

# Facing the Future:

## The Evolution of the Cook Islands Cultured Pearl Industry.

Pearls.

For over 5000 years they have been an obsession of mankind.

They grace the necks of the rich and famous, royalty and celebrity, Emperors and their consorts.

Entire civilizations coveted them, myths exploring their origins, virtues & attributes exist in all ancient writings.

Some believed that pearls were a link to heaven.

Today the global cultured pearl market is valued in excess of USD400 million (all loose pearls produced by world pearling regions) and on a tiny atoll called Manihiki in the Northern Cook Islands, a resilient group of pearl farmers play their part.

The Cook Islands Pearl industry dates back to the 18th century when Black Lipped Mother of Pearl Shell (*Pinctada Margaritifera*) were collected from Manihiki and Penrhyn by European traders for buttons and inlaid furniture, a huge fashion statement of the time.

During the 1950's, spat (larvae oyster shell) collection experiments were carried out in Manihiki lagoon to determine shell farming and export sustainability, but it was not until the early 1970's that an Australian, Peter Cummings, established the first modern cultured pearl farm.

Cummings farm lasted 10 years, producing magnificent large silver/white pearls. Price regulations and industry domination by the Japanese eventually rendered the farm unprofitable.

During this time, in neighboring French Polynesia, significant production of black pearls had begun and in 1986 the Cook Islands Government supported the development of a modern black pearl industry centered on Manihiki.

In collaboration with Chinese/Tahitian Yves Tchen Pan and local families, including the renowned Tekake Williams, pearl farms were established with the first harvests of fabulous black pearls arriving on the market in 1988/89.

Taking advantage of a buoyant world market, The Cook Islands Black Pearl Industry quickly gained momentum and by 2000 was generating USD12 million per annum in export revenue and had established itself as the second largest world supplier of south sea black pearls.

Black Pearl Boutiques on Rarotonga evolved, offering a diverse range of jewellery, from world class to souvenir. Finding immediate

appeal, Black Pearls quickly became a favoured item for visitors to the Cook Islands.

But as with any new business sector, the industry of pearls has not escaped its share of heartache.

On November 1st, 1997 a devastating Cyclone struck Manihiki. The worst storm in living history, Cyclone Martin was said to have generated waves of such height that they swept over this small island, killing 19 and devastating a majority of the surface infrastructure.

The memories of that shattering day are still fresh in the minds of all those who remain on Manihiki and will forever be remembered as a mournful chapter in the history of the Island of Pearls.

In 2001 the world black pearl market was affected by unregulated, over production from French Polynesia, (who supply 95% of saltwater cultured black pearls) reducing average world prices and driving many farmers, both Cook Islands & Tahitian, out of the industry.

More recently, world prices have begun to make a recovery. Lower production levels and controlled exports from French Polynesia have once again led to an increase in world demand for this truly exotic gem.



Cook Islands Pearl Authority Chairman George Ellis believes that the outlook is bright for Cook Islands Pearls.

“The economic potential of the Cook Islands Pearl Industry is huge and should not be ignored. Manihiki Lagoon, if farmed sustainably has an export revenue potential in excess of USD8 million per annum. The market for quality pearls is still out there and it will pay good prices for them. We have and we still can produce quality pearls. Our future direction must be to produce and market quality Cook Islands Pearls”.

Pearl Farmer & Wholesaler Raymond Newnham says that “the Cook Islands Black Pearl Industry is poised for a period of growth at the production and wholesale level. Several factors which have previously had a negative effect on the industry are now looking very positive”.

Today, the global profile of cultured pearls is at an all time high. In the worldwide jewellery industry, pearl jewellery ranks third in consumer preference, surpassed only by gold and diamonds. World sales of pearl jewellery were estimated at USD5 billion in 2005.

Black Pearls feature in the collections of world jewellery and fashion houses Tiffany, Cartier, Mikimoto and Louis Vuitton. They grace the covers of international fashion & jewellery magazines, their magnetism, unrivalled history & tradition of romance is impossible to escape.

Far removed from the glamour of world jewellery icons, on a small group of palm fringed south pacific atolls, regional & local industry leaders are banding together to plan the secure future of this magnificent ocean gem. Their challenges are multi-tiered, their lasting efforts yet another chapter in the enduring legend of pearls. ✕

