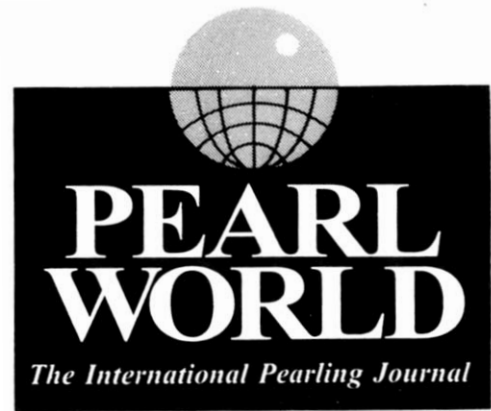


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- An incredible find: a tale of "lost" keshis recovered in the Cook Islands.
- Coverage of the 2008 Tucson Gem Show: what pearl dealers were offering (and thinking). Plus Lois Berger's comprehensive pearl report.
- Pearl farming: a safe harbor for biodiversity. Why Jeweler is on the leading edge of marine conservation.
- Cultured pearls in the 21st Century: from GIA's *Gems & Gemology*.



LOST IN MEMORIAM

Dr. Grahame Brown
May 25, 1936- January 15, 2008



Editor of *The Australian Gemmologist*, good friend, and personable promulgator of cultured and natural pearls. Admired and loved by many.

page 3

AND FOUND

Lying on the bottom of
Manihiki Atoll for many years



The *Poe Tuanaana*, an incredibly beautiful bracelet of 10-14mm Cook Islands keshis from a line which was lost for over seven years.

page 5

Cultured Pearls in the 21st Century: A Free Market and New Looks

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by Russell Shor, GIA Senior Industry Analyst

The cultured pearl industry has experienced a dramatic transformation during the past 15 years, from a single commodity dominated by one country to a multi-colored array of goods and an ever-expanding group of producers (figure 1).



Figure 1. Recent years have seen dramatic changes in the types of cultured pearls and their sources, with (top to bottom) Tahitian, Chinese, South Sea, and Japanese akoya (bottom two rows) goods represented here. Tahitian earrings courtesy of Mastoloni; South Sea strand courtesy of The Collector Fine Jewelry. Photo by Harold & Erica Van Pelt.

The Fall 2007 issue of *Gems & Gemology* (pp. 200-226) offered an in-depth look at these changes and how they have transformed pearls into a must-have fashion item.

Japanese Dealers Relinquish Control

For many decades after pioneering the cultured pearl in the early twentieth century, Japanese companies maintained tight control over its technology, production and distribution. In the 1960s, however, large, white South Sea cultured pearls from Australia and black cultured pearls from French Polynesia began entering the market alongside the traditional white Japanese akoya.

The French Polynesians initially struggled to gain acceptance for their products, as many believed they were treated-color. A breakthrough came in the early 1970s when GIA researcher Robert Crowningshield

determined their black color was indeed natural. Meanwhile, the South Sea cultured pearl was becoming a branded fashion item, though the Australians still marketed their output solely through Japanese wholesalers.

The real changes began in the 1990s, when the nearly century-long grip of the Japanese loosened due to a combination of factors: aggressive marketing efforts for South Sea and black French Polynesian pearls; the rise of lower-cost, fine-quality Chinese freshwater cultured pearls (figure 2); and the outbreak of a disease that devastated much of Japan's pearling industry.



Figure 2. The mussels used by Chinese culturers can produce dozens of pearls at one time. Photo by Doug Fiske.

The Australians and the French Polynesians (now selling under the "Tahitian" banner) began marketing their products as distinct from Japanese akoyas: the South Sea goods as luxury items that were not subjected to treatments, the Tahitians as exotic fashion pieces. Producers of both types of cultured pearls embarked on multi-million-dollar consumer campaigns to promote their goods and the images they wanted them to convey.



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"GIA" to page 4

GOODBYE, GRAHAME

It is with sadness that we report the passing of a dear friend, Dr. Grahame Brown, Editor of *The Australian Gemmologist*.

This gentleman had such a long, varied and distinguished career that his *curriculum vitae* spans so many pages in 6-point type that there is no way we could reproduce it here, on these pages.

His degrees include BSc, FGAA, FGA, FCGmA, Dip DT, and Dip GR.

As was said at his memorial: "This man was a driven person in anything he turned his mind to. He had many passions and a few addictions, namely: reading, pearls, diamonds, jade and corals.

"Underpinning Grahame's career and extra curricular activities has been his insatiable quest for knowledge and an absolute focus on the transmission of this knowledge to others in a quality and complete sense. This has been one of his trademark characteristics that will form a material part of many people's memories of him.

"Grahame's contribution to the fields of Family, Dentistry, Army and, most significantly, Gemmology is vast and has influenced many people. This will ensure that despite his death his memory will live on."

Grahame, son to Beatrice, is survived by his wife, Helen, his children David, Mark and Lisa, and grandchildren Rowan, Nicola, Lucas, Abi, Jamie and Madeline.

From a personal standpoint, it has been my pleasure to have worked with Grahame on quite a few pearling projects, and he contributed much interesting and worthwhile information to the pages of *Pearl World* over the years. His untimely leaving will be sorely felt by not only myself, or our readers, but also the legions of friends he made all over the world.



His friend



Professor Grahame Brown
25.5.36 – 15.1.08



Raw Pearls
21.6.06

“GIA” from page 2

By the mid-1990s, Chinese farmers, who for years had produced small, irregularly shaped and very inexpensive goods (dubbed “rice krispie pearls”), were successfully growing round, akoya-like cultured pearls. The quantity of Chinese goods entering the market threatened to inundate Japanese distributors. The Japanese entered talks with the Chinese government in an effort to control production and exports of such goods, but they failed on both fronts.

Then, in 1996, reports began filtering in that Japanese pearl farms were suffering the massive mortality of their oyster crops. By year’s end, an estimated two-thirds of the akoya oysters under cultivation in Japanese waters had died from infectious disease—a blow from which that country’s cultured pearl industry has not yet fully recovered. As a result, Japanese producers no longer had the financial resources to control supplies and distribution, thus creating a true free market within the industry.

**Market Instability
Meets Fashion Revolution**

The first test of the new free market came at the end of the decade, when the large amounts of Chinese goods depressed prices for some categories and the production of Tahitian black cultured pearls skyrocketed with little control over quality. Prices for lower-quality black cultured pearls in particular plummeted, a situation that took several years to reverse as the French Polynesian government imposed stricter controls on exports. The Japanese attempted to move akoyas more up-market by concentrating on larger sizes, while the South Sea producers increased their luxury marketing

and advertising campaigns.

At the same time, cultured pearls in pastel shades of green, violet, pink and blue began showing up in designer pieces in the late 1990s, while a producer in the Philippines launched a marketing campaign for gold-colored goods. Within the past few years, “chocolate pearls” have become a fashion item. Once rejected by pearl producers and distributors who thought only in terms of black and white, such fancy-colored cultured pearls started a fashion revolution that still continues (figure 3).

As some of the world’s top designers began working with cultured pearls and the major producers increased their spending on branding and advertising, large retailers took a much greater interest. Indeed, Tiffany & Co. created an entire chain of retail stores (Iridesse) based on pearl jewelry, because they could now offer a diverse array of products across a very broad price range.

In the future, the success of these many ventures will undoubtedly attract new enterprises in other nations, particularly around the Pacific Rim—but also in Mexico and the Middle East—while existing producers will continue to experiment with new products.



Figure 3. Fancy-colored cultured pearls have greatly enlarged choices for jewelry buyers. Courtesy of Albert Asher Pearl Co. Photo by Robert Weldon.

Recently, one designer partnered with a Vietnamese farm to culture black pearls around gemstone bead nuclei.

Identifying treatments will remain a challenge, and retailers and consumers alike must beware of the many techniques that can be used to enhance the appearance of cultured pearls, especially irradiation and dyeing, and the methods that can be used to identify them. ❖

Ed. It seems that the timeline suggested by Mr. Shor in his first paragraph may be somewhat wrong. In my view, the changes outlined “during the past 15 years” actually started occurring a decade or so before. However, they did accelerate in later years. Sorry to quibble. RDT

Lost, then found, then prized

This is an incredible lost-and-found story, one that could only come from the great pearl world.

It began with a Cook Islands pearl farmer who one day in the 2000-2001 season accidentally lost a line of nucleated oysters, and could not find them even after much frantic searching. “I guess I’ll just have to write these oysters off,” he thought.

Then, some seven or eight years later, he unexpectedly came across the lost line.

Lying in their pristine and hidden marine environment,

undisturbed for so long, these unique pearls grew into their unbelievable size, shape and color before being finally re-discovered by their owner.

The enormous size of these “lost line” pearls from the lagoon in Manihiki is truly remarkable. This rare, small and very special lot was sold to a Rarotonga pearl merchant not long ago who created an incredible, multi-colored bracelet, and who named it *Poe Tuanaana*. This bracelet has since been sold to a private client in the United States.

The weight of these 17 vibrant black, silver and bronze

Cook Islands keshi pearls is approximately 42 grams; they range in size from 10-14mm, and the magnetic clasp is 14k white gold.

“The philosophy behind the name is that the focus of the appellation centers on the fact that these pearls had been ‘lost’... adopting a rather romantic twist, the term *Tuanaana* is used here in an all-encompassing manner for the pearls, lying in their shell, beckoning with their radiant colors, far beneath the ocean waves, awaiting the day they would be rediscovered” says the designer. ❖



2008 TUCSON GEM SHOW

What almost all of us anticipated coming true at the Tucson 2008 Show did not, indeed, turn out to be the case.

For pearl-ers, in general, the show was about the same, give or take plus-or-minus- alpha, as the year before. Attendance might have been a wee bit down, but buyers were not especially closed in their minds or wallets; fears had been expressed that the poor U.S. economy would have had a much more disastrous effect on attendees' penchants for purchasing baubles of all shapes, sizes and prices.

The "usual suspects" (our term for the exhibitors who routinely attend this show over the years) were upbeat, and pedaling strongly toward the finish when we exited stage left on Sunday morning. Their overall feeling at that point in the game was that the show had

started unusually strongly, and then had tapered off quite some bit as the days progressed, most notably on the Jewish Sabbath when many exhibits were closed.

Perhaps one reason was that getting around Tucson was more difficult than ever before: most of the mid-town major freeway exit and entrance ramps were closed due to construction (why couldn't they have left one or two, here and there, open?), and one had to navigate unusually crowded surface streets to try to attend venues in and about the city center.

This traffic drawback is bound to last at least two more years, we were told by exasperated locals.

So let us begin with some brief snapshots of what we found, followed by Lois Berger's usual concise overview of current pearl market, as seen through the goings on at the 2008 Tucson Gem Show.

The "Pearl Walk" folks assembled, as usual, at the opening bell on Friday. Led by the indefatigable Lois Berger through the myriad byways of the Tucson Convention Center, exhibitors were pleased to hold court and perform show-and-tell with their pearly goods.

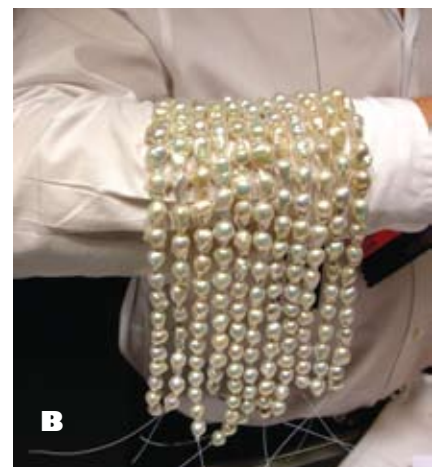
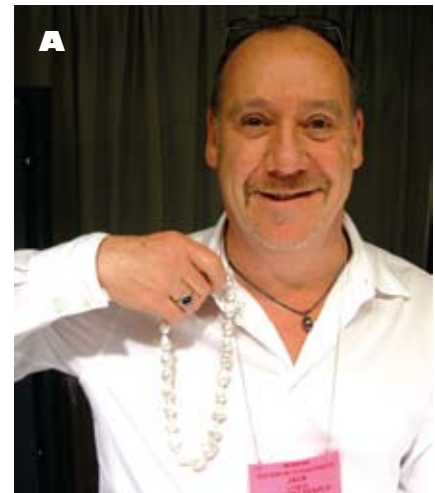
Starting off at the Latendresse booth, American Pearl Company, the group first moved on to A&Z Pearls where Avi Raz displayed his usual superior selection of goods (Chinese freshwater, but especially Japanese akoya) and waxed eloquently about his love of and search for cultured pearls. His 2007 business had been better than 2006's he told us, and related that one of his longtime customers had told him that "pearls saved us" during the year due to their full markup. Excellent quality CFWCPs, 10-11mm, were selling well and akoya sales in November and December were quite high. It was nice to see his son, Ari, working beside his Dad in the booth.

From there, the group trundled over to Asher Pearl where Armand (son of Albert, the founder) was proud to show us a lovely strand of 10-12mm pistachio *ikecho*, some larger American naturals, several loose *P. Mazatlantica* from the Sea of Cortez, a selection of CFWCP coins, and a 9.5-10mm akoya necklace in the \$11,000-\$13,000 range.

Then the herd moved on to meet up with Jack Lynch at the Sea Hunt booth. Jack, as usual, bubbled with enthusiasm, and displayed an eclectic range of unusual cultured pearls, mostly of the Chinese freshwater variety which seems to be his specialty.

2007 had been a very good year, he admitted, and 2008 was "running pretty close so far."

Traffic at his location was good, and many visitors were interested in his 12-17mm baroque CFWCPs selling for \$10,000 ("A" right) and bead-nucleated baroques 11-13mm selling at \$1,200 ("B" right).



"Tucson" to page 8

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King’s Ransom was the next stop, where the effervescent Betty Sue King holds shop (and sway).



It’s been a good show,” she said. “Our buyers know what they want, and have specific things in mind,” showing us her exquisite 18-inch 7 x 14 x 25mm metallic purple coral branch keshi necklace (\$425) which drew lots of attention (“C” above).

Other items of interest: fancy color, juicy center-drilled multi-pastel “puff coin” strands 14-15mm (\$670; photo “D”); 19-inch “white cloud angel wings” 19 x 23 x 30mm (\$3,400; photo “E”), plus a similar strand in pastels.



“The 16” standard length necklace is too short for most of the exotic selections. I’ve extended their lengths to 18” and 19” to accommodate the fullness of the pearls so they drape comfortably around the neck. This includes the juicy center drilled coins and double keshi strands,” she told us.

Also exhibited was a lovely dyed Japanese fire-ball 12-13mm (\$450).

Betty Sue, also known as “The Pearl Goddess” (a well-deserved monicker), is always innovative and informative about what’s new and different, and never fails to enthuse the visiting Pearl Aficionado firemen.

She avers that “dyed brown freshwater pearls are still a hot item. We are still getting requests and sold a wide variety of sizes ranging from 2.5-13mm at the show (photo “F”).”



And she added a lovely postscript: “I spent the weekend at home after the show in bed recuperating from the Tucson bugs, the AGTA Board of Directors meeting and general exhaustion. I stayed away from the show one day when my cold was the boss of me. My girls had a terrific day and suggested I stay home another day! While last year broke all records, much to my delight, we exceeded that this year!”



Fuji Voll, a perennial member of the Pearl Walk, brought along an interesting strand that his colleague, Sarah Canizarro, had induced him to buy.

“Twenty years in the water,” he starts telling us about the supplier’s claim about these pearls. Fuji and Sarah didn’t buy that, but they did buy enough pearls to make two “record” strands (one sold)... incidentally quadrupling their own record price per weight paid for Chinese pearls.

These Chinese freshwater bead-nucleated strands are slightly baroque, 14.5 x 16.4mm diameter, in various bright colors with a lot of goldy. They have a texture like hammered metal typical of in-body bead-nucleated baroques, but not of the “flame-ball” type that has become available during recent

years. (One Pearl Walk member felt their textures were very interesting: “somewhat reminiscent of foil-wrapped Hershey’s Kisses”).

Like Japanese Kasumi and ocean-cultured pearls, their pearl sacs grow to surround the nucleus from a graft, while flame-balls grow when beads are inserted into pre-existing, generally ill-fitting pearl sacs in the mantle.

Sarah, who began working with Pacific Pearls over a decade ago, knows her stuff, says Fuji (himself a second generation pearl dealer) with great admiration. “Besides at our booth, she can be found at www.kojimapearl.com,” Fuji adds.

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TUCSON PEARL REPORT 2008

Lois H. Berger, G.G., NAJA

The Tucson AGTA Gem Show, 2008, was in full swing on the opening days. Everyone was busy looking at the best gems and pearls from all over the world.

Many dealers held the line with similar pricing from 2007 and some discounted to unload older inventory. This is always a problem, especially with newer hot ticket items that are priced high. Lower and mid-end pearls held their own to a degree depending upon the pricing. Of course, high-end is always pricey. New items were not plentiful but with excellent quality.

With our borderline economy, a weakening dollar, and higher Chinese prices, we have a good bit of uneasiness.

The latest Chinese freshwater cultured baroque pearls are great. They are white, also seen in multi-pastels with very high luster, and higher prices. Strands are approximately 16" in length. Size, price and color are shown in the table below.



Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls, Baroque, Bead-nucleated

I saw a remarkable Chinese freshwater cultured baroque pearl strand measuring 12-17mm, very baroque, white with high luster and priced at \$10,000. Impressive! It appears that the Chinese freshwater baroque cultured pearls are mimicking the South Sea baroque cultured pearls in

their shape and size range.

One particular Chinese freshwater cultured baroque, bead-nucleated strand measuring 14.5x16.4mm was outstanding. It had a wrinkled surface offering delightful colors of golden, cream, lavender, peach, rosé and bronze. This strand sells for \$15,000. Upon examination, I thought it might be Japanese freshwater cultured Kasumigaura pearls. After many conversations concerning this strand, it was revealed that it is a Chinese freshwater cultured baroque strand. It really resembles a Japanese Kasumigaura freshwater cultured pearl strand. It is very difficult to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese freshwater cultured pearls. Only with laboratory testing can these pearls be differentiated on the basis of trace elements in the nacre.

Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls, Baroque
Bead-Nucleated

9.5x9.5 mm	Metallic gold	\$90
11x16 mm	Mixed pastel	\$350
10x11 mm	Mixed pastel	\$600
12x13 mm	Lavender, gold metallic	\$600
11x13 mm	Lavender, gold metallic	\$1,200
12x14 mm	Mixed pastel	\$2,000
17x22 mm	Mixed pastel	\$2,800
14.9x20 mm	Mixed pastel	\$3,100



Japanese Kasumigaura Freshwater Cultured Pearls, Bead Nucleated		
14.2x11.9 mm	semi-baroque, pastel, very high luster, excellent matching	\$3,600
14.5x13 mm	semi-baroque, pastel colors, very high luster	\$7,500
9x12 mm	Baroque, rosé, golden, cream, lavender, green, bronze, very high luster	\$9,000
9.5x12.8 mm	Off round-round, pastels	\$10,000

Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls, White, Tissue Activated	
5.5x6 mm	\$65
6x6.5 mm	\$80
6.5x7 mm	\$100
7x7.5 mm	\$150
7.5x8 mm	\$180
8x8.5 mm	\$195



Japanese Kasumigaura cultured pearls are hard to come by. Lake Kasumigaura, located in Japan, has been producing very limited quantities in recent years but some are available. I saw several wonderful strands which are described in the table (above left).

The "keshi" Chinese

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Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls "Keshi"		
10-11x30 mm	Bronze, lavender, cream, double and triple shapes	\$350
10x12 mm	Apricot, lavender, cream, double shapes	\$400
12x14 mm	Silver white	\$500
13-15x35 mm	Metallic multi-color, double and triple shapes, 19 inches	\$1,550
20x23 mm	White, lavender	\$2,500
19-23x30 mm	"Angel Wings", white cloud color	\$3,400

Above left: Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls, Bead Nucleated

Above right: Kasumigaura Japanese Freshwater Cultured Pearls, Bead Nucleated

Middle left: Chinese Freshwater Cultured "Keshi" Pearls

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freshwater cultured pearl strands were very popular. Double and triple shapes with very high luster and outstanding colors are high fashion. Sizes varied from 10x12mm to 20x23mm. Prices ranged from \$400 to \$2,500. A very special strand called “baroque angel wings”, in white, measured 19x23 by 30 mm, 19” strand, and cost \$3,400.

Chinese Freshwater Cultured Petal Pearls		
9x10 mm	White	\$90-120
12x14 mm	White	\$250
11x12 mm	Pastel	\$350-400
12x14 mm	Silver white	\$450

Although no longer *fashion du jour*; the Chinese freshwater cultured petal pearls are still very beautiful with their vibrant colors. Many strands have been discounted and inventory appears low.

This year, the coin-shape Chinese freshwater cultured pearls were beautiful with really round shapes, smooth nacre, hardly any blemishes and very high luster. A light purple Chinese freshwater cultured pearl strand measuring 13.5x14mm, with very high luster and perfect coin shape was priced at \$580. Another strand measuring 14x15mm, multi-pastel colors (puff coin), very high luster, was priced at \$670. An 18inch, 7x14x25mm, metallic purple coral branch strand sold for \$425. All were stunning!



Above: Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls, Stick Shapes



Left: Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearl Strand, Coin Shape



Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls, Tissue Activated

Round to nearly round tissue-activated Chinese freshwater cultured pearls are one of the most difficult to find in the marketplace. They have beautiful metallic mixed pastel colors, natural colors, nearly round to round, and very, very high luster. The following table illustrates price, size and color. Strands are 16 inches.

Chinese Freshwater Cultured Pearls Tissue Activated, Near Round - Round		
9.5x10.4 mm	Mixed pastel metallic	\$1,200
7x11.5 mm	Peacock metallic	\$1,850
9.8x10.6 mm	Mixed pastel	\$4,800
11x12 mm	Mixed pastel	\$16,800

Japanese akoya cultured pearls, white, round, are back on the market with great availability of all sizes except 9-9.5mm and 9.5-10mm. These Japanese akoya cultured pearls cannot be readily separated from Chinese akoya cultured pearls. As it has been mentioned many times, Chinese akoya cultured pearls are frequently mixed in the strands with Japanese akoya cultured pearls. Possibly in the larger sizes,

more Japanese akoya cultured pearls will be used in the strand. Treatments are such that there is no distinguishable evidence in separating the Japanese akoya and the Chinese akoya cultured pearls.

The strands are excellent with high luster, excellent matching and roundness and free of blemishes. Pricing is available in all grades from low to high end.

I will list the average grade of A quality in the table below, strands are 16" in length.

Japanese Akoya Cultured Pearls, White	
5.5x6 mm	\$240
6x6.5 mm	\$420-720
6.5x7 mm	\$485-850
7x7.5 mm	\$755-1,200
7.5x8 mm	\$1,040-1,600
8x8.5 mm	\$1,620-2,230
8.5x9 mm	\$3,560

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Chinese Akoya Cultured Pearls, White	
5.5x6 mm	\$125
6x6.5 mm	\$155
6.5x7 mm	\$185
7x7.5 mm	\$225
7.5x8 mm	\$465

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"Report" from page 13

Tahitian South Sea cultured pearls are selling well, especially in larger sizes. I spotted a heavily circled baroque strand selling for \$480. This is old inventory that is still very salable. The quality of the Tahitian South Sea cultured pearls is amazing. The luster and roundness are striking. Overtones are primarily green but there are also many strands at the mid to high end with purple, aubergine, red, and blue overtones. High-end pearls command higher prices. Low-end strands were primarily black and basic shades of grey.

Tahitian South Sea Cultured Pearls, Rounds		
8x10 mm	Black with dark grey overtones	\$2,000
8x11 mm	Black with green and red overtones	\$2,800
11.5x13.2 mm	Black with strong green overtones	\$5,000
11x13.3 mm	Black with overtones of green, chocolate, yellowish green	\$9,000
11.5x12.8 mm	Black with red and blue overtones	\$11,000
12x14 mm	Black	\$12,500
13x16.1 mm	Mixed greys	\$14,000
13.1x15.3 mm	Black with green overtones	\$15,500
12x13 mm	Black with green overtones	\$24,000



Tahitian South Sea Cultured Pearls,
Mixed Greys

Tahitian South Sea Cultured Pearls, Baroque		
11x12 mm	Dark grey	\$650
10.3x12.3 mm	Very light grey	\$1,700
13x14 mm	Medium grey, circles	\$1,400
15x17.2 mm	Black	\$8,500
15x16.5 mm	Black with green overtones	\$16,000
13x15 mm	Black	\$5,000
15x17 mm	Black	\$10,000



Tahitian South Sea
Cultured Pearls, Multi-Origin

Tahitian South Sea Cultured Pearls, Multi-Origin, Round		
9.5x10 mm	Orange, cream, mint, green, rosé, blue grey	\$3,000
12x13.6 mm	Cream, yellow, rosé, greenish grey	\$7,000
10x12 mm	White, gold, black	\$13,000
13x16 mm	White, gold, black	\$15,000

Tables below show price, color, and cost.

Baroque white South Sea cultured pearls are great! The shapes and colors bounce off the surfaces and catch the eye. The pearls are currently in demand and sell well. They are a fashion trend that allows versatility for all women. Round South Sea cultured pearls are not selling as well as the baroques. However, trends change from year to year.



South Sea Cultured Pearls, Round

South Sea Cultured Pearls, Round, White		
7x8 mm	Baby South Sea	\$2,000
12.2x15.4 mm	Low to medium luster, circled	\$3,000
9x10.8 mm	Slight greenish overtone	\$4,000
9x11.8 mm	Rosé overtone	\$4,500
10.9x12.7 mm	Soft luster	\$7,000
11x14.5 mm	White	\$8,500
13.9x10 mm	White rosé	\$13,500
12x14 mm	Gem quality	\$18,000
15.6x12 mm	Light silver overtone	\$20,000
13x15.5 mm	Greenish overtone	\$27,000
14x16.3 mm	Pink overtone	\$30,000
15.7x11.5 mm	Rosé	\$50,000



South Sea Cultured Pearls, Baroque

South Sea Cultured Pearls, Baroque, White		
9x14.3 mm	Bluish silver white	\$1,600
10.5x11.9 mm	Silver white, slight blue overtone	\$2,800
10x12.7 mm	Silver white	\$4,000
15x16.8 mm	White rosé	\$7,000
15x12 mm	Silver bluish white	\$7,700
13x15.9 mm	Silver bluish white	\$8,000
13.5x16 mm	Light blue and silver overtones	\$16,000
15x16.9 mm	Rosé, lavender, blue overtones	\$19,000
15.6x18.7 mm	Silver white	\$22,000

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The golden color varies to such a degree that it is hard to determine if the pearls have been treated. Many times, only a few pearls have been treated and the remaining pearls are natural color. Laboratory testing can give important answers.

South Sea Cultured Pearls, Round, Golden

South Sea Cultured Pearls, Round, Golden		
8.1x9.3 mm	Very strong golden	\$2,700
11x13.8 mm	Light golden	\$6,500
9.1x12.3 mm	Intense golden	\$8,000
11x14.7 mm	Strong golden	\$8,700
11.1x14.6 mm	Medium light golden	\$12,000
11x14 mm	Golden	\$20,000
13.2x16.8 mm	Strong golden	\$29,000
15.6x12 mm	Light golden	\$35,000
13.1x16.2 mm	Golden	\$75,000

South Sea Cultured Pearls, Baroque, Golden		
12x14 mm	Light golden, circled	\$1,300
10x11 mm	Strong golden	\$1,500
11x12 mm	Mixed golden	\$1,700
10.2x12.5 mm	Semi-baroque	\$3,200
10x12 mm	Golden	\$6,000
12x15 mm	Golden	\$9,000
13x6 mm	Golden	\$12,000

The information contained in this report is intended to provide a cross section of what is available in the current pearl market at the wholesale level. The tables, listings, sizes, and prices are not intended for grading purposes. All pictures were taken by Lois H. Berger.

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PEARL FARMING: A SAFE HARBOR FOR BIODIVERSITY

A harbor is defined as place that is safe and sheltered. It can also be defined as a coastal area where ships and other marine vessels can safely dock and anchor. A harbor is likened to a pearl farm because it is a secure and protected area and it provides the environment for marine species such as fish to temporarily stay, propagate and eventually pass through and move on to other destinations.

When Jacques Branellec and his Filipino business partner, Manuel Cojuangco, started Jeweler International Corporation in 1979, their first pearl farm was located in the southernmost part of Palawan island in the Philippines. The farm is about four hours and 15 minutes away by boat from neighboring Malaysia and about four hours via helicopter from Manila. That vast area between Palawan and Malaysia is known to be a rich oyster bed for the pearl-bearing *Pinctada maxima*.

Branellec recalls how at that time, the Philippine oyster was already close to extinction. He said this was partly due to the high demand for mother-of-pearl shells in the 19th century and to the lack of government control and monitoring for fishing activities. In the book “The



Mr. Branellec holds a recent harvest of golden South Sea pearls. Photo by Markches Ang.

Sulu Zone” it was stated at the beginning of the 19th century, the industry for mother-of-pearl shell became a more profitable export than pearls.

“To get these pearl oysters,

we hired about a thousand divers from Sulu Island, the southern most part of Mindanao in the Philippines,” recalls Branellec.

From Mindanao, they would transport the oysters to Palawan. “Oysters were very hard to come by at that time. We risked life and limb in order to get them. Then, it was not guaranteed that the oysters we have acquired would even survive.

“You see, after buying these oysters from the divers, we had to acclimatize the oysters before it can be operated on. Naturally, some oysters died along the way,” he further explains.

When they began, Jeweler was only able to produce about 10,000 cultured pearls a year. Branellec immediately knew it was not enough because of the huge logistical costs they incurred and the many people they had to employ for production. “We could not prioritize business expansion but we decided to take risks and started research in marine biotechnology in the early 1980s,” he reveals.

After years of research, Jeweler was able to reproduce oysters in the laboratory. “We wanted to not have to use natural resources anymore to succeed in breeding,” shares Branellec.

1. James Frances Warren, *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The Dynamic of External Trade, Slavery and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers), 1985, 74.

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“We tried French, British, Japanese and Filipino technicians and a team of scientists to do intensive research about it. We had the parent oysters and from there on we were able to reproduce 100,000 pearl oysters.

“Finally, in 1993, from 10,000 we were able to reproduce gradually up to 30-to-40-fold the quantity. That was our success in biotechnology!” he adds, beaming. The success in pearl oyster reproduction through biotechnology meant Jeweler would rely less and less in wild stock.

**The Beginning
of a Golden Era**

“Our initial success inspired us to take a step further and attempt to create something unique in the character of the pearl, which at that time you could only find in some natural pearls,” reveals Branellec. “We were trying to go back to that beautiful color of origin which is gold.

“We believe that gold is magical. It is a symbol of beauty, wealth and grandeur.”

With the combination of choosing the best host oyster, the best mantle tissue, the perfect environment and the best human care possible, Branellec is proud to say that Philippine golden pearls came out of the oysters with this intense golden hue. “There is no addition, no alteration, nothing. That is how it came out of the oyster,” he explains while pointing to the gold pearl in his hand.

Lagoon vs. the Open Seas

According to Branellec, the advantages of working in the open seas eventually outweighed the disadvantages when it comes to the

production of the pearl. Branellec explains that in an open sea, the production of the oyster revolves strictly on natural factors.

“Production clearly involves a more complex process but having a hatchery on hand definitely made some steps easier. It still takes time and takes into consideration a lot of different things that other pearl farmers in other parts of globe take for granted. It’s a far cry from simply submerging an oyster underwater, leaving it for a period of time... and Voila! You

of the oysters that we keep in our farms. If you are familiar with the way oysters breed in the sea or in nature, you have groups of male and groups of female oysters and if they mature sexually and in a breeding mode, the males will have a collective release of sperm in the sea. It will fertilize the eggs already dispersed in the sea by the females and then you will have free swimming larvae and larvae drifting for three weeks before the larvae become spat which will settle in the bottom of



A map showing the Philippines as part of the core of the Sulu-Sulawesi Marine Ecoregion, deemed the area with the highest marine biodiversity in the world.

have a pearl. We learned it the hard way since the open sea is a force to reckon with.”

With years of doing research and development in pearl farm operations, Cojuangco’s and Branellec’s expansion to other pearl farm ventures have produced more than five million oysters in its almost 30 years of operation.

But why do they still keep live oysters in the pearl farms?

“We have six farms spread out in the province of Palawan in the Philippines. We do not have control of the natural propagation

the sea and continue to become an oyster.

“In the process of keeping so many oysters alive for so many years in the farm, they will continue breeding and reproducing naturally. The more oyster density, the higher the fertilization, and it is much higher in the farm than in the natural environment.

“For example, the larvae of the oyster from our pearl farm in south Palawan can reach while drifting as far as the Spratly Islands in north Palawan, parts of Malaysia and all the way to the Visayas, even

Mindanao regions in the Philippines.

“In 21 days, the larvae can travel up to an estimated 600 miles. Eventually, the oysters can reach down to Indonesia just by going with the flow of the natural currents.”

The rate that a pearl farm can multiply the number of once endangered species like *Pinctada maxima* is so phenomenal that it is one of the reasons why pearl farming is considered as a harbor for biodiversity.



Slash-and-burn method of farming can denude a once forested hill like this so easily.

Photo by Markches Ang.

Deforestation and the destruction of coral reefs

Branellec compares the status of the marine environment to the state of the Philippine forest cover to explain the urgency of environmental regeneration.

Using a map made by the Environmental Science for Social Change², Branellec pointed out that during the 1900s, the percentage of the Philippine forest coverage was about 70% of the land. The actual figure today is below two percent.

Whichever data you believe, the fact of a depleting forest is still an alarming matter especially for the pearl farmers because having less and less forested area means that more soil will be eroded from the mountains to the coastal areas and it will have an irreversible

effect on marine life since it will cause landslides that will turn into silt in the coastal fringes where coral flourish.

According to a data from the Reefs at Risk in Southeast Asia project³ compiled by the World Resources Institute, about 70% of the Philippine reefs are at risk from blast fishing and fishing with poisons. This study also stated that coastal development threatens over 40% of Philippine reefs while 35% are under pressure from sedimentation and land-use associated activities.

Scientists such as Dr. Kent Carpenter⁴ from Old Dominion University in Virginia, USA however, still considers the Philippines as the center of marine

biodiversity.

The Philippines sits in the middle of the Sulu-Sulawesi Ecoregion, which is hailed by many scientists around the world as the area with the highest concentration of marine biodiversity.

Prior to Carpenter’s study, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature Philippines, the local arm of the World Wildlife Fund released a coffee table book in 2001 about the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas with shows the different habitats and various endemic and endangered species, which can not be found anywhere else in the world.

Branellec laments that because of poverty and poor environmental law enforcement

2. <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/003/X6967E/x6967e0c.jpg>

3. Philippine Coral Reefs, http://bfar.da.gov.ph/inforcorner/fast_facts.htm

4. Carpenter, K.E. and V. G. Springer 2005. The center of the center of marine shorefish: the Philippine Islands.

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and disastrous activities such as dynamite and cyanide fishing, physical destruction of marine habitats in the Philippines go on unabated. He believes that nothing destroys marine life and coral reefs as pervasively as cyanide.

He recalls an incident where the local authorities seized eight drums containing 1,600 liters of cyanide solution. The drums disappeared mysteriously after they were seized.

“It’s highly probable that the live fish that are available



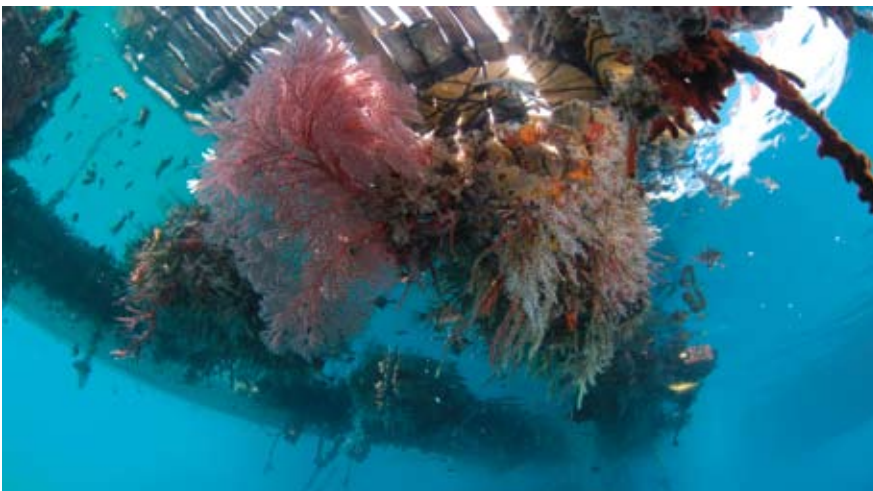
A whale shark swims across the oyster lines of a pearl farm in the Philippines.

Photo by Maria Suleiman



Branellec examines the species that attached to an oyster basket in a span of two weeks showing how healthy the marine environment is in a pearl farm

Photo by Markches Ang.



Like a harbor, a pearl farm attracts numerous marine species to its area where it can breed and multiply before moving on to other areas of the sea. An example can be seen in this close-up of an uncleaned oyster basket. *Photo by Markches Ang.*

in the market are most likely caught with cyanide unless it came from aquaculture farms and fish ponds. Unlike dynamite where fish are killed, cyanide only stuns the fish, which is why cyanide is prevalent with the rising demand for live fish in restaurants that prefer the fish to look aesthetically pleasing to eat.”

Cyanide does not kill the fish on site but it kills everything else including the coral reefs. Cyanide has a long toxic remnant and its toxicity can last up to 15 years. Even in the sea, it is not easily dissolved.

“One (1) teaspoon of sodium cyanide is enough to destroy five (5) kilometers of a coral reef. Believe it or not, it only takes one dash of cyanide to poison a human being,” warns Branellec.

That is why Branellec finds it fortunate that one of their pearl farms is located inside a marine protected ecoregion.

Branellec believes that there

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is no other way of reversing the effects of destructive fishing methods than converting some portions of the sea turn into a marine park or marine protected zone.

Why? According to Branellec, no government agency can secure a vast marine area in order to protect it from poachers and other illegal fishing boats better than a pearl farm with the support of the local communities.

The pearl farms’ security team protects not only the precious pearl oysters underneath but also acts as guardians of the sea.

It helps to know that the pearl farm’s concession areas are open and not fenced. Fish and other marine animals are free to swim and propagate in and out of the concession.

For a select number of clients and journalists who have been invited to visit the Jewelmer pearl farm, Branellec willingly



Some coconut trees that protect the island from the seawater lay fallen on the beach.

Photo by Cyril Brossard.

shows them the evidences, which support the scientists’ claim that a pearl farm is a safe harbor for biodiversity.

The visit of National Geographic journalists last June 2007 was blessed with a sighting of a whale shark swimming in

between the oyster lines. The whale shark is the biggest fish species in the world and feeds on plankton, which explains why it is drawn to open-sea oriented pearl farms.

Another good example of the unique contribution of pearl farms to biodiversity are the pearl oyster baskets that were submerged underwater and kept undisturbed for two weeks.

“It is quite amazing to see how exponential and diversified the species that cling to these baskets in such a short length of time. This is the evidence of thriving marine life inside a pearl farm.

“If an oyster basket is submerged just right below the water surface and left uncleaned for two weeks can attract such number of species, what more can be on the coral bed underneath these baskets?

“This is possible because a pearl farm is a protected zone, hence the marine animals are left to themselves to propagate and multiply. This basket acts as biogenerators increasing density and diversity of marine



Old houses that were built near the sea have to be reinforced with concrete to withstand the constant beating of rising seawater.

Photo by Cyril Brossard.

species.”

Global Warming

Branellec also touched on the issue of global warming and cited some local manifestations that he has observed in his 30 years of experience living in a coastal community.

“Every year, we have experienced an increase in the sea temperature and increase in the sea level,” he says. “Since the beginning of our pearl farm operations, sea temperature rose from a minimum of 25 degrees to a maximum of 30 degrees Celsius to an average of as low as 26 degrees to as high as 32.6 degrees Celsius!” he further adds.

Branellec also said that they’ve recorded a 60-centimeter increase in sea level over the course of 30 years. Major structural poles of houses built along the coast have to be reinforced with concrete in order to protect it from rapidly rising seawater during high tide.

One of those houses belongs to Branellec. “There used to be two rows of coconut trees between my house and the shoreline. Sadly, rising sea level has already uprooted the trees.”

He explains that this is not a solitary case as he has also observed the same rising sea levels and strong winds during typhoon season in nearby areas of the pearl farms. Trees that used to protect the island from the sea lay uprooted or fallen on the beach after years of heavy beating from rising sea levels. “Undoubtedly, global warming is felt and can be measured,” he laments.

Hope Still Remains

In light of the threats to the environment, which were mentioned above, Branellec is still hopeful for the future.



One of the benefits of a pearl farm is as a breeding ground for various marine species like these huge fishes, which have high commercial value.

Photo by Cyril Brossard.

A recent catch of huge fishes outside the marine protected zone in Balabac by local fisher folks reaffirms Branellec’s hope for marine regeneration.

“It’s not too late. There is still the possibility of reversibility in certain areas. But we need to effect change now! The presence of government and non-government organizations barely scratched the surface and even the contributions of the private sector to initiatives geared towards the local coastal communities’ education and poverty alleviation which ultimately results in environmental protection comes far and few in between,” he says adding that “at present there is no clear and sufficient consolidated initiative in the alleviation of poverty among the general population and therefore the protection of the environment

is pushed to the back burner and remains the least priority among the private sector, the NGOs and the government.

“The public perception of the environment is that it can replenish itself easily and that groups calling for its protection are elitist because saving Mother Nature means fewer opportunities for fishermen. Unbeknownst to many, the environmental initiatives will ultimately result to securing food supply for the future generations.”

With this in mind, Branellec calls on the support of environmental scientists, private individuals, philanthropic groups and first-world countries to rally behind the reconstruction and regeneration of the environment in critical places located in the Sulu-Sulawesi Ecoregion like the Philippines. ❖

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