

# PEARL FISHERY INDUSTRY IN SRI LANKA: A REVIEW

JINADASA KATUPOTHA

Department of Geography, University of Sri  
Jayewardenepura  
Nugegoda 10250, Sri Lanka  
katupotha@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

The Gulf of Mannar was one of the most abundant sources of natural pearls in the world for more than two millennia. Pearls were the most valuable aquatic resource in Sri Lanka and were exploited since ancient times, more than 3500 years time. Pearl-producing bi-valve molluscs *Pinctada* genus of saltwater oysters (mainly *Pinctada radiata* and *Pinctada fucata*) populated the low-lying shoals and rock and coral formations of the Gulf of Mannar. But some historical and archaeological evidences extend more than two millennia, because Sri Lanka known as the pearl of the Indian Ocean. The pearl beds of South India and Sri Lanka constituted one of the two major sources of pearls in the world, rivalled in size only by that of Hainan. The exploitation of pearl fisheries continued during the Dutch and the British colonial rule. The British earned considerable revenue from pearls of Ceylon, e.g from March 1828 to May 1837 alone Sterling Pounds 227,131 were credited as revenue into the Ceylon Treasury on account of the pearl fisheries. But, the pearling industry is all extinct today.

**KEY WORDS:** Pearl fishery, Gulf of Mannar  
Colonial rule, Ceylon Treasury



## INTRODUCTION

All shelled molluscs can form by natural processes, produce some kind of "pearl" when a grating microscopic object becomes trapped within its mantle folds, but the great majority of these "pearls" are not valued as gemstones (Figs. 1 and 2). Natural pearls are nearly 100% calcium carbonate and conchiolin. It is thought that natural pearls form under a set of accidental conditions when a microscopic intruder or parasite enters a bivalve molluscs and settles inside the shell.



**FIGURE 01:** Oysters aren't the only type of mollusc that can produce pearls; clams and mussels can as well (MACIEJ TOPOROWICZ, NYC/GETTY IMAGES). **FIGURE 02:** A natural pearl is a pearl that forms in nature with no human intervention (Source: Real Shoppee).

Several species of pearl oysters of the genus *Pinctada* occur in Indian waters, of which *P. fucata* supports the pearl fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar (Fig. 3), the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Kutch. In the Gulf of Mannar these oysters are found on ridges or rock or coral known as *paars* or pearl banks (Fig. 4) with the most productive areas (Prasad and Ramachandran 1973). The present writer paid full effort to collect the information through published evidences and continued limited field works to examine the pearl industry of Sri Lanka.



**FIGURE 03:** The Gulf of Mannar was one of the most abundant sources of natural pearls in the world for more than two millennia (IUCN, 2012).

The Gulf of Mannar was one of the most abundant sources of natural pearls in the world for more than two millennia. Fertile pearl banks were found short distances from the land between Negombo to Muthu Halawatha (Chilaw) in the south and Karaitivu to the north. Along the northwestern coastal belt, from Kalpitiya to Arippe discarded pearl shell mounds, clearly represent that the well-being of the natural pearl fishery industry.

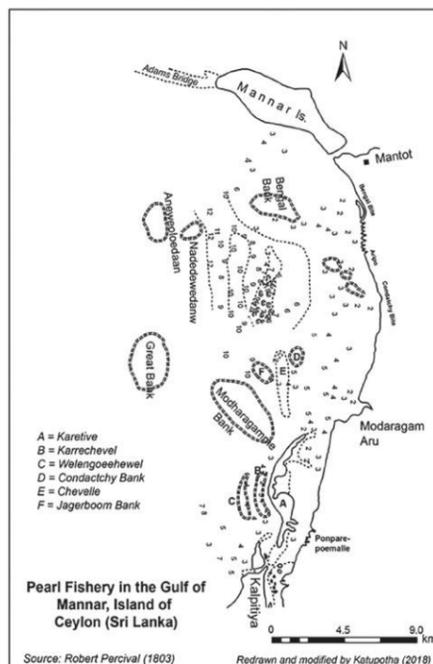
## METHODOLOGY

Geographically, the pearl fishing industry in Sri Lanka was limited to the Gulf of Mannar. Some data and information collected from published articles, reports and historical documents and information on discarded shells collected from the field. But, there are no radiometric dating facility to determine the evolution of the pearl fishery industry in Sri Lanka.

## DISCUSSION

During the Portuguese period a total of 50,000 to 60,000 persons, including divers, merchants and others were occupied in the pearl fishery at Mannar. Pearl fishery industry in Sri Lanka has a long history, but it is flourished from time to time from Second century to up to the Nineteenth century.

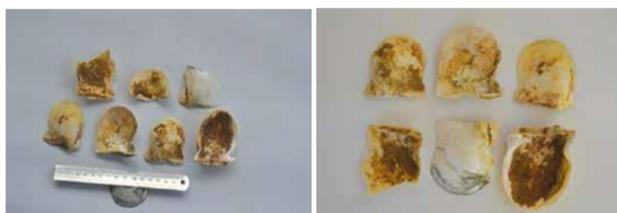
Along the northwestern coastal belt, from Kalpitiya to Arippe discarded pearl shell mounds, clearly represent that the wellbeing of the natural pearl fishery industry (Figs 5-8). Between Sixteenth Century and mid-Twenty-First Century, Europeans invaders, e.g. Dutch, Portugese and British reports and records used for this article to reveal the pearl fisheries in Sri Lanka (Herdman 1903, Percival 1803, Steuart 1834, Fisheries Research Station (Department of Fisheries, Ceylon) 1958, Sivalingam 1961, Ostroff. 2016).



**FIGURE 04:** Distribution of pearl fishery between Kalpitiya Peninsula and Mannar Island in the Gulf of Mannar.



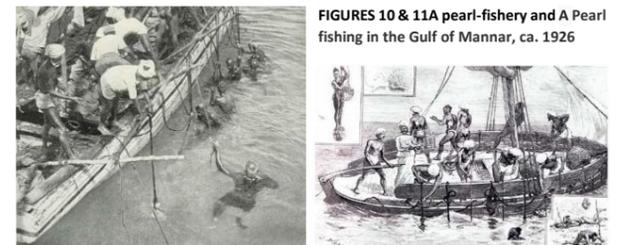
**FIGURES 05 & 06:** Discarded pearl shells around Doric Bungalow area, Northwestern Coast (Photos dated 15, Sept. 2015). **FIGURE 06:** Discarded pearl shells after removing of pearls from molluscs at Kal Aru coastal area. (Photos dated 16, June 2018).



**FIGURE 07 & 08 :** Pearl shells at Kal Aru coastal area, Northwestern Coast (Photos dated 16, June 2018, Field observation).

Gathering of pearl shell from the sea, removing of pearl from the shell, and trading mainly undertaken by Tamils and Muslims. The divers were mostly Indian Tamils or Arabs (Figures 09-14).

According to the historical and mythological legend Fig. 15), the palace of the Kudremalai was ruled by the Princes Allirani whom is the queen of beauty. As she was an interested pearl so she got horses by giving pearls. The Princes Allirani was from the Yakka clan and the village where her palace was situated around Vankalai area.



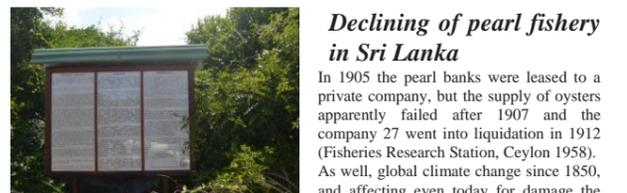
**FIGURES 10 & 11A** pearl-fishery and A Pearl fishing in the Gulf of Mannar, ca. 1926



**FIGURE 11:** to Dive at the pearl fishery, 1906 (Source: Woolf in Ceylon. Christopher Ondaatje). **FIGURE 12:** Pearl fisheries in Ceylon 1920-1930. Sources: LANKAPURA Historic Images of Sri Lanka; Woolf in Ceylon. Christopher Ondaatje).



**FIGURE 13:** Pearl fishing. Arab divers, equipped with nose clips. Source: Woolf in Ceylon. Christopher Ondaatje. **FIGURE 14:** As the divers rushed out of the koddu with their share of oysters, they besieged by dealers (Source: Woolf in Ceylon, Christopher Ondaatje).



## Declining of pearl fishery in Sri Lanka

In 1905 the pearl banks were leased to a private company, but the supply of oysters apparently failed after 1907 and the company went into liquidation in 1912 (Fisheries Research Station, Ceylon 1958). As well, global climate change since 1850, and affecting even today for damage the agriculture, fishery, forestry and creating of desertification (land degradation). This climate change affected to the existing

**FIGURE 15:** Historical and mythological legend, the palace of the Kudremalai was ruled by the Princes Allirani whom is the queen of beauty.

monsoon wind pattern, and changes of El Niño and La Niña processes.

Such changes evidently influence to the declining and damage the pearl fishing industry in the Gulf of Mannar.

With this incident other factors such as:

- Attacks by predacious fish and other enemies,
- Over fishing,
- Overcrowding of beds by the oyster collectors, and
- Diseases.

The British Rulers made an Ordinance (chapter 243) to amend and Consolidate the law relating to the pearl fisheries of Sri Lanka nos. 2 of 1925 3 of 1946. This Ordinance promulgates some regulations for the pearl fishery in Sri Lanka, and later the Government of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) revised the regulation in 1956 to promote the Pearl fishery industry. Although, the government made an effort to continue pearl fishery industry in Sri Lanka, natural reasons and cultural and social factors have been responsible for the declining the industry.

*At present, collecting of natural pearls in Sri Lanka were completely declining since 1950's. It is very difficult to replacement again as to former level. But, it is possible to produce cultured pearls, which are considered to be the most valuable pearl on the world market. For this purpose, we need trained personnel, investors and need to develop local and international market.*

## REFERENCES:

- (1) Fisheries Research Station, Ceylon, (1958). A guide to the fisheris of Ceylon, Department of Fisheries, Colombo, Ceylon. (2) Herdman A. W., (1903). Report to the government of Ceylon on the pearl oyster fisheries of the gulf of Mannar with Supplementary reports upon the Marine Biology of Ceylon. Part 1 : 1-307. The Royal Society, London. (3) Larif, S., History of the Discovery and Appreciation of Pearls - *the Organic Gem Perfected by Nature* - Page 2, 3 and 4. (4) Prasad R. R. and P. V. Ramachandran Nair (1973). India and the Indian Ocean fisheries *Journal of the Marine Biological Association of India*. VOL. 15 June 1973 No. 1, (4)