

diamonds,* rendered the fisheries of Cubagua less lucrative. At the same time, the oysters which yielded the pearls became scarcer, not, because, according to a popular tradition, they were frightened by the sound of the oars, and removed elsewhere; but because their propagation had been impeded by the imprudent destruction of the shells by thousands. The pearl-bearing oyster is of a more delicate nature than most of the other acephalous mollusca. At the island of Ceylon, where, in the bay of Condeatchy, the fishery employs six hundred divers, and where the annual produce is more than half a million of piastres, it has vainly been attempted to transplant the oysters to other parts of the coast. The government permits fishing there only during a single month; while at Cubagua the bank of shells was fished at all seasons. To form an idea of the destruction of the species caused by the divers, we must remember that a boat sometimes collects, in two or three weeks, more than thirty-five thousand oysters. The animal lives but nine or ten years; and it is only in its fourth year that the pearls begin to show themselves. In ten thousand shells there is often not a single pearl of value. Tradition records that on the bank of Margareta the fishermen opened the shells one by one: in the island of Ceylon, the animals are thrown into heaps to rot in the air; and to separate the pearls which are not attached to the shell, the animal pulp is washed, as miners wash the sand which contains grains of gold, tin, or diamonds.

At present Spanish America furnishes no other pearls for trade than those of the gulf of Panama, and the mouth of the Rio de la Hacha. On the shoals which surround Cubagua, Coche, and the island of Margareta, the fishery is as much neglected as on the coasts of California.† It is believed at Cumana, that the pearl-oyster has greatly multiplied after two centuries of repose; and in 1812, some new attempts were made at Margareta for the fishing of pearls. It has been asked, why the pearls found at present in shells which become entangled in the fishermen's nets are so small, and

* The cutting of diamonds was invented by Lewis de Berquen, in 1456, but the art became common only in the following century.

† I am astonished at never having heard, in the course of my travels, of pearls found in the fresh-water shells of South America, though several species of the *Unio* genus abound in the rivers of Peru.