

Samal Island — Challenge to Mikimoto?

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The Japanese, since the large scale introduction of the cultured pearl by Mikimoto, have been the only volume pearl producer in the world. In 1958, however, the Aguinaldo Development Corporation of the Philippines began experimenting with pearl culture on Samal Island, south of Mindanao. Japanese technicians have been imported to instruct in the care and seeding of tropical oysters. It is believed that tropical temperatures, large oysters, and abundance of food will combine to produce larger, more valuable pearls here in much less time than is required in Japan.

The large oysters are caught near Jolo in the Sulu Archipelago and flown to the site on Samal. After a period of acclimatization to the new environment the oysters are operated upon, and the tiny glass bead, which is to serve as a focus around which the nacre will be deposited, is inserted. If the oysters perform as expected, pearls of merchantable size are to be anticipated within two years of the operation.

There is much more to the business than the planting of a "seed" and the harvest of a pearl. Wire baskets and all ropes must periodically be treated with a heavy coat of tar to prevent their deterioration in salt water. Poachers, both human and animal, present constant problems. (Indeed the operation was undertaken in Samal, rather than in the Sulu Archipelago because of the danger of piracy.)

Potential economic problems must be anticipated as well. While the Aguinaldo Development Corporation is a large corporation it is not in the same competitive league with the Mikimoto organization. Further, in the recent past there has been a serious glut on the world pearl market, and Mikimoto has resorted to large scale destruction of pearls to maintain prices at reasonable levels. Market fluctuations, price variations, distribution difficulties, and problems of competition with a near monopolistic organization are formidable obstacles, with which the Aguinaldo Development Corporation must contend. In spite of the fact that environmental conditions favor pearl culture it seems unrealistic to assume that these favorable production factors will override the cold cruel economic facts of a saturated pearl market. Samal Island will probably fail to become a significant producer of pearls, and Mikimoto will continue to dominate the cultured pearl market of the world.