

Correspondence between a freshwater pearl mussel and a human being

24 June 2020

Dear Freshwater Pearl Mussel,

greetings from ashore. I just read some news about you. My fellow humans found you in a river flowing through Lapland and worked out your age. You have been alive for 208 years. I don't know anybody else as old as you. We humans, who have been tamed by our culture, only live around 100 years at the most, and even among wild animals, you are one of the most longest-living in the world.

Old age brings wisdom, they say, and this is why I am writing to you. I would like to know what you think of life.

I know you freshwater pearl mussels have a history going back as long as 100 million years. You are survivors, but in the last few millennia you have been under pressure. This is because we humans got the notion that your pearls are valuable.

For you, the pearls are just a type of scar tissue you create to protect your body from grains of sand and other impurities. In spite of this, we have greatly desired your pearls. They have influenced our thoughts and actions in bewildering ways.

Did you know that according to Kalevala, the Finnish national epic, pearls are tears shed into the sea by our ancient hero, Väinämöinen? And can you imagine that pearls also played a part in European military history: it is said that one of Caesar's reasons for attacking and conquering parts of Britain was to extract pearls from your fellow mussels on that island.

Despite your great age, you are too young to remember the time when pearl hunting began in northern waters. Neither are there any humans around who remember it. It is likely that your ancestors already had to put up with treasure hunters in prehistoric times, even if the first written records of pearl hunting only date back to the Middle Ages. At that time, pearls were sought after because the Orthodox Church used them to decorate textiles. Gradually, this idea spread to other craft traditions, too.

Deep down there in your peaceful river, you may find it difficult to believe that pearls even caused friction between the East and the West. Between the 14th and the 16th centuries, Swedish kings tried to stop the Karelian people from pearl hunting in order to grab your precious pieces of scar tissue for themselves.

People are fussy when it comes to the appearance of pearls. As few as one in 10,000 mussels holds a pearl that meets all our criteria. So, it comes as no surprise to you that pearl hunting has caused great destruction among your nation.

Now our pearl hunters' rafts have rotted away, diving suits have perished, and tridents are gathering rust. Freshwater pearl mussels were left in peace once they were protected under the law here in Finland. This happened in 1955 when you were slightly over 140 years old.

Our ideas of you have also changed. In the past, mussels were sought after because of their pearls, whereas today we value you as indicators of clean water. I live close to a mussel river, and believe it or not, when building sites were on sale on the river shore, you were mentioned as a selling argument of the area. In other words, aquatic creatures like you raise the value of land by just existing.

I know you have no brains to think with, but I would still be happy if you could reply – in one way or another.

Best regards,
A human.

Dear human,

Thank you for your letter. I was surprised, too, when you told me about my record-breaking age, as I do not feel very old. But you are wrong about us having any peace deep down here in the river. On the contrary, life is so busy that I don't really get around to thinking about the passing of time. The water flows over and through me bringing nice titbits, bad-tasting humus gunk and air bubbles. Once every summer it carries messages of love from the upper reaches of the river. Indeed, I am no larva anymore; I have many times obeyed the command given to my family long ago: "Multiply and fill the river bottom."

Some of the things you said brought back memories. A while back, perhaps 90 years ago or so, a cloud often covered the sun and the river bottom went dark. Gravel was stirred around me, and my fellow mussels were pulled up. They never came back, only a few empty shells landed beside me. So it was you, humans, teetering on your pearl hunting rafts and poking at us with your tridents!

I would never have guessed that you were attracted by those miserable lumps of pearls, rather than all the other fine things we have. It is difficult to understand why nature has made you so fragile that your own shell does not excrete mother of pearl. If it did, you would not care about pearls; you would consider them to be a necessary evil.

Also, I did not fully understand that bit you said about being "left in peace and protected under the law" in 1955. We keep busy all the time down here. We rarely get to rest. We collect food, we open and close, we navigate the stormy waters of mussel relationships, and we try to give our children a good start in life. But if protection means that you no longer poke at us to get our pearls, that is great.

It is not very comfortable here, however. When I was small, the water was cleaner. During a recent metering operation, I eavesdropped on the scientists and came to the conclusion that a few decades ago, you humans pulled a nasty trick on us: you dug so many ditches in mires and forests that our bright river went dark. No wonder breathing is now more difficult.

The worst thing is that when you mess around with soil, sediment settles down here on the bottom and suffocates especially the smallest ones of the family before they get a chance to grow up. If you really appreciate us, could you please dam your ditches, and also stop clearing your building sites so close by the river. You already protected us and left us in peace – now you could try and calm down yourselves.

I hope my reply reaches you somehow, as of course I am not able to write. You are a Homo sapiens, a wise human, so you will probably find a way of figuring out what a mussel thinks.

Swim to the place where my river reaches the lake, dive down and listen. Then you can enter my world and understand.

Best regards,

