

Nurturing the finest mother-of-pearl

Creating the world's most beautiful pearls requires not only a pristine natural environment but also first-rate oysters such as the *Pinctada maxima*. The white mother-of-pearl in these silver-lipped giants provides a lustrous sanctuary for the organic gem to form, and an accurate barometer of the environmental conditions and care involved in the pearl's development.

But quite apart from the beautiful pearls it produces, the mother-of-pearl shell itself has long been treasured for use in buttons, jewellery and inlay. Sustainable, easy to cut and use and available in large sizes – due to the unusual size of the *Pinctada maxima* oysters – white mother-of-pearl is in consistently high demand.

Paspaley is a family-owned company that has been involved in mother-of-pearl collection for almost 80 years. In the 1930s, founder Nick Paspaley began his pioneering career by diving for wild oyster shells off north-western Australia.

Today, the core of Paspaley's business is the production of gem-quality cultured Australian South Sea pearls, but the company is also the world's largest producer of white mother-of-pearl. According to Peter Bracher, executive director of Paspaley Pearling Company, Paspaley's average annual catch is between 300,000 and 400,000 pearl oysters – about 90 percent of the Australian total.

Paspaley mother-of-pearl is sourced from a sustainable wild natural resource, making it suitable for creating high-end components. The silver-lipped *Pinctada maxima* oysters occur naturally in the northern waters of

Top photo: Paspaley's pearl farms are dotted along the coast of North-Western Australia

Bottom photo: A *Pinctada maxima* mother-of-pearl shell

Australia and in no other region more notably than the 80-mile beach south of Broome.

"Australia produces the finest pearls because we have access to the best pearl oysters," said Bracher. "It is the last region in the world whose production primarily comes from wild oysters hand-caught by pearl divers. Almost all other pearls in the world are produced from hatchery-grown oysters which are smaller in size and without the wild vigour of Australian pearl oysters."

Paspaley's pearl farms are also located in the wild oysters' natural habitat, allowing them to thrive throughout the pearl farming process. The remote waters of this virtually uninhabited part of Australia are rich with nutrients and have enormous tidal flow to feed the oysters and maintain their health. "The final ingredient is our pearl farming methods which set the world standard," Bracher added.

He continued: "The pearl oysters used in the Australian South Sea pearl culturing process can be used several times, often spending as long as ten years on a farm, during which time they may produce up to three pearls. When their productive life is over, the mother-of-pearl shell is used in the manufacturing of high-quality buttons and the meat is sold as a delicacy in many parts of the world. The Australian South Sea pearl is a beautiful, emotionally evocative and socially responsible gem that people should be proud to wear and be seen wearing."

For more information on Australian South Sea pearls, Paspaley has created an educational website set to launch in the coming months. Email enquiries@apcpearls.com.au for an alert upon launch. **JNA**

