Pearl Diving in Mexico

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Pearl diving has been a successful business throughout the world for thousands of years. Mexico, however, was once the world’s foremost supplier of pearls. While native Mexicans had been diving for hundreds of years, the business of pearls really kicked off when the Spanish explorers

History

Mexican natives began pearl diving approximately 7,000 years ago, according to Mexconnect. Lacking metal knives, the natives threw the oyster shells into the fire, often resulting in blackened pearls. When Spanish explorers landed in Mexico, they pried the oysters open with their sharp knives to reveal milky-white pearls, rivaling those found in the Middle East or Asia. As the Spanish began settling in Mexico, they sent thousands of pearls to Europe, making pearls a vital export and showing the world Spain’s wealth in the New World. In the mid-nineteenth century, the pearling industry really took off, as hired divers explored the shallow coves around La Paz and Mulegé.

Process

In the mid-19th century, native Mexicans dove nude from homemade canoes for up to five hours each day. They dove with a short, sharpened stick that pried open the oyster shells, as well as warded off dangerous sea creatures. In 1874, larger vessels and new equipment, including the diving suit, revolutionized the pearling industry. The new methods permitted access to much deeper water, lengthened the amount of time the divers could be underwater and lengthened the season.

Decline

Conditions for pearl diving in Mexico and Baja California were so favorable in the 1800s that the supply of natural oyster beds began to decline. In fact, by 1936 rampant over-pearling depleted the natural stocks of oyster beds to almost nothing. Today there are very few natural pearls harvested in Mexico. There are many Baja Californian firms that cultivate pearls.

Dangers

When the Spanish initially inhabited Mexico, pearl diving was dangerous primarily due to sharks, devil-fish and other sea creatures. Diving was done nude and in shallow water during the warm months. It was hard work, but not often fatal. As pearling in Mexico became more lucrative and modern equipment allowed deeper, longer dives, the industry became fraught with danger. Modern equipment often failed and caused many deaths. Mexican pearl divers confined to diving suits for too long would suffer rheumatism, paralysis, partial deafness and respiratory problems due to the compressed atmosphere and the abrupt changes in temperature. The cold water forced them to frequently come up to vigorously rub their limbs and increase circulation.

Revival

By the late 1800s, the natural oyster beds of Mexico were beginning to decline and by the early 1900s it was almost impossible to find natural pearls. The Mexican government put a blanket ban on pearling in 1940. An experimental pearl farm was open in 1960 but was later nationalized. In 1991 students at the Tec de Monterry research institute in Guaymas began a program to revive the pearl culture. There are now 200,000 oysters being cultivated in farming conditions.