



*From left: Laurent Cartier of Sustainable Pearls inspects a batch of Tahitian pearls. © Andy Bardou; Laurent Cartier was part of the team that conducted research on the impact of pearl farming on marine diversity in French Polynesia. © Josh Humbert*

# Cultured pearls – sustainable gems from nature

By Marie Feliciano

In June of this year, the Sustainable Pearls project (SustainablePearls.org) brought together some of the world's leading pearl producers, pearl jewellery retailers, scientists and marketing experts in a Hong Kong forum to highlight the sustainability efforts of select pearl producers and discuss how the strong sustainability story of pearls can be communicated and marketed to consumers. The event also highlighted the research that has come out of the three-year project "Sustainable Pearls" that was funded by the Tiffany & Co Foundation.

In an interview with *JNA*, Laurent Cartier, co-founder of the Sustainable Pearls project and an expert on natural resource management and sustainable sourcing of gemstone materials, talks about the goals of his organisation and the exceptional contributions of the marine pearl production to sustainability in the jewellery industry.

***JNA: What is the role being played by your organisation, Sustainable Pearls, in the global marine pearl industry?***

**Laurent Cartier:** Sustainable Pearls was launched as a research project in 2011. The aim was to investigate how marine pearl farming could further contribute to marine conservation and local livelihoods in pearling regions. Many pearl farmers are already very pro-active in their sustainability activities. We want

to find ways of supporting this work through the supply chain, and raise awareness both in the trade and with consumers about this. We have been working with pearl farmers in a number of different countries in the last three years. We have also been looking at ways of tracing pearls through the supply chain.

***JNA: What compelled you to organise the Hong Kong and Ingorhenta forums?***

**Cartier:** Inhorgenta invited me to organise a pearl forum in February of this year. This brought together pearl farmers such as Jewelmer and prominent pearl companies such as Gellner and Schoeffel. The aim of this was to raise awareness about pearls, and give some fresh insight to people in the trade and consumers about what is happening in the world of pearls today and what we can expect in the coming years. In June, we organised a Sustainable Pearls Forum in Hong Kong that was organised by the Sustainable Pearls project. The aim there was to bring people around a table to specifically discuss sustainability in a pearl context. We are happy that many of the world's leading pearl farmers – Jewelmer, Paspaley and Robert Wan – agreed to take part and present their vision, alongside major pearl jewellery retailers such as Mikimoto and Tiffany's & Co. The aim of the Hong Kong forum was to also highlight the marketing potential of "sustainable" pearls. A recent market survey in the US showed there is

clear consumer interest in these themes. The results of this consumer survey can be found on our website. Finally, we discussed a set of draft sustainability principles with partnering pearl producers to make the concept of sustainability more tangible, that is, what is a “sustainable” pearl?

**JNA: Could you please share some of your observations regarding the global saltwater pearl purchasing/consumption trends today? Are you anticipating the demand for “green” pearls to increase significantly going forward? Why?**

**Cartier:** The global financial crisis had an important impact on the pearl industry as a whole. Pearl prices had been sinking and many pearl producers have been facing financial difficulties. Part of the problem lies with overproduction of pearls. This situation has eased somewhat today. There is increasing competition from Chinese freshwater cultured pearls. We think that marine cultured pearls have a unique sustainability story, and that this needs to reach the consumer more. The consumer survey recently carried out by Julie Nash in collaboration with MVI showed that there is a strong marketing potential for “green” pearls. However, most consumers are not aware of this. Consumer education and getting the story to the end-consumer is an important part of the process.

**JNA: Name at least three of the benefits that responsible pearl farming has on the environment.**

**Cartier:** Cultured pearls are a renewable resource. For example, in Mexico, wild oysters were overfished for centuries, practically depleting all stocks. Since the emergence of the Cortez Pearl farm in Sonora state, there has been repopulation of wild oyster stocks



Laurent Cartier gives his introductory remarks at the Sustainable Pearls forum held in Hong Kong in June. Cartier, a co-founder of the Sustainable Pearls project, holds a PhD from the University of Basel (Switzerland) and is also a project scholar at the University of Vermont. His PhD research explored sustainability and traceability issues in pearl farming. Cartier is also a project manager with SSEF

in the area. In French Polynesia, I carried out research with Kent Carpenter on the impact of pearl farming on fish abundance and diversity. We found that on the atoll of Ahe, pearl farming had a positive effect on fish populations; there were more fish around pearl farms than in similar areas without a pearl farm. In effect, responsible pearl farms are acting as quasi-marine protected areas (MPA). Kamoka Pearls is a pearl farm on Ahe that is especially active at this level. In places like Fiji (J. Hunter Pearls), the Philippines (Jewelmer) and Indonesia (Atlas Pearls), pearl farms employ many locals, thereby also raising awareness about the need to protect the environment. In Australia, Paspaley Pearls operate in remote areas without the use of land operations; there is very little impact on the marine environment.

**JNA: Among today’s pearl farmers, who do you think stand out in terms of sustainable business practices and community engagement initiatives?**

**Cartier:** I think that the companies I have mentioned above that we have partnered with in recent years are especially noteworthy. We have developed a set of sustainability principles to which a number of these producers adhere. There will be more details on this on our website in the coming weeks.

**JNA: Why are pearls nature’s only sustainable gems?**

**Cartier:** Cultured pearls are a renewable resource, whereas the metals and gemstones used in jewellery are not. The quality of a pearl ultimately depends on the quality of the environment in which it grows. So there is an imperative for pearl farmers to operate sustainably if they were to make a profit in the long run. Also, many of the human rights issues affecting the gold and gemstone supply chains are less present with pearls due to the nature of the product and where it is produced. Our project was recently selected by Sustainia as one of the top 100 solutions for sustainability in 2014. There is clearly interest for pearls as pioneers of sustainability beyond just the jewellery industry.

**JNA: What are the next projects that SustainablePearls.org will be organising in the coming months?**

**Cartier:** The first phase of our project came to an end in August 2014. We are currently in discussion with different partners about the next phases of this project. Stay tuned to [www.sustainablepearls.org](http://www.sustainablepearls.org) for more to come. **JNA**



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