

Women Farm *Mabe* Pearls



Farmed *mabe*—or half-pearls—mother-of-pearl jewelry and seaweed soap are all sustainable livelihood products developed by women’s groups in the coastal villages of Fumba Peninsula on Zanzibar in Tanzania. Each product is handmade by village women from farmed oyster nurseries, locally grown shells and food products. The jewelry is inspired by Zanzibar’s natural beauty, rich cultural heritage and the people’s “island replenishment philosophy”.

The women of Fumba have always depended on the collection of oysters and cockles for food and livelihood. In recent years, however, uncontrolled harvesting had led to a decline in the shellfish population. Today, that situation is changing thanks to support from the United States Agency for International Development, which is creating opportunities for small-scale commercial pearl farming and jewelry trade. Fumba women are now learning to make jewelry and soap, design the packaging, market, and sell their products to tourists, boutiques and regional hoteliers, and are fast becoming true entrepreneurs.



In a few months, the oysters collected from this nursery will be made into fine jewelry. These rare *mabe* farmed pearls are harvested only a few times each year, which significantly increases their value.

Mabe farming and jewelry making are well suited for semi-tropical coastal villages and farming communities in need of inexpensive business start-up capabilities with high-end market value for the finished product.



Photos by Klaus Hartung

Dr. Erin Wilkinson, Professor of Marketing at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, RI spent three weeks in summer 2008 on a volunteer marketing assignment teaching the village women how to package, price and sell their jewelry across Zanzibar and regional tourist destinations on the mainland.

