. I will never forget or forgive how he proclaimed in my presence, with a smug smirk, the virtues of collaborating with WWF.

The IWMC World Conservation Trust is an international organization that promotes the Sustainable Use as a conservation mechanism, the protection of the sovereign rights of independent nations and the respect of diverse cultures and traditions.  
It is a non-profit body supported by donations.

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