

THE PEARLING INDUSTRY IN THE KIMBERLEY

At the meeting of 3 September 1997, Ms Dee Taylor from Linneys Jewellers stood in for Greg Linney who had been invited overseas at short notice. Dee is the Manager of Linneys shop in Subiaco and she opened her talk with a short video called "Jewels of the Sea", which illustrated the history and management of the farming of cultured pearls.

The largest and most lustrous pearls in the world come from Broome and are cultivated or cultured in the Giant Silver-lipped pearl oyster called *Pinctada maxima*. Bill Read, a marine biologist, coined the name "Broome Pearls". Pearls are the oldest gems known to mankind and the industry in Broome originated from the collection of pearl shell for "Mother of Pearl" buttons etc. The actual collection of pearls was a sideline and only began in earnest in the 1950s when plastics took over for use in buttons.

There was also a big change in diving methods at this time. The huge lead boots and heavy helmets were slow, labour-intensive and dangerous. The divers still carry a bag around their necks in which to store the shells as they collect them. Originally Japanese and Malays, they are now are mostly Aboriginal and other Australian people. The season is February to May.

To make a cultured pearl, you must start with the right oyster shell and water where the temperature is about 20° C. The bags are filled and the shell are measured, cleaned of debris and kept alive in mesh baskets which are lowered back into the ocean bed till they are ready for seeding. During seeding, a wooden wedge is inserted to keep the two shells apart for the operation. The mantle makes the nacre which coats the pearl. In a natural situation, a pearl results when a piece of sand or grit accidentally enters the shell and the nacre is deposited to isolate it and lessen the irritation to the animal.

To make a cultured pearl, a tissue graft and a nucleus from a freshwater clam shell are inserted into the animal which is then returned to the sea to recuperate. Eventually they are all strung upon long lines in calm, warm seas such as those at the 18 pearl farms on the Kimberley coast and two off Darwin. It takes 8000 oyster-days to produce a pearl. Fouling organisms which compete for food must be cleaned off, mostly by hand, every two weeks for the next two years while the pearls form in the shells. It can be dangerous work, as there are sharks and crocodiles in these peaceful-looking waters. Often the crew and workers live on floating two-storey pontoons to be close to their work.

Finally comes the harvest after the shells are cleaned for the final time and prised open to extract the world's finest pearls. It is illegal to kill an oyster to look for a

pearl today and, if the shell is in good condition, another seed will be inserted. The pearls are then washed, weighed and packaged. Broome produces 1300 kg of pearls annually. The Japanese produce 100 tons but only leave the seeds in for six months. Their pearls are smaller and they have badly polluted waters which can wipe out their shells. The Cook Islands use the Black-lipped oyster. Oysters can change sex during their lifetime and they usually live for about eight years.

Cyclones are a problem and can destroy the whole farm. The oyster meat is sold to Japan and fetches \$100 per kg. Originally, Japanese experts did all the seeding but now the Australians are being trained and taking over. A large apricot pearl is worth \$8000–\$9000; a drop shape is worth \$5000. A Keshi pearl is a small, baroque pearl, uneven and almost natural. Our largest pearls range from 10 to 20, even 25 millimetres. On a good pearl, the nacre is built up as thick as a fingernail. A real pearl is slippery but a fake or manufactured pearl will grate on the teeth. Some people believe pearls are unlucky but this is not so; they are tears of joy at owning such a beautiful gem. They also get better as they age.

Dee, who has been with Linneys for six years, answered many questions as she passed around a large pearl shell and three beautiful samples of pearls, one large apricot, one large drop and one black pearl. Her own ring, a Keshi surrounded by many small diamonds, was most attractive. We were lucky to be able to handle such priceless gems. Kevin Kenneally thanked Dee for her interesting illustrated talk and the audience gave a round of applause.

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