

Pearling

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Pearling



Map of Torres Strait, showing route of pearl shell commission, 1908

By: Regina Ganter

Pearling became the largest industry in far north Queensland in the 1890s and had a massive impact on coastal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It was the only industry ever exempted from the provisions of the White Australia policy because it was the economic pillar supporting the far north with cheap labour from the South Pacific and Asia. Its legacy is a history of mixed populations in the far north that defies the standard historical image of a white Australia.

A jumpstart for the north

The Queensland pearling industry kicked off at Tutu (Warrior) Island in 1870, and within a few years over 100 boats and luggers converged in the Torres Strait searching for the pearl-shell with which local islanders adorned themselves. Pacific traders had gradually depleted the South Pacific islands of sandalwood and whales, and were in constant search for new trading opportunities, particularly in commodities that could be marketed in China – like sandalwood and trepang (beche-de-mer). They had become accustomed to setting up shore stations with imported Pacific labour gangs, operating at the colonial frontier in a legal vacuum, and had reached Torres Strait in 1862. Tutu, the island home of some forty families, became the shore station for a company connected with Robert Towns, employing seventy Kanak (New Caledonian and Tongan) labourers who married into local families and exhausted the local pearl-shell patch within a year.

The few government officers who were stationed in the far north soon became financially interested in the new pearling industry and considered Indigenous people one of the 'as yet undeveloped resources' that could be rendered productive. Because land settlement was slow to reach the north, Indigenous people in the pearling belt were not as systematically displaced from their lands as in areas of primarily pastoral settlement. Many Indigenous people were signed on for work as swimming divers and deckhands, and often recruited with the typical strategies of Pacific 'blackbirding', so that the fishery soon gained a bad reputation.

Determinants of technology

The pearl-shell accessible by swimming diving with goggles became quickly exhausted and an experimental diving suit by Siebe & Gorman was introduced to Torres Strait fishery in 1871 which permitted diving to 15 fathoms (27.4 metres) by pumping air to the submerged diver. By 1877 more than half the fishery was conducted from pump boats. This changed the labour requirements of the industry, which became focused around



Pearling industry Torres Strait, 1965-66



Pearling industry Torres Strait, 1965-66



Pearling industry Torres Strait, 1965-66



Pearling industry Torres Strait, 1965-66



Pearling luggers, Thursday Island, 1959

the productivity of the dress diver, who had to be better trained and more highly motivated than swimming divers. Malay and Filipino divers were recruited and rewarded with incentive payments, and by the 1890s Japanese divers and tenders dominated the top end of the pearling workforce. The organisational style shifted from shore stations to floating stations, with a large mother ship for provisioning and storage, so that fleets could stay out longer and further away from shore.

The diving season was limited by the monsoon period and spring tides, so divers increased their catch by extending the number and length of dives while conditions were favourable. This increased the risk of divers' bends. Few white divers could be recruited into this perilous occupation, where the death rate was 10% (in 1916, compared to an overall occupational death rate of 1.1% in Queensland), and the top income was less than the 'Harvester' minimum wage, it was still very attractive for young men from impoverished villages in Japan and South-East Asia. The white master pearlery defended their access to cheap imported labour successfully against the new Federal government which sought to implement the White Australia policy as in the sugar industry, but supported the idea that aliens could not own boat licences. As a result the entrepreneurial end of the fishery remained in the hands of whites, whereas the workforce consisted entirely of Asian, Pacific and Indigenous people.

By the turn of the twentieth century shell to the 20-fathom line (36 metres) had been practically exhausted, and divers were exposing themselves to ever greater depths and water pressures. The limitation to one diver per boat was lifted in 1912 and most boats registered two or three divers to take turns with air supplied from the one manual pump operated by two deckhands. In other words, thirty years after the introduction of cutting edge diving suits, the pearling fleet still carried the same equipment (now mostly supplied by Heinke) although the European navy divers already used oxygen 'knapsacks', had telephone contact with the boat and decompression chambers on standby to alleviate the divers' bends. Meanwhile Torres Strait divers experimented with the cumbersome heavy diving suit to facilitate walking the sea floors by discarding the full diving suit and using the helmet and corselet only. This became standard practice until the 1960s, when a somewhat safer 'half-dress' was adopted. By this time hookah gear - tested to 48 fathoms (87 metres) as early as 1922 - was available, but was considered unsuitable for the strong tides in north Australian waters, like the later Scuba equipment (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus), which did not supply enough oxygen to spend the time required under water and surfacing. After World War II motor-powered vessels displaced the characteristic sailing luggers, most of which had been confiscated during the war. Typical of the history of Australia, the nineteenth century was one of innovation and cutting edge, while in the twentieth century there was a settling into backwater comfort: what had worked so far must surely be good practice.

Resource depletion

Pearl-shelling was essentially a colonial industry, based on resource raiding, and served on several occasions for the gradual extension of sovereign territory. Technological innovation served only to intensify the productive effort (to dive deeper, move further afield, stay longer) rather than to conserve stocks, so that the fishery operated on a 'depleted yield basis' and relied on territorial expansion. It was aimed at market, rather than subsistence production, so that there was never a natural 'enough'.

1 2 3 4 5



Pearl shell necklace



Pearl shell ornament



Pearl shell pendant



Dive helmet, pre 1939



Dive helmet, pre 1939

As early as the 1890s it was observed that the 'catch per unit effort' declined, as the larger shells (up to 6 kg) were quickly harvested, and the shell weight decreased from about 3 kg per shell to about 1 kg per shell. The industry records chart an inverse relationship between fishing intensity and relative productivity, so that it overcame its three major resources crises (1898-1905, 1913-14, and 1930-32) by contraction: only by reducing the total yield could the shell stocks be stabilised.

Pearls were only ever a by-product of the Australian pearl fishery which was geared to procuring mother-of-pearl for overseas markets, of which 80% was turned into buttons. Australian master pearlers were therefore disinterested in research on pearl culture, and Japanese became the proponents and leaders of this new industry. Australian pearl-shellers were sure that all they needed to do was to continue doing what they had been doing successfully for nearly 100 years. They were wrong. When new durable plastic substances were developed for buttons the international market for pearl-shell crashed in the 1960s. The pearl-fishery was replaced by pearl-culture farms, which involve very little diving, and produce cultured pearls.

Further reading:

Regina Ganter, *The pearl-shellers of Torres Strait: resource use, development and decline, 1860s-1960s*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press, 1994

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