Australia’s stunning Kimberley coastline is one of the wildest, most remote coastlines on earth. It’s a land of extremes, where deadly predators are more common than people. This pristine wilderness is also home to one of nature’s greatest treasures - the south sea pearl. For thousands of years, pearls have been coveted as one of the world’s most beautiful and precious gems. But unlike gold, diamonds, rubies and sapphires, pearls are a jewel created by a living animal.

**Premiering Monday 14 March at 9.30pm**, the intriguing story of the South Sea Pearl, the rarest and most valued marine gem, has never been told. And yet, it is a story of a remarkable collaboration. Born by nature and nurtured by man, the documentary begins in one of the most remote and dramatic landscapes on earth, offering viewers a rare insight into the extraordinary and undiscovered world of the Australian pearling industry.
North Western Australia is the most unpopulated place on the planet. 20 miles off the coastline lies the world’s best preserved bed of wild pearl oysters. The treasures it produces are the finest, most expensive pearls in the world. A pearl that maintains its lustre, colour and size forever.

But this pristine place is also hostile. The divers searching for wild pearl shell face hazards including deadly jellyfish, tiger sharks and saltwater crocs. Extreme heat, torrential rain and cyclones make it a challenging place to work for the Pearlers who cultivate pearls from the oysters on the floating work camps.

Narrated by Australian actress Brooke Satchwell, join this epic story of discovery through the eyes of the divers who risk their lives to find the most magnificent and desired treasures.

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PEARLS – FACTS AND BEHIND THE SCENES

1. Unlike diamonds, rubies and sapphires, pearls are the only jewels created by a living animal.

2. All pearl oysters are born male, before transforming into females at around three years of age.

3. A natural pearl of value is found in less than 1 in every 10,000 wild oysters.

4. There are three major types of saltwater cultured pearls: Akoya, Tahitian and South Sea. These pearls account for approximately 5% of the total weight of global pearl production. Although they share many of the same characteristics, they can look vastly different as each pearl is sourced from a different species of oyster. These oceanic oysters typically grow only one pearl at a time.

5. Freshwater pearls account for approximately 95% of total global pearl production but are much less valuable than saltwater pearls. China produces the overwhelming majority of freshwater pearls in pearl farms that may range from a farmer’s fishpond to massive lakes filled with over a million mussels. A single freshwater mussel will typically produce between 30 and 50 pearls at a time. These pearls are typically bleached, polished and dyed in a wide range of colours before going to market.

6. The largest and most valuable of all pearls are sourced from the Pinctada maxima pearl oyster.

7. Even with cultivation practices, South Sea pearls are incredibly rare. By way of comparison, the weight of diamond production each year is about 10 times greater than the weight of the annual Australian South Sea pearls harvest.

8. South Sea Pearls account for a mere 0.5% of total global pearl production, but over 35% of total global value.
9. The highest price ever achieved for a strand of cultured pearls at public auction is US$2.3 million. The strand was produced by Paspaley.

10. Pearl oysters are also used for their shell (known as mother-of-pearl) and their meat.

11. The earliest record we have of pearls as precious objects date are artefacts from Mesopotamia dated to around 2300 B.C.

12. Recently, a two thousand year old pearl was found in an Australian Aboriginal archaeological dig in the Kimberley region of Western Australia – very close to the farms that feature in The Secret Life of Pearls.

13. If you were to stretch out the Kimberley Coastline, it would be over thirteen thousand kilometres in length. There is no road access to any of Paspaley's Kimberley pearl farms.

14. La Peregrina (Spanish for 'the incomparable') is one of the most famous pearls in the world. 500 years old, it is pear shaped and the size of a large pigeon's egg. Its previous owners included a King of Spain, Napoleon Bonaparte and Elizabeth Taylor.

15. In the early days, pearl divers regularly faced the threat of shark attacks as well as the dreaded crippling effects of the bends with every dive. In the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, the mortality rate for divers was as high as 50 per cent. Today, there are strict protocols and regulations regarding occupational diving to reduce these risks.

16. The program was shot at 4k using a red epic dragon camera. All aerial components were filmed with a 4k drone, using motion control time-lapse rigs. Filming alone spanned over 12 months with a small crew.

About National Geographic Channels International
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