

The remote north-west coast of Western Australia

Paspaley and sustainability

If there is one pearling company that has witnessed first-hand the symbiosis between the natural environment and the pearl, that would be Paspaley Pearling Company.

Founded more than 75 years ago in Australia, Paspaley knew long before the words green and sustainability became the high-profile topics that they are today that working with nature and not against it is inextricably linked with business success.

"Our ethos is that a high-quality environment is required to produce high-quality pearls, and we therefore regard a high level of self-imposed environmental stewardship as being of critical importance to our operations," James Paspaley, executive director of Paspaley Pearling Company, said at a Sustainable Pearls forum held in Hong Kong in June.

"To this end, we have invested heavily in research and development, and have implemented systems and procedures to protect and maintain the environment we operate within and to minimise environmental impact."



From left: James Paspaley, executive director of Paspaley Pearling Company and pearly pioneer Nicholas Paspaley, MBE

Citing some examples, he said all Paspaley farms have strict procedures for the collection and disposal of waste. Paspaley support-vessels are also required to follow strict company policies on the minimisation and processing of waste materials.

"We also place strong emphasis on our staff's responsibilities toward the environment," James said.

Beautiful reward

The company said it maintains a close working relationship with the industry body and all levels of government, and spends thousands of man hours providing feedback and promoting discussion between industry and community stakeholders to ensure the industry continues to evolve and progress.

"The pursuit of high-quality cultured pearls equal to that of natural pearls is the hallmark of the Australian pearl industry. This is not an easy task. It requires a rigorous commitment to protect the environment," said James. This demands the utmost dedication to the culturing process, which requires experience, skill, dedication and significant investment.

"However, the reward is a pearl just as beautiful in its natural state as the finest of natural pearls ever found," he continued.

This must be the ultimate objective of every aquaculture industry.

"And once this objective has been achieved, the product should be treasured with the same reverence that the wild product once was treasured," James noted.

In his presentation, the Paspaley executive said the simplest and first step in sustainability is the preservation of the wild stock and the environment itself.

"The real difficulty today is the sustainability of pearling businesses in an environment where consumers and the trade will publicly and politically demand

conditions and regulations that are cumbersome and costly to put in place, and then privately refuse to pay a premium to those producers or countries that comply," he said. "If we want our industry to set a high moral and social standard, then we must support it at all levels from the producer to the consumer."

Australia's pearling heritage

The Australian pearling industry is unique in its use of primarily wild-caught *Pinctada maxima* oyster endemic to the 80 Mile Beach in the remote north-west coast of Western Australia. This is the last place this species is found in the wild in commercially viable quantities.

"As the only commercially viable wild stock of pearl oysters in the world, we have a responsibility to ensure that it is responsibly managed. The strict management of the wild stock of pearl oysters is based on decades of rigorous scientific study and modelling, and is critical to our industry. It is the very basis of our pearling businesses and we regard ourselves as the custodians of this natural resource," James said. "The successful production of pearls is directly related to the area in which we operate. This means that for Paspaley, sustainability also includes the preservation of our pearl farming environment. Our pearl farming locations lie over fifteen hundred miles of the remote and pristine Kimberley region of Western Australia. Its dramatic and relatively undisturbed landscapes include thousands of islands lying off the red sandstone coast, incredible biodiversity and Australia's largest inshore coral reefs."

Governments in Australia are currently in the process of implementing the world's largest system of marine protected networks, which will include much of the Kimberley region.

"Our activities – both shell catching and farming – will be completely encompassed within these boundaries. The West Kimberley is also on the National Heritage List with 19 million hectares declared environmentally and culturally significant to the nation. Interestingly, one of the culturally significant aspects listed was the region's pearling heritage," James said. "Furthermore, a large area, including our oldest pearl farming site, was recently designated a sanctuary for southern right and humpback whales."

He added that pearling activities have been assessed as the only commercial fishery compatible with these environmental priorities, "which is a fantastic endorsement of the environmentally responsible way in which we conduct our pearling operations."

Third-party certification

Paspaley have not achieved what they have overnight; it was the result of decades of engagement with governments, industry groups, environmentalists,



The trademark Paspaley Strand Signature, a brilliant-cut diamond set seamlessly into the shoulder of the pearl, identifies each Paspaley strand with a unique numbered code assuring authenticity

special interest groups, research organisations and the community at large.

"It is no longer acceptable to simply do the right thing. Today, we must defend our industry and others like it by educating and engaging with the public at large to maintain our social licence to operate," James said.

The overall conclusion is that the Australian pearling industry is environmentally benign. "In fact, it could be argued that the industry has an environmentally beneficial effect as, if not for the existence of the pearling industry, there would be fewer influential advocates for environmental preservation of this remote region," he said.

The pearling specialist is seeking to take further steps to keep pace with the evolving environmental developments and ensure that it keeps pace with public interest in this regard.

Currently, the Western Australian Pearl Oyster Fishery is undergoing the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification process. MSC is a partnership between the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, and is a global organisation working with fisheries, seafood companies, scientists, conservation groups and the public to promote the best environmental choice in wild-capture fisheries and seafood. The MSC fishery certification programme and seafood eco-label recognises and rewards sustainable fishing.

The MSC certification, on current information, will apply to the whole pearling process in Western Australia – the oyster and the pearl.

"Once certified, we will be eligible to carry the MSC's distinctive blue eco-label, which provides assurance that our products are fully traceable to a sustainable fishery that has been awarded MSC certification," James said. "Because Australia is the only pearling industry utilising a wild-stock fishery, it is the only pearling industry, that I am aware of, capable of achieving MSC certification." **JNA**