

By contrast, gross revenues for pearls from French Polynesia alone are around US\$ 150 million. This represents roughly 10 per cent of the total value of the regional tuna catch—from one country, thirty odd lagoons. There are six or seven countries which can offer considerable scope for black pearl expansion. With continued strong promotional efforts, it is not inconceivable that this industry could sustain a three-fold, five-fold, or greater increase in volume and value over the next decade or two. In an article in this issue ('Balanced on Pearls', pp. 18–19), Sibani of Tahiti suggests that such an expansion could be easily sustained.

This article also touches on one most important—and most frequently forgotten—consideration: pearl revenues are earned directly by the individual farmers in the Pacific Islands. The revenues stay in the islands, and primarily on outer atolls, away from urban centres. It has multiplier effects throughout the atolls themselves, and to the producing nations.

The best available information on job creation in the pearl industry is from French Polynesia in 1989, when 2 300 people were estimated to be directly employed in pearl culture. This number has probably seen a five-fold increase in the intervening years, as the industry has similarly grown since then. Using the same multiplier ratios as Gillett (*ibid*) of between 1:1 and 1:2 for direct: indirect jobs created, yields a total employment figure for French Polynesian pearls of between 23 000 to 34 000 jobs. Most of these, remember, are jobs on the outlying atoll islands.

Pearl culture is also an aquaculture industry. It is cultivating, not extracting. It is the essence of sustainability, in a way that wild stock exploitation (of finfish or shellfish) could never hope to be.

With the imminent hatchery-driven expansion of pearl farming across the Pacific, this industry will grow. It may never eclipse tuna in terms of total value of the catch, but it might possibly have already exceeded the tuna industry in terms of the revenues brought into, and circulated around within, the island economies.

No, we don't want to detract from the attention accorded to the Pacific pelagics. We all love our sashimi, and the access fees sure do help keep the governments running. But pearls have eclipsed most other likely candidates for comparison. There is little else in the marine sector by which to measure it. The total value of all other commercial fishing in the region, outside of the industrial tuna fishery, for example, is estimated to be around US\$ 82 million p.a. (Dalzell, et al. 1996).

I know, I thump this drum every issue. Same drum, different beat. I guess I would just like to see more folk more aware of this perspective. Pearls deserve some greater recognition. Perhaps the place to start is for each of us to commit to memory a couple of the above facts or figures, and toss them out casually in conversation with one or two of your more influential friends.

References

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Pearls and Pacific regionalism

by Neil A. Sims

-The principal constraint to growth of the Pacific pearl industry in new areas has been the limited numbers and restricted distribution of wild stocks. Over the past decade, hatcheries have shown increasing promise, but the conventional wisdom was that you still couldn't seriously consider farming in areas without a large pool of wild oysters.

Over the last six months, however, the muted hatchery bugling has reached a fanfare crescendo. Simply-constructed, economically-run hatcheries have yielded spat in the hundreds of thousands for three separate projects. Post-settlement handling techniques have

also improved dramatically, meaning that a far greater proportion of these spat will reach seedable size.

These milestones underscore the impending expansion of pearl farming across the Pacific. The lustre—and the lucre—of pearl farming has for too long been hidden beneath a bushel; or more factually, hidden beneath the surface of the NW Australian coast, or eastern Polynesian lagoons. Farming has for too long been tethered to wild stocks for collection, or for supplying consistent spat-falls to collectors. This is now changing. Pacific pearl culture is in the fledgling stages of becoming a regional industry.

We need to begin to think about what we might become, and what models are out there for regional co-operation. Yes, OK, pearl farms are local, not regional. Yes, the oysters don't migrate much. It is still a single market however, and we are all reliant on the same pool of seeding technicians, the same sources of supply for materials and nuclei. There are strong arguments for co-ordinated promotional efforts, and unified grading and pricing standards.

I remember those days, not so long ago really (the early 1980s), when a bilateral tuna fishing treaty was considered a rarity in the Pacific. With a grad-

ual, persistent massaging, Pacific tuna interests are now able to sit down together, foreign fishing countries and island nations, as they recently did in Majuro, and consider a regional fishery management policy, and regional licensing agreements. Pacific tuna has come a long way in the 15 odd years that I've been following it.

The next 15 years should be equally momentous for Pacific pearling. We all need to begin to pay attention to these impending changes. We need to think about them, and devise strategies which can help build the industry up, without tearing each other down.

