

PEARL PRODUCTION - A SOURCE OF IRRITATION

Roger Merenyi

I recently bought a new watch for my wife from a local jeweller's and chose a *DKNY* model with a silver bracelet, thus avoiding a leather strap. When I arrived home, however, I noticed that the dark face gave off a purple sheen and, having telephoned the UK distributors, I learned that it was mother of pearl. Fortunately I was able to return to the jeweller's and exchange the item for another, equally attractive, *Guess* watch. On the way home it occurred to me that, although I was aware that the production of pearls and mother of pearl involved exploitation at some level, it would be a good idea to find out more, as my knowledge of the topic was rather hazy.

Mother of pearl is a readily recognisable smooth, iridescent substance forming the inner layer of the shell of certain types of molluscs and covering the outer layer of pearls. Also known as nacre, it is composed of calcium carbonate, which is secreted by certain seawater and freshwater molluscs, mainly oysters and freshwater mussels. Mother of pearl is often 'harvested' as a by-product of the seafood industry: abalone sea snails, for example, are killed for both their mother of pearl and their meat. The outer layers of shells are removed to get to the nacreous mother of pearl inside.

As pearls form naturally in only one in every few thousand oysters and as the creation of a pearl can take up to three years, the pearl industry 'cultures' them by implanting a foreign body into an oyster. The formation of the pearls is accelerated by surgically opening the shell, placing irritants into the creatures, and then suspending them in underwater cages for several months, periodically raising them to wash the shells with hoses. Freshwater pearls are cultured by inserting another mussel's mantle tissue; for saltwater pearls, oysters have beads and another oyster's mantle tissue inserted and there can be little doubt that the creatures suffer from the ordeal.

In her book *Speciesism*, Joan Dunayer writes that 'Like all vertebrates, nearly all bilaterally symmetrical invertebrates possess a brain, defined as a primary nerve centre in the head. Among others, these invertebrates include flatworms, earthworms, insects, molluscs, arachnids, and crustaceans'. The artificial culturing process has been described by the *Vegetarian & Vegan Foundation* as like having a splinter inserted into the skin. When the pearls are eventually 'harvested', the creature is either re-exposed to another foreign body to produce another pearl or, if it is no longer of use, it is discarded.

As Lee Hall, Legal Director of *Friends of Animals*, says, 'Given that pearls are well known to be the result of irritation to the oyster, there is a good vegan argument against using them. The manipulation of these beings is part of aquaculture, the manipulation of marine communities, which is a custom humans could and should do without'. And yet, if you walk into any jeweller's, you are likely to find a multitude of products containing pearl or mother of pearl, including beads, rings, bracelets, necklaces and, of course, watches. Mother of pearl can also be found in other places such as parts of musical instruments, ornaments and furniture. The main pearl producers, Japan, Australia, China, The Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, continue to profit from the trade and global pearl farming, according to an industry report (First report of the Emirates-based Pearl Revival Committee, November 2007) is expected to grow into a \$3 billion industry by 2010.

Humans seem to have a peculiar habit of associating products involving exploitation and cruelty, such as fur, leather, wool, silk and, in this case, pearls and mother of pearl, with style and luxury. As is so often the case, there are numerous stylish and luxurious cruelty-free alternatives available, so why don't more people use them? Why is it that, in the twenty-first century, the majority of humans still insist that animals must suffer on their behalf, when it is totally unnecessary? This must be a question which vegans ask themselves time and time again. For those of us seeking to reduce suffering, mainstream attitudes towards our fellow creatures can be a genuine source of irritation and exasperation, in much the same way as the artificially inserted foreign body is to our unfortunate friend, the mollusc.



Photograph of pearls being removed from oysters.
Photo © Keith Pomakis, www.pomakis.com