



Life on the Farm on a Coral Atoll

The insiders guide to how Black Pearls are grown

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Almost 20 years ago Manihiki was a little known island lying hundreds of miles to the north of Rarotonga. It's still relatively unknown – except now mention the name Manihiki in international circles that trade in black pearls and there's bound to be enthusiastic recognition.

The export of black pearls has Manihiki placed as the second biggest producer in the world of these fascinating gems, earning on average \$5.3million a year, which includes the export of mother-of-pearl shell. Not a bad effort for fewer than 600 people who live on two inhabited islands, Tukao and Tauhunu on either side of Manihiki's magnificent lagoon.

Pearl farms ingeniously sited on built-up coral boulders seem to float over this vast water and are dotted over the entire lagoon. Sizes vary, from large two-storied buildings belonging to companies, to modest constructions owned by small farmers. Some hobby farmers merely have pearl shell lines stretched out, and like all other operations, the lines are kept floating and visible to passing boats by buoys. All the lines that criss-cross the lagoon are awaiting harvest time and hopefully

the reward of quality black pearls that will end up in jewelry worn all over the world.

The life of a pearl oyster begins as unassuming wild spat which are collected by farmers on the branches of the haruharu bush, immersed off their kava into the lagoon. At around 8 cm in diameter, the shells are collected, drilled and transferred to chaplets before being returned to the sea. When they have reached a width of about 10 cm the shells are removed from the chaplets and cleaned of marine growth. Then the delicate process of seeding each shell takes place by a trained technician. After carefully cutting the gonad it is then inserted with a tiny spherical nucleus together with a small piece of mantle tissue from a donor shell. The mantle determines the colour of the nacre which forms around the nucleus to create the pearl. The

optimum result is a perfectly spherical Black Pearl. While most of the big farms employ technicians from Japan, China and Australia, several locals have also become adept at seeding oysters.

The seeded shells are placed in bags and then returned to the sea off the farm jetty which has especially built frames. Within four to six week's technicians inspect each shell to check which have retained or rejected the nuclei. Reject

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shells have the koriri or oyster removed for export to Rarotonga, or to be cooked as a nutritious feed for local pigs.

Shells that have retained the nuclei are strung upside down through the drilled holes on to chaplets of ten or twelve and placed on lines in deep water for 18 months or so. This is when the oysters begin to form the layers of nacre over the nuclei, ending up as black pearls in different shapes, sizes and hues. ✕

1) Shells pegged open await seeding

3) Extracting the mantle from the donor oyster

2) Seeding the oyster with a tiny nucleus

4) The end result - removing the pearl

