

# **FEASIBILITY OF AKOYA PEARL OYSTER CULTURE IN QUEENSLAND**

Thesis submitted by

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## **Statement on the Contribution of Others**

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The following people in addition to my supervisor provided editorial support which aided in the preparation of my thesis: Dr. Brad Evans, Dr. Dean Jerry, Dr. Jens Knauer, Dr. Wayne O'Connor and Andrew Hoey

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**Frontispiece:** Pearls and pearl jewellery date back to the Roman Empire where it has been noted by historians that an entire military campaign was financed through the selling of one single pearl (Anon 1998).

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Abstract

Pearl culture is the second largest aquaculture industry in terms of value in Australia. It is currently worth an estimated Aus\$300 million annually and it is anticipated that the industry will be worth Aus\$500 million by 2010. The Australian pearl industry is currently based on South Sea pearl production from the silver-lip pearl oyster, *Pinctada maxima*, for which it is world renowned. However, there has been recent interest in pearl production from two other major marine pearl oyster species, the blacklip pearl oyster, *P. margaritifera*, and the Akoya pearl oyster, *P. fucata*, which are both abundant in Australian waters.

Production of Akoya pearls, until recently was dominated by the Japanese. However, recent down-scaling of the Japanese pearl oyster industry due to factors that resulted in the death of millions of oysters, has presented an opportunity for other countries to enter the Akoya pearl market. Australia is one such country which has received a lot of interest in Akoya pearl production over the last 5-10 years because of:

- (1) its reputation as a quality pearl producing nation;
- (2) the clean non-polluted waters around Australia; and
- (3) the wide distribution of Akoya oysters along the Australian coastline.

Consequently, there was a need for biological information on which the feasibility of Akoya pearl oyster culture in Australia could be assessed. The major objective of the current project was to develop techniques to determine whether Akoya pearl oyster culture is feasible in tropical north Queensland. The results of this study will compliment the results of research with similar goals conducted in temperate Australia

(New South Wales). The focus of this study was to produce Akoya pearl oysters in tropical Australia for the first time, before optimizing protocols for hatchery and nursery culture. This information was then utilized to suggest possible sites within Queensland which would be suitable for Akoya pearl oyster production, based on 'biological performance'.

The first successful culture of Akoya pearl oysters in Australia under tropical conditions produced 213 000 larvae which were transferred to settlement tanks. A total of 58 000 spat were subsequently transferred from settlement tank and resulted in 48 000 spat ranging in size from 2-30 mm at 3.5 months of age. These spat were produced using established protocols for other pearl oyster species. After 12 months, Akoya pearl oysters had a mean dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of  $56.2 \pm 0.2$  mm and showed superior growth rate to those reported for this species in more traditional culture regions (i.e. SE Asia).

This project investigated aspects of hatchery production including embryonic and larval development to identify optimal protocols for hatchery culture of Akoya pearl oysters (Chapters 4 and 5). Full orthogonal designs were established to investigate; (1) the effects of water temperature and salinity; and (2) the effects of density and addition of antibiotics on the development of *P. fucata* embryos into D-stage veligers. Maximum development of *P. fucata* embryos into D-stage veligers occurs within a water temperature range of 26-28°C and a salinity range of 28-32‰. Further results suggested that antibiotics are not required during embryonic development of *P. fucata* as development of larvae was not improved in the presence antibiotics. Results have also shown that maximum development of embryos into D-stage veliger occurred when larval stocking densities were low. Suggesting an ideal stocking density is strongly dependant on the individual hatchery and the production



goals. These results have obvious implications for the selection of sites for an Akoya oyster hatchery in Queensland. Ideally, a site should be selected in which water parameters are within the above-mentioned ranges.

A number of pearl oyster culture techniques were investigated during this project to optimise nursery culture of Akoya pearl oysters under Queensland (tropical) conditions. These included the effects of depth, stocking density, culture apparatus and fouling on the growth and survival of pearl oysters.

*P. fucata* spat were transferred from the hatchery to the long-line and placed in plastic mesh trays at three different depths, 2 m, 4 m, and 6 m. After 8 weeks on the long-line, spat cultured at 2 m were significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) larger in DVH than spat at either 4 m or 6 m, which were not significantly different from each other. Additionally, greater numbers of 'large' spat were recorded when spat cultured at 2 m compared to spat cultured at either 4 m or 6 m.

Hatchery-produced *P. fucata* spat at 3.5 months of age were graded into three size classes, 'small', 'medium' and 'large', which for the purpose of the study were treated as 'slow', 'normal' and 'fast' growers, respectively. This study aimed to determine whether growth rates differed between oysters from the above-mentioned size classes. Results from this study suggest that when oysters are first graded at 3.5 months of age (8 weeks after transfer to the ocean) slow growing oysters should not be discarded (common practice by some pearl farmers within the industry). This is because slow growers, when compared to 'normal' growers, only require an additional 2-4 months before reaching pearl production size. The implications of retaining slow growers is discussed.

Hatchery-produced spat were cultured at different stocking densities to determine optimal growth and survival of *P. fucata*. Stocking densities were

determined on the basis of percentage of total available net area. In Experiment 1 during early nursery culture, spat were stocked at either 25%, 50% or 75% of total available net area. Maximum growth was recorded for spat cultured at the lowest stocking density (25% of total available net area), which were significantly larger than spat cultured at either 50% or 75% of total available net area. Furthermore, spat cultured at 25% of total available net area had significantly greater numbers of spat in the medium and large size classes than spat cultured at 50% or 75% total available net area. In Experiment 2 during late nursery culture, and based on the results from Experiment 1, spat were cultured at four stocking densities (20, 25, 30 and 40% of total available net area). Similar trends to those in Experiment 1 were recorded in Experiment 2 where spat cultured at the lower stocking densities were significantly larger than spat cultured at the other stocking densities. However, the overall growth performance ( $\Phi$ ) was greatest in spat cultured at the highest stocking density (40% of total available net area). Survival was not significantly different between treatments.

Two experiments were conducted with hatchery-produced *P. fucata* spat using four different culture units to determine which culture unit supported maximum growth and survival. In Experiment 1, the four treatments used were 'box', 'tray', 'pearl net' and 'pearl net with noodles'. While maximum growth was recorded by oysters cultured in pearl nets, there was no significant difference in growth rate to oysters cultured in pearl nets with noodles; however, oysters cultured in the box treatment were significantly smaller than oysters in all other treatments. Survival of oysters in the box treatment was 47%, whereas, survival of spat cultured in the other three treatments was greater than 90%. In Experiment 2, the four treatments included 'pearl net with small mesh', 'pearl net with large mesh', 'panel net with small mesh', and 'panel net with large mesh'. Maximum growth in terms of DVH was recorded for oysters cultured in

panel nets with large mesh, followed by pearl nets with large mesh, pearl nets with small mesh and panel nets with small mesh. Survival was not significantly different between treatments, and all treatments recorded 85% or greater survival.

Site did not affect growth and survival in the present study when *P. fucata* were cultured at Orpheus Island and Magnetic Island for 12 months. Although slight variations in water temperature, salinity and chlorophyll 'a' were recorded between the two sites, no significant differences were recorded in overall oyster growth performance ( $\Phi'$ ) of 3.81 and 3.82 for Orpheus Island and Magnetic Island, respectively. Site selection for pearl oyster culture is important if growth and survival are to be maximised during nursery culture. Akoya pearl oysters showed positive growth at all water temperatures experienced throughout this study; however, the range at which optimal growth occurred was between 25.1-28.1°C. Meanwhile, maximum growth occurred within salinity and chlorophyll 'a' ranges of 29-33‰ and 3.5-5.3  $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$ , respectively.

This project has produced biological information, which will provide a basis for the development of an Akoya pearl oyster industry in Queensland. Establishment of such an industry would compliment the current valuable pearl industry in Australia. While information generated during this study has answered a number of questions in terms of 'biological performance' there is, however, a requirement for further research to appraise pearl production from Akoya oysters in Queensland and factors influencing pearl quality.

## Table of Contents

Statement of Access .....	i
Statement of Sources .....	ii
Statement on the Contribution of Others.....	iii
Frontispiece .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Abstract .....	vi
Table of Contents .....	xi
List of Tables .....	xvii
List of Figures .....	xxi
CHAPTER 1          GENERAL INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>1.1    General Biology</b> .....	1
1.1.1 <u>Taxonomy and Species Description</u> .....	1
1.1.2 <u>Reproduction</u> .....	3
1.1.3 <u>Life History</u> .....	4
<b>1.2    Pearl Oysters and their Pearls...A History of Pearling</b> .....	6
<b>1.3    Australian Pearling: How it began</b> .....	8
1.3.1 <u>Wild Shell Collection</u> .....	8
1.3.2 <u>Artificial Pearl Production in Australia</u> .....	9
1.3.2.1 <i>Western Australia</i> .....	9
1.3.2.2 <i>Queensland and the Northern Territory</i> .....	10

<b>1.4</b>	<b>Hatchery Production: How and Why it Started</b> .....	11
1.4.1	<u>Spawning</u> .....	13
1.4.2	<u>Larval Rearing</u> .....	14
1.4.3	<u>Micro-algae Production</u> .....	15
1.4.4	<u>Settlement</u> .....	16
1.4.5	<u>Nursery Culture</u> .....	16
<b>1.5</b>	<b>How Pearls are Produced</b> .....	18
<b>1.6</b>	<b>History and Current Status of Akoya Pearl Culture</b> .....	21
1.6.1	<u>Japan</u> .....	21
1.6.2	<u>Vietnam</u> .....	22
1.6.3	<u>China</u> .....	23
1.6.4	<u>India</u> .....	23
<b>1.7</b>	<b>Akoya Culture in Australia</b> .....	24
1.7.1	<u>Source of oysters</u> .....	24
1.7.2	<u>Why is there no Australian Akoya Industry?</u> .....	25
1.7.3	<u>Benefits of Akoya Pearl Culture in Australia</u> .....	26
<b>1.8</b>	<b>Objectives</b> .....	27
CHAPTER 2	GENERAL MATERIALS AND METHODS .....	29
<b>2.1</b>	<b>Study Sites</b> .....	29
2.1.1	<u>Orpheus Island</u> .....	29
2.1.2	<u>Magnetic Island</u> .....	30
<b>2.2</b>	<b>Hatchery Production</b> .....	32

2.2.1	<u>Broodstock</u> .....	33
2.2.2	<u>Spawning Induction</u> .....	33
2.2.3	<u>Fertilisation and Embryonic Development</u> .....	36
2.2.4	<u>Larval Rearing</u> .....	37
2.2.5	<u>Micro-algae Production</u> .....	38
2.2.6	<u>Settlement</u> .....	41
2.2.7	<u>Spat Transfer</u> .....	41
2.2.8	<u>Grading</u> .....	42
2.2.9	<u>Nursery Culture</u> .....	43
2.2.10	<u>Measuring Oysters</u> .....	43
<b>2.3</b>	<b>Long-line Culture</b> .....	44
<b>2.4</b>	<b>Water Quality Monitoring</b> .....	45
CHAPTER 3	INVESTIGATION OF <i>P. FUCATA</i> CULTURE IN QUEENSLAND.....	47
<b>3.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	47
<b>3.2</b>	<b>Materials and Methods</b> .....	47
3.2.1	<u>Embryonic Development</u> .....	48
3.2.2	<u>Larval Development</u> .....	48
3.3.3	<u>Spat Development</u> .....	49
3.2.4	<u>Juvenile Development</u> .....	49
<b>3.3</b>	<b>Results</b> .....	50
3.3.1	<u>Embryonic Development</u> .....	50
3.3.2	<u>Larval Development</u> .....	51
3.3.3	<u>Spat Development</u> .....	55
3.3.4	<u>Juvenile Development</u> .....	55

<b>3.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	59
CHAPTER 4 EMBRYONIC DEVELOPMENT		64
<b>4.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	64
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Materials and Methods</b>	66
4.2.1	<u>Effects of Water Temperature and Salinity on Development of Embryos</u>	66
4.2.2	<u>Effects of Density and Antibiotics on Development of Embryos</u>	67
<b>4.3</b>	<b>Results</b>	68
4.3.1	<u>Effects of Water Temperature and Salinity on Development of Embryos</u>	68
4.3.2	<u>Effects of Density and Antibiotics on Development of Embryos</u>	68
<b>4.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	73
4.4.1	<u>Effects of Water Temperature and Salinity on Development of Embryos</u>	73
4.4.2	<u>Effects of Density and Antibiotics on Development of Embryos</u>	75
CHAPTER 5 EFFECTS OF DENSITY DURING LARVAL DEVELOPMENT		80
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	80
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Materials and Methods</b>	82
5.2.1	<u>Effects of Density on Larval Growth and Survival</u>	82
5.2.2	<u>Effects of Density on Spat Settlement</u>	83
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Results</b>	86
5.3.1	<u>Effects of Density on larval Growth and Survival</u>	86
5.3.2	<u>Effects of Density on Spat Settlement</u>	90
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	92
CHAPTER 6 EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT CULTURE METHODS DURING NURSERY CULTURE		97
<b>6.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	97
6.1.1	<u>Does Culture Depth Affect Growth of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u>	98

6.1.2	<u>Does Stocking Density Affect Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	99
6.1.3	<u>Do Small Oysters ‘Catch Up’ to their Larger Counterparts?</u> .....	100
6.1.4	<u>Does Culture Unit Affect Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	101
6.1.5	<u>What is the Optimal Cleaning Frequency for Maximum Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	97
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Materials and Methods</b> .....	<b>104</b>
6.2.1	<u>Does Culture Depth Affect Growth of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	105
6.2.2	<u>Does Stocking Density Affect Growth and Survival of <i>P. fucata</i>?</u> .....	106
	6.2.2.1 <i>Early Nursery Culture</i> .....	106
	6.2.2.2 <i>Late Nursery Culture</i> .....	107
6.2.3	<u>Do Small Oysters ‘Catch Up’ to their Large Counterparts?</u> .....	109
6.2.4	<u>Does Culture Unit Affect Growth and Survival of <i>P. fucata</i>?</u> .....	110
	6.2.4.1 <i>Experiment 1</i> .....	110
	6.2.4.2 <i>Experiment 2</i> .....	112
6.2.5	<u>Does Cleaning Frequency Affect Growth and Survival of <i>P. fucata</i>?</u> .....	113
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Results</b> .....	<b>114</b>
6.3.1	<u>Does Culture Depth Affect Growth of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	114
6.3.2	<u>Does Stocking Density Affect Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	116
	6.3.2.1 <i>Early Nursery Culture</i> .....	116
	6.3.2.2 <i>Late Nursery</i> .....	120
6.3.3	<u>Do Small Oysters ‘Catch Up’ to their Larger Counterparts?</u> .....	125
6.3.4	<u>Does Culture Unit Affect Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	133
	6.3.4.1 <i>Experiment 1</i> .....	133



6.3.4.2	<i>Experiment 2</i> .....	139
6.3.5	<u>What is the Optimal Cleaning Frequency for Maximum Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	143
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Discussion</b> .....	145
6.4.1	<u>Does Culture Depth Affect Growth of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	145
6.4.2	<u>Does Stocking Density Affect Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> ....	147
6.4.3	<u>Do Small Oysters ‘Catch Up’ to their Larger Counterparts?</u> .....	151
6.4.4	<u>Does Culture Unit Affect Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	153
6.4.5	<u>What is the Optimal Cleaning Frequency for Maximum Growth and Survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i>?</u> .....	157
6.4.6	<u>Conclusion</u> .....	159
CHAPTER 7 SITE DEPENDENT GROWTH .....		160
<b>7.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	160
<b>7.2</b>	<b>Materials and Methods</b> .....	162
<b>7.3</b>	<b>Results</b> .....	164
<b>7.4</b>	<b>Discussion</b> .....	174
CHAPTER 8 GENERAL DISCUSSION.....		181
<b>8.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	181
<b>8.2</b>	<b>Hatchery Production</b> .....	182
<b>8.3</b>	<b>Nursery Culture</b> .....	184
<b>8.4</b>	<b>Site Selection</b> .....	188
<b>8.5</b>	<b>Future Directions</b> .....	191
REFERENCES .....		194

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1.1.</b> Comparison of hatchery production methods used for Akoya pearl oysters in different countries . . . . .	13
<b>Table 2.1.</b> Density of micro-algae cells fed to <i>Pinctada fucata</i> larvae and spat (modified from Southgate and Beer (1997) and Doroudi <i>et al.</i> (1999a)). Larvae were stocked at an initial density of 2 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> and placed into settlement tanks on day 21. Larvae were fed a ternary diet of T-ISO, <i>Pavlova salina</i> and <i>Chaetoceros Muelleri</i> in equal parts. . . . .	40
<b>Table 3.1.</b> Approximate stocking densities and shell sizes of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at Orpheus Island on a surface long line. . . . .	50
<b>Table 3.2.</b> Incremental and cumulative survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> larvae cultured at Orpheus Island. . . . .	52
<b>Table 4.1.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=3$ ) survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> embryos cultured using combinations of four temperatures (26, 28, 30 and 32°C) and four salinities (28, 31, 34 and 37‰). . . . .	70
<b>Table 4.2.</b> Analysis of variance of the effects of water temperature and salinity on the development of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> embryos, using arcsine transformed data. . . . .	72

<b>Table 4.3.</b> Analysis of variance of the effects of density and the addition of antibiotics on the development of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> embryos, using arcsine transformed data.....	72
<b>Table 4.4.</b> Embryonic development of the major pearl producing species and their associated survival rates cultured at different densities. ....	76
<b>Table 6.1.</b> Growth characteristics of oysters cultured at four different stocking densities (20, 25, 30, and 40% of available net area) during late nursery culture at Orpheus Island as determined by von Bertalanffy growth models .....	120
<b>Table 6.2.</b> Significance levels from analysis of variance on the effects of four stocking densities (20, 25, 30 and 40% of available net area) on DVH, APM, shell width and wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> during late nursery culture at Orpheus Island.....	123
<b>Table 6.3.</b> Growth characteristics of oysters cultured from three different size classes (small, medium and large) during nursery culture at Orpheus Island as determined by the von Bertalanffy growth models (VBGM). ....	126
<b>Table 6.4.</b> Significance levels from analysis of variance on the effects of different size classes (small, medium and large) on DVH, APM, shell width and wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> after 7 and 21 months of culture at 11 and 25 months of age, respectively.....	127

<b>Table 6.5.</b> Growth characteristics of oysters using four different nursery culture apparatus (box, tray, pearl net and pearl net with noodles; see text for definitions) at Orpheus Island as determined by the von Bertalanffy growth models (VBGM).....	135
<b>Table 6.6.</b> Effects of four nursery culture apparatus (box, tray, pearl net and pearl net with noodles; see text for definitions) on the growth (DVH, APM, shell width and wet weight) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at Orpheus Island for 12 months. ....	135
<b>Table 6.7.</b> Significance levels from analysis of variance for the effects of four different culture apparatus (pearl nets and panel nets of small and large sizes) on DVH, APM, shell width and wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at Orpheus Island for 12 months. ....	140
<b>Table 6.8.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE with ranges in parentheses, $n=90$ ) DVH, APM, shell width, wet weight and survival of oysters cultured under different cleaning protocols (see text for definitions) at Orpheus Island for 6 months. Means with the same superscript in the same column are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). ....	144
<b>Table 7.1.</b> Growth characteristics of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> at Orpheus Island and Magnetic Island as determined by the von Bertalanffy growth model (VBGM) cultured for 12 months. ....	170

<b>Table 7.2.</b> Changes in <i>Pinctada fucata</i> shell parameters (DVH, APM, shell width and wet weight) at Orpheus Island and Magnetic Island between July 2001 and July 2002. Values represent means $\pm$ SE ( $n=100$ ). Means with the same subscript are not significantly different between sites ( $P>0.05$ ). .....	172
<b>Table 7.3.</b> Reported growth performance of Akoya pearl oysters ( <i>=P. fucata</i> ). .....	179
<b>Table 8.1.</b> Schematic overview of the results and impacts of this study .....	183
<b>Table 8.2.</b> Growth performance characteristics for different experiments conducted during this study and analysed with von Bertalanffy growth models. ....	187
<b>Table 8.3.</b> Annual water temperatures and chlorophyll ‘a’ ranges for a number of sites along the Queensland coast. ....	191

## List of Figures

<b>Fig. 1.1.</b> Distribution of “Akoya” pearl oysters from Shirai (1994) and O’Connor <i>et al.</i> (2003). .....	2
<b>Fig. 1.2.</b> Generalised life cycle of pearl oysters (adapted from Southgate and Lucas 2003). .....	6
<b>Fig. 1.3.</b> Diagrammatic representation of artificial pearl formation. ....	20
<b>Fig. 2.1.</b> Location of study sites: (1) Orpheus Island and (2) Magnetic Island near Townsville on the east coast of northern Australia. ....	30
<b>Fig. 2.2.</b> Location of long-line (▲) at Pioneer Bay on Orpheus Island. ....	31
<b>Fig. 2.3.</b> Location of long-line (▲) at Horseshoe Bay on Magnetic Island. ....	32
<b>Fig. 2.4.</b> Culture units used for culture of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> : (a) pearl net; (b) pearl net with noodles; (c) plastic mesh tray; (d) plastic box; and (e) panel net. ....	34
<b>Fig. 2.5.</b> Pearl oyster larvae were measured along the antero-posterior margin (APM) as seen in (a) and (b), while juveniles and adult pearl oysters (c) were measured for dorso-ventral shell height (DVH), APM, shell width and wet weight. ....	35

<b>Fig. 2.6.</b> Larval rearing tank (500 L) used during this study showing two drainage taps, the top tap to drain larvae and the bottom tap to drain waste products (dead and unhealthy larvae). .....	38
<b>Fig. 2.7.</b> Process of scaling-up micro-algae cultures from 250 mL stock flasks to 20 L carboys and further onto 2 000 L outdoor culture (Southgate 2003). .....	39
<b>Fig. 2.8.</b> Settlement tank containing spat collectors and vigorous aeration from the tank bottom.....	42
<b>Fig. 2.9.</b> Representation of the surface long-lines used for the culture of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> at Orpheus Island and Magnetic Island.....	45
<b>Fig. 3.1.</b> Changes in mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=30$ ) antero-posterior shell length (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> larvae cultured at OIRS that passed through a 150 $\mu\text{m}$ sieve ( $\square$ ) or were retained on a 150 $\mu\text{m}$ sieve ( $\square$ ) and transferred to the settlement tank. ....	53
<b>Fig. 3.3.</b> Changes in dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> during 25 months of suspended long line culture at Orpheus Island. Data are fitted with a line of best fit.....	56
<b>Fig. 3.4.</b> Changes in antero-posterior shell length (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> during 25 months of suspended long line culture at Orpheus Island. Data are fitted with a line of best fit.....	56

<b>Fig. 3.5.</b> Changes in shell width of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> during 25 months of suspended long line culture at Orpheus Island. Data are fitted with a line of best fit. ....	57
<b>Fig. 3.6.</b> Changes in wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> during 25 months of suspended long line culture at Orpheus Island. Data are fitted with a line of best fit. ....	57
<b>Fig. 3.7.</b> Relationship between dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) and antero-posterior shell length (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured for 25 months at Orpheus Island. ....	58
<b>Fig. 3.8.</b> Relationship between dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) and shell width of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured for 25 months at Orpheus Island .....	58
<b>Fig. 3.9.</b> Relationship between dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) and wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at Orpheus Island. ....	59
<b>Fig. 4.1.</b> Response surface estimation of percentage development of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> embryos to D-stage veligers after 24 h cultured at different water temperature and salinity combinations.....	71
<b>Fig. 4.2.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, n=3) percent development of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> embryos to D-stage veligers cultured at various densities (10, 20, 30, 50, 100 and 150 eggs mL <sup>-1</sup> ) using pooled data (with or without the addition of antibiotics). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different (P>0.05). ....	73



<b>Fig. 5.1.</b> Settlement system used for <i>Pinctada fucata</i> ‘spat’ .....	85
<b>Fig. 5.2.</b> Changes in mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) antero-posterior shell length (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> larvae (2-11 days of age) cultured at four densities (1, 2, 5, and 10 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> ). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ).....	87
<b>Fig. 5.3.</b> Changes in mean percent ( $\pm$ SE, $n=3$ ) survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> larvae (2-11 days of age) cultured at four different stocking densities (1, 2, 5, and 10 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> ). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ).....	87
<b>Fig. 5.4.</b> Changes in mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) antero-posterior shell length (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> larvae (11-20 days of age) cultured three different densities (1, 2, and 5 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> ). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ).....	89
<b>Fig. 5.5.</b> Changes in mean percent ( $\pm$ SE, $n=3$ ) survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> larvae (11-20 days of age) cultured at three different stocking densities (1, 2, and 5 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> ). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ).....	89
<b>Fig. 5.6.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> spat (20-43 days of age) resulting from four initial stocking densities (0.1, 0.2, 0.5 and 1.0 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> ) at transfer (6 weeks of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	91

<b>Fig. 5.7.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of <i>P. fucata</i> spat (20-43 days of age) resulting from four initial stocking densities (0.1, 0.2, 0.5 and 1.0 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> ) at grading (20 weeks of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	91
<b>Fig. 5.8.</b> Mean percent ( $\pm$ SE, $n=3$ ) survival of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> spat (20-43 days of age) resulting from four initial stocking densities (0.1, 0.2, 0.5 and 1.0 larvae mL <sup>-1</sup> ). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	92
<b>Fig. 6.1.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=50$ ) DVH of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at 3 different depths (2, 4 and 6 m) during early nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscripts are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	115
<b>Fig. 6.2.</b> Percentage of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> spat in three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured at three different depths (2, 4 and 6 m) at Orpheus Island and graded after 109 days.....	116
<b>Fig. 6.3.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at three different stocking densities (25, 50 and 75% of available net area) during early nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	117

<b>Fig. 6.4.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) antero-posterior measurement (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at three different stocking densities (25, 50 and 75% of available net area) during early nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	118
<b>Fig. 6.5.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured at three different stocking densities (25, 50 and 75% of available net area) during early nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	118
<b>Fig. 6.6:</b> Percentage of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> in three different size classes (small, medium and large) when cultured at three different stocking densities (25, 50 and 75% of available net area) during early nursery culture at Orpheus Island.....	119
<b>Fig. 6.7.</b> Growth of <i>P. fucata</i> cultured at different stocking densities (20, 25, 30 and 40% total available net area) during late nursery culture at Orpheus Island for 12 months. ....	121
<b>Fig. 6.8.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured using four different stocking densities (20, 25, 30 and 40% of available net area) during late nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	123

<b>Fig. 6.9.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) antero-posterior measurement (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured using four different stocking densities (20, 25, 30 and 40% of available net area) during late nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	124
<b>Fig. 6.10.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) shell width of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured using four different stocking densities (20, 25, 30 and 40% of available net area) during late nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	124
<b>Fig. 6.11.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured using four different stocking densities (20, 25, 30 and 40% of available net area) during late nursery culture at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	125
<b>Fig. 6.12.</b> Growth of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured from three different size classes (small, medium and large) during nursery culture at Orpheus Island for 12 months. ....	128
<b>Fig. 6.13.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 7 months (11 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	129

**Fig. 6.14.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) antero-posterior measurement (APM) of *Pinctada fucata* from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 7 months (11 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ )..... 129

**Fig. 6.15.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) shell width of *Pinctada fucata* from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 7 months (11 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). ..... 130

**Fig. 6.16.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) wet weight of *Pinctada fucata* from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 7 months (11 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). ..... 130

**Fig. 6.17.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of *Pinctada fucata* from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 21 months (25 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ )..... 131

**Fig. 6.18.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE) antero-posterior measurement (APM) of *Pinctada fucata* from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 21 months (25 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ )..... 132

<b>Fig. 6.19.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE) shell width of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 21 months (25 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	132
<b>Fig. 6.20.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE) wet weight of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> from three different size classes (small, medium and large) cultured for 21 months (25 months of age). Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). .....	133
<b>Fig. 6.21.</b> Growth of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> using four different nursery culture apparatus (box, tray, pearl net and pearl net with noodles; see text for definitions) cultured for 12 months at Orpheus Island. ....	136
<b>Fig. 6.22.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured using four different nursery culture units (box, tray, net and noodles; see text for definitions) for 12 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). ....	137
<b>Fig. 6.23.</b> Mean ( $\pm$ SE, $n=90$ ) antero-posterior shell length (APM) of <i>Pinctada fucata</i> cultured using four different nursery culture units (box, tray, net and noodles; see text for definitions) for 12 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). ....	137

**Fig. 6.24.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) shell width of *Pinctada fucata* cultured using four different nursery culture units (box, tray, net and noodles; see text for definitions) for 12 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). ..... 138

**Fig. 6.25.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) wet weight of *Pinctada fucata* cultured using four different nursery culture units (box, tray, net and noodles; see text for definitions) for 12 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ ). ..... 138

**Fig. 6.26.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) dorso-ventral shell height (DVH) of *Pinctada fucata* cultured using four different nursery culture units (pearl nets- PE and panel nets- PA of two different mesh sizes; see text for definitions) for 11 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ )..... 141

**Fig. 6.27.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) antero-posterior shell length (APM) of *Pinctada fucata* cultured using four different nursery culture units (pearl nets- PE and panel nets- PA of two different mesh sizes; see text for definitions) for 11 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ )..... 141

**Fig. 6.28.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) shell width of *Pinctada fucata* cultured using four different nursery culture units (pearl nets- PE and panel nets- PA of two different mesh

sizes; see text for definitions) for 11 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ )..... 142

**Fig. 6.29.** Mean ( $\pm$  SE,  $n=90$ ) wet weight of *Pinctada fucata* cultured using four different nursery culture units (pearl nets- PE and panel nets- PA of two different mesh sizes; see text for definitions) for 11 months at Orpheus Island. Means with the same superscript are not significantly different ( $p>0.05$ )..... 142

**Fig. 6.30.** Attachment of *P. fucata* to ‘noodles’ from within pearl nets ..... 154

**Fig. 7.1.** Changes in mean ( $\pm$ SE) annual water quality parameters: (a) temperature; (b) chlorophyll ‘a’; and (c) salinity, at Orpheus Island (OI) and Magnetic Island (MI). Error bars are 95% confidence limits, dashed horizontal lines refer to optimal growth conditions (refer text). ..... 165

**Fig. 7.2.** Changes in mean ( $\pm$ SE) water quality parameters of: (a) temperature; (b) chlorophyll ‘a’; and (c) salinity, at Orpheus Island (OI) and Magnetic Island (MI) over successive measurement periods (Jul-Aug, July-August; Sept-Oct, September-October; Nov, November; Dec-Jan, December-January; Feb-Jul, February-July)..... 167

**Fig. 7.3.** Principal component analysis of (a) water quality parameters at Orpheus Island (OI) and Magnetic Island (MI) during different seasons (Jul: July-August; Sept: September-October; Nov: November; Jan: December-January and Jun: February-June) and (b) environmental vectors driving the processes..... 168



**Fig. 7.4.** Growth of *Pinctada fucata* cultured in pearl nets at Orpheus Island and Magnetic Island for 12 months..... 171

**Fig. 7.5.** Relationship between combined (Orpheus Island and Magnetic Island) water quality parameters of: (a) temperature; (b) chlorophyll 'a'; and (c) salinity, against daily growth rate of *Pinctada fucata*. Lines represent 'best fit'. ..... 173