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Pearls

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Seeding shed at Kioa farm

Pearl farmer J. Hunter Pearls Fiji is steadily getting back on its feet after enduring serious losses from the devastation caused by Cyclone Tomas that hit the north and east areas of Fiji in March 2010.

The hurricane wiped out the company's pearl farm infrastructure, destroying its 2011 harvest. This marks the first time in eight years that J. Hunter Pearls Fiji has no pearls available for export.

"As you can imagine, this is quite a financial challenge for us," company founder Justin Hunter said. "The year 2011 has been about learning from this event and getting back on track, and making ourselves better and stronger. We have persevered with great support and encouragement from many of our customers. The demand for our Fiji pearls fortifies our resolve to bring these truly exceptional pearls back to our customers."

The hurricane claimed some 200 spat collector lines, boats and barges, and two seeding sheds. "The most serious damage was the significant loss of post-implanted and young oysters," Hunter said.

Hatchery babies

The first week of April 2011 proved to be an exciting week for the J. Hunter team with the successful movement of more than 2.5 million hatchery-produced spat. "Over four long days, the oysters were cautiously moved from their holding tanks into the J. Hunter hatchery to the Savusavu and Kioa pearl farms using loading trucks, barges and farm boats," Hunter said.

Hatchery-produced spat spend the first 20 days of their life in 4,000-litre holding tanks where they are fed and closely monitored in controlled conditions to ensure good survival rates and healthy growth. After day 20 of their infant life, the oyster develops a "foot" which can only be observed under a microscope. The foot signals the oyster is mature enough to attach itself to a surface and settle. At this stage, the spat are moved to setting tanks lined with special collector ropes. After a week, the spat-collector ropes with newly attached spat are ready to be moved to their future homes in the water.



Josh Bazar of Imperial Pearls



Justin Hunter, founder of J. Hunter Pearls Fiji

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ready to be moved to their future home in the calm waters of the bay for grow-out on the farms.

"We are still at a very critical junction with regards to growing these spat into healthy pearl-producing adult oysters. These shells will be a better part of two years old before they can be implanted; so for now, the focus is on their grow-out which is key to not only producing healthy adult pearl oysters but eventually producing exceptional Fiji pearls," Hunter said.

Hunter is confident that his pearl farm has a bright future. "Over the course of last year, we have more than doubled our grow-out capacity, increasing our number of water leases and forming stronger relationships with traditional fishing right owners. We now have twice the grow-out capacity we had just one year ago," he said.

New team member

Australian Chris O'Keefe, who has some 30 years of experience in the aquaculture industry, joined the company as a pearl oyster hatchery manager earlier this year. As part of his new role with J. Hunter Pearls Fiji, O'Keefe has been working to improve the health of the oysters for a greater yield of quality pearls. In addition, the hatchery has been expanded to produce other species such as beche-de-mer and giant clam. "In his short time with us, we have had to shut down our hatchery since we simply have too many oysters," Hunter said.

Located in Savusavu Town on the island of Vanua Levu in the north of Fiji, J. Hunter Pearls Fiji won the Unique Exporter of the Year Award presented by the Fiji Islands Trade and Investment Bureau, in the coveted Exporter of the Year category, in 2005.



Pearl oysters

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