

# Pearl Oyster Industry

## History of pearling industry in the NT

Pearling first occurred in the Northern Territory in 1884 when pearl beds in Darwin harbour were harvested. Pearl oyster shell was collected for buttons and inlays, pearls were rare but were a bonus. Pearling moved up to around the Tiwi Islands shortly afterwards, in the area west of Bathurst Island (Western grounds). From 1901 to 1922 small amounts of shell were harvested, but the discovery in 1936 of the Eastern grounds north of Milingimbi saw the peak recorded catch.

World War 2 essentially stopped the fishery and only few boats were operating afterwards, when plastic buttons decreased the market for mother of pearl. Japanese interests fished the NT Eastern grounds in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Since then there has been smaller scale shell collection in the NT. The 1991 Northern Territory Pearl Bed Survey found that beds were scattered and nowhere near the levels present pre-exploitation. Recent years have only seen very small scale fishing of the NT stocks, with less than 15% of annual quota being fished in the years that fishing occurs. The annual quota was set at 138,000 shell per year. Harvested pearl oysters are used primarily for mother of pearl but a valuable by-product is pearl meat, said to be similar to scallop meat.

Harvest of wild caught pearl shell is managed by the NT government using a quota system to limit catches to sustainable levels. Total catches have never reached even half of the quota amount.

The pearl culture industry started in the Northern Territory in 1955 with a joint venture project. The Paspaley family established pearl oyster farming in the NT. It was a long road to success to producing commercial cultured pearls locally in 1984, using wild collected oysters from the WA grounds for seeding. In 1995 Paspaley established a hatchery to produce pearls for grow out and seeding. There has been consolidation of pearl farming in the Northern Territory, with two producers now present. There are currently two pearl oyster hatcheries in the NT, producing pearl oysters for grow out in farms north-east of Darwin and near Gove.