



From left: Douglas McLaurin of Cortez Pearls, Shigeru Akamatsu of Mikimoto, Jacques-Christophe Branellec of Jewelmer, Josh Humbert of Kamoka Pearls, James Paspaley of Paspaley, Julie Nash of Sustainable Pearls & University of Vermont, Andy Hart of Tiffany & Co, Fiona Solomon of RJC, Gaetano Cavalieri of Cibjo, Michael Krzemnicki of Swiss Gemmological Institute SSEF, Saleem Ali of Sustainable Pearls & University of Queensland, Kent Carpenter of Old Dominion University, Laurent Cartier of Sustainable Pearls & University of Basel, Louisa Ho The Nature Conservancy and David Wong of Fukui at the Sustainable Pearl Forum in Hong Kong

Pearl sector:

The path to sustainability

The cultured pearl industry provides an opportunity to broaden the discussion on sustainability, and introduce concepts that often cannot be considered in other sectors of the jewellery industry, according to Gaetano Cavalieri, president of Cibjo or the World Jewellery Confederation.

"Why is this so? Because as we often point out: mining, through which we as jewellers obtain the bulk of our raw materials, is inherently unsustainable. Once a gemstone or mineral has been removed from the earth, it will not return, at the very least for the next couple of billion years or so," Cavalieri said in his opening speech delivered at the Sustainable Pearls Forum held on the sidelines of the June Hong Kong Jewellery & Gem Fair.

One can talk about sustainable mining methods that protect the environment and sustainable economic opportunities created by mining, "but when it comes

to natural gems and minerals, we cannot truthfully talk about a sustainable product," he continued.

"But with pearls we can, because we possess the means and knowledge to initiate the natural growth of new products within an economically viable period of time, and please take note that I refer to 'natural growth,'" Cavalieri said. "True, we are talking about cultured pearls, which need to be differentiated from natural pearls, but the biological processes by which a cultured pearl is created are natural, as is the environment in which they take place. This is not the same as with synthetic gemstones, where neither the processes nor the environment are how nature intended."

Community sustainability

To achieve sustainability, three vital elements need to be addressed, the Cibjo chief said. These are economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and

social sustainability, which Cavalieri described as "stakeholder or community sustainability."

"The inability to address any one of those elements will make it difficult, if not impossible to address the other two, certainly over the long term," he said.

Economic sustainability is about using resources in an efficient and responsible way to ensure the long-term viability of the business.

"The essential importance of economic sustainability must be appreciated by the business community, which needs to be prepared to take a long-term approach, sometimes at the expense of short-term profit. It also needs to be appreciated by government regulators, who must do their utmost to protect their country's natural environment and social fabric, while at the same ensuring that the economy is allowed to function," he said.

Environmental sustainability should be a "catchphrase" of the

cultured pearl industry. "When a consumer buys an item of pearl jewellery, they should feel that they have invested in our planet's long-term survival, rather than having taken advantage of it," Cavallieri said.

In pearl farming, stakeholder, community or social sustainability is about ensuring that members of the grassroots communities associated with the industry remain actively involved for generations to come since cultured pearls represent a sustainable or renewable activity, he said.

"It is therefore important that these communities be provided with fair and equitable opportunities to benefit from the pearl farming enterprise, so that they will be incentivized to invest and reinvest in their future and that of the entire pearl industry," Cavallieri said.

To illustrate his point, the Cibjo chief said French Polynesia and the Tahitian pearl industry would make a useful case study.

"It is a country where pearls constitute a major portion of national exports, and for a good number of the country's citizens, living in Tahiti and on numerous islands and atolls, they provide a means of living and a way of sustaining entire families and communities," he said.

Cavallieri noted that while the more established participants in the Tahitian cultured pearl sector remain solid, the same cannot be said about the many family-owned operations.

"The inherent problem of the Tahitian cultured pearl sector has been systemic. It exists in a business model in which in the bulk of the family-owned farms operating at the grassroots of the industry receive only a very small share of the added value of the pearls that they themselves produce. As a consequence, most of the pearl farmers are chronically under-financed, meaning that they



Cibjo President Gaetano Cavallieri delivers his opening speech at the Sustainable Pearls Forum in Hong Kong

lack the ability to invest the time and money necessary to achieve the full potential of their marine concessions," he said.

Successful pearl farming, Cavallieri said, is the result of careful and responsible maintenance of both oysters and the aquatic environment in which they are kept, as well as time provided to allow the nacre to develop. "But many of French Polynesia's family-owned farms felt they could do neither. With profit margins so low, they tried to compensate with increased production, and the result was lower-quality products and still lower prices. Pearl farms closed, and thousands of workers lost their jobs. A lack of economic sustainability threatened both environmental sustainability and stakeholder or community sustainability," he continued.

Grading system

Cavallieri also touched on the harmonisation of industry standards, which has been a critical element of Cibjo's mission, and "has stood at the heart of its effort to protect the confidence of consumers in the jewellery product itself."

"To advance the goal of universal standards and terminology in the

jewellery industry, Cibjo developed its Blue Book system, which involves definitive set of standards for the grading, methodology and nomenclature of pearls and other organic materials, diamonds, coloured gemstones, precious metals and gemmological laboratories," he said.

Full disclosure is part and parcel of the trade's obligation to the jewellery consumer.

"But in order to be transparent – in other words to be able to disclose clearly – one needs to be able to describe the product in a language that is understood throughout the trade," Cavallieri said. "It is for reason that we are encouraging the development of a Unified Pearl Grading System, through our Pearl Commission. We realise that it is not an easy task, and that a variety of opinion exists. It will take time."

Cibjo, however, is patient, and "believe that such system will enhance transparency, and, as a consequence, consumer confidence," he said. "And let me remind you, to operate a sustainable industry, or any business enterprise, consumer confidence is an absolute prerequisite." **JNA**