

Myanmar South Sea Pearl: Implication on Natural and Cultured Pearls

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ABSTRACT

Mergui (or) Myeik Archipelago consists of 800 islands and its sea area is 25,600 sq kilometers. It has been inhabited by large, natural pearl producing oysters, *Pinctada maxima* since the old years. These oysters were collected and sold to the Chinese traders by the Moken (or) Salone-sometimes called "Sea Gypsies", the sea nomad who can dive to a depth of 10 fathoms without any diving gear. It has been well known that the Salone fished for these oyster shells and their pearls since many years ago. Systematic shell fishing and natural industry was conducted in 1890.

In 1920, since oysters could not be found in shallow water but in the deeper water, they were fished for their shells and natural pearls by using diving apparatus. The Salone lost the opportunity of diving to deeper water without any diving equipment. Natural pearls collected in Myanmar with fine luster fetched highest prices in London and world market according to a British report prepared in 1907.

Production of cultured pearl commenced in Myanmar in 1954 by a company formed by South Sea Pearl Company of Japan and Burma Pearl Syndicate of Myanmar. Myanmar South Sea Pearl had been firstly produced in 1957. In 1963, the State continued cultured pearl industry. Young Myanmar biologists began to insert oysters by themselves without Japanese help in 1964 and became successful in 1966. In 1992, the State invited both local and foreign investment for the pearl business. Local and foreign pearl industry companies are joint venture with Myanmar Pearl Enterprise. There are seven companies producing cultured pearl in southern Myanmar; (1) Myanmar Pearl Enterprise (SOE, since 1963), (2) Niino Pearl Culturing Company (Local, since 1992), (3) Orient Pearl Company (Local, Zinyaw Island in 1994 & Jar Lann Island in 2014), (4) Myanmar Tasaki Company (Foreign, since 1997), (5) Myanmar Atlantic Company (Foreign, since 1998), (6) Myanmar Andaman Pearl Company (Foreign, since 1998) and (7) Belpearl Myanmar Company (Foreign, since 2014).

In the past, pearl business depended mainly on the wild oysters. Nowadays, with technical know-how, pearls are being produced from hatchery bred oysters. The production of South Sea Pearls from Myanmar are 712,280 pieces with 424,441.61 momme in 2014-2015. Myanmar South Sea pearl is historically famous for its pinkish silver and deep gold colour with fine luster. Also, non-nacreous melo pearl from *Melo melo*, a gastropod, pink and black corals find in Andaman Sea. There are many good pearl culturing areas in Southern Myanmar. Many virgin islands suitable for pearl culturing still remain for exploitation in Myeik Archipelago, Andaman Sea.



The pearl farm in southern part of Myanmar, an aquacultural business with an ultra-modern approach to oyster production and pearl culturing in pearl island.



MPE, Myanmar Pearl Enterprise pearl culturing farm in Pearl Island



The pearl farm in Pearl Island, Myeik archipelago



Nets with oysters under sea water in pearl farm



Workers checking nets with oysters in the culturing Pearl farm



Workers washing nets with oysters which will take them to Andaman sea.



Checking the cultured pearl in oyster, *Pinctada maxima*



Producing of oysters by modern approach



Zoologist inspects the oysters (11-12 cm) which will implanted bead



Pinkish silver South Sea cultured pearls



Golden yellow South Sea cultured pearls



Black coral and Melo, non-nacreous pearl from Melo melo gastropod in Andaman Sea