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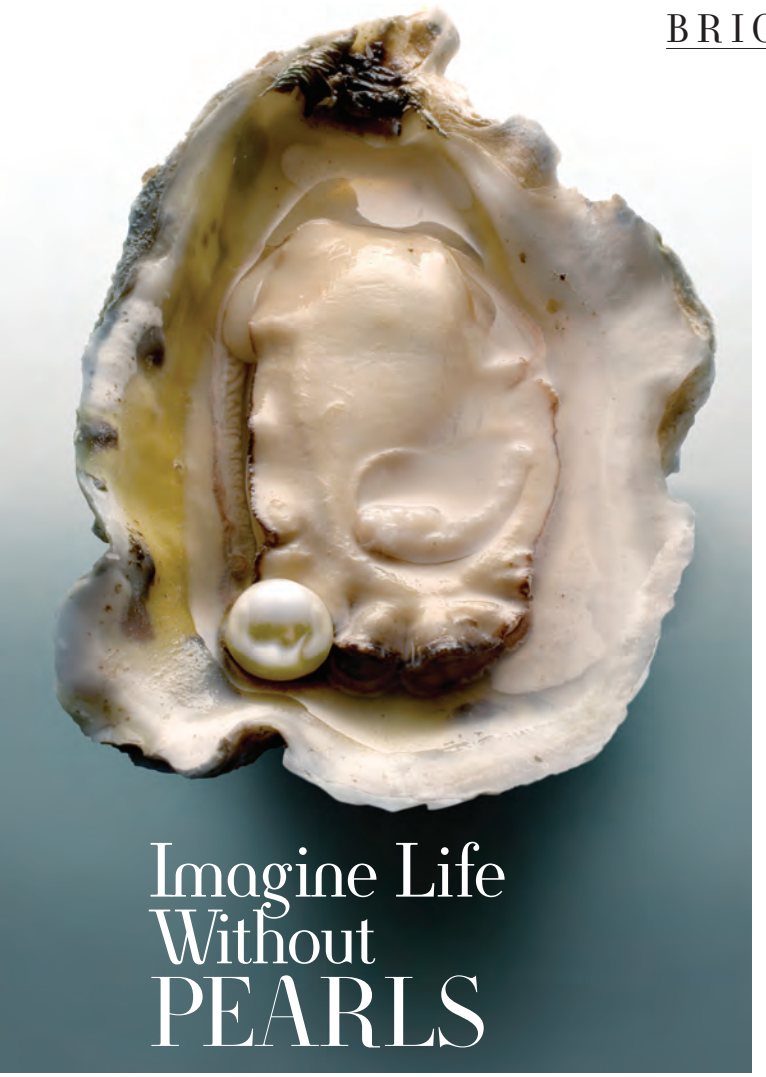

Imagine Life Without PEARLS

With climate change endangering pearl-bearing oysters, we just may have to. BY JILL NEWMAN

Flying on a seaplane to a remote isle in the Palawan archipelago in the Philippines, I see miles of crystal-clear turquoise water, verdant islands here and there, and dolphins dancing in the sea. We land by a rickety dock made of bamboo poles and twine and are greeted by a dozen security guards who are patrolling the waters around Jewelmer's pearl farms, protecting them from destructive dynamite fishing and polluters that wreak havoc on this delicate ecosystem. Far removed from civilization (it's two hours by plane from Manila), this untouched paradise is what Jacques Christophe Branellec, Jewelmer's deputy CEO, calls "the last frontier," because it's one of the only remaining places on the planet where his oysters still thrive.

Despite his efforts, though, Branellec can't curtail the effects of climate change on his cultured pearls. "Global warming and increasing ocean acidification are making it harder for pearl oysters to produce high-quality pearls," says Laurent Cartier, a researcher at the University of Lausanne who works for the Swiss Gemmological Institute.

Cultured pearls have been around for only a century, the brainchild of Kokichi Mikimoto, who created the first one off the coast of Japan. It was great timing, because natural pearl–bearing oysters had been hunted nearly to extinction in the 19th century. Conquerors and kings since Roman times were so enthralled by their beauty that they would send fleets of ships to the far reaches of the world in pursuit of pearls; the most prized natural ones were found in the Basra region of the Persian Gulf. Over the centuries the hunt depleted the stock. Vintage natural pearls can still be found today, for a price—La Peregrina, a 500-year-old pearl owned by Elizabeth Taylor, sold for $11.8 million at Christie's in 2011.

Cultured pearls are disappearing too, albeit for different reasons. When the water temperature rises just a single degree, the acidity increases, depriving the oysters of oxygen and food. In the past decade Jewelmer's production of its signature golden South Sea pearls, which are nurtured in rare *Pinctada maxima* oysters, has been cut in half.

The irony is that pearl farms actually help the environment. Jewelmer's Palawan farms, which account for 80 percent of the world's golden pearl supply, are at the northern tip of the coral triangle, an area in the western Pacific considered the center of marine biodiversity, with nearly 600 types of reef-building coral and more than 2,000 species of fish. The farms help the ocean ecosystem by serving as enormous artificial reefs. "We have a net positive effect on the habitat," Branellec says. "When we produce beautiful pearls, the environment thrives."

To make these gems, divers must clean and care for each oyster every 15 days for five years before a pearl can be extracted. Even then success is elusive. It takes about 1,000 oysters to find just one matching set of perfectly round golden pearls.

On the shores of the island I watch a pearl technician gently open and remove a flawless golden pearl that glistens under the sun—unlike other gems, pearls don't require cutting or faceting to shine. But with this fragile ecosystem at risk, its beauty takes on a whole new meaning. T&C

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

A brief history of our centuries-old fascination with pearls.

« 1ST CENTURY BC So rare and coveted are pearls that Julius Caesar forbids women below a certain status to wear them.

« 16TH CENTURY The world famous La Peregrina pearl is later set into a diamond and ruby necklace for Elizabeth Taylor by Cartier.

»19TH CENTURY Kokichi Mikimoto creates the first cultured pearl, in Japan in 1893, after natural pearls almost go extinct.

« TODAY 80% of the world's golden cultured pearls come from Jewelmer's farms.

JEWELMER BERLINGOT RING ($8,780), JEWELMER.COM

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