

Poster of a haenyeo, a woman diver of Jeju. It hangs in the Haenyeo Museum in Jeju

Women Divers of Jeju

The Mermaids called *Haenyeo*

Text and photos by Bonnie McKenna

The island of Jeju, Korea, is an island of myths, gods and goddesses. It is also the birthplace of the women divers of Jeju. Although the women divers of Jeju are not the goddesses of myths, they are real alive mermaid goddesses.

The women divers of Jeju have been diving—diving without breathing equipment for centuries. It is not exactly known when the first women divers appeared, but ancient shrines honoring women divers indicate that they began gathering food from the sea prior to the Common

Era. Historical documents from the Three Kingdoms period, which lasted between the 4th and 7th century, mention the women divers of Jeju.

The name for these women divers, in Korean, is *haenyeo*. It literally means 'women of the sea'. Traditionally, the women wore only a simple home-sewn white linen combination of pants and a top with lead weighted vests where they tucked the specialized tools of their trade.

Precise rituals ensure the women's survival as they free dive in all kinds of weather searching for shell fish and special seaweeds. The divers stay submerged for two to three minutes at depths of 10 to 30 meters with only a

float, or *taewak*, to mark their position. A bag, or *mangsiri*, that attaches to the float holds the day's catch. Although the diving tradition continues today, the women now take advantage of modern wetsuits, fins and goggles.

When the divers surface, they make a unique shrill, high-pitched whistling sound that is their way of expelling carbon dioxide from their lungs and breathing in the fresh air.

The women divers usually work in groups. During breaks and at the end of the day, they retire to their *bulteok*. Although the word means 'bonfire' in Korean, a *bulteok* serves as much more than that. It is a term which signifies an open-air dressing room. It also serves as a place where the women meet to exchange information, opinions and foster the diving profession.

Diving is still an excellent source of income, and as a consequence, the women divers enjoy more freedom, independence and self-respect than other Korean women.

There is a special ranking among the women divers. Group A are the most able divers. Groups B and C are divided based on experience, character and capability. The groups determine who dives from shore, from boats (to 15 meters) and those who specialize in deep diving (more than 20 meters).

As the women gather around the bonfire, their seating position in the *bulteok* reflects their position within their group. When a diver is upgraded, her seating

position is changed.

Although the working environment of the women divers has not changed appreciably over time, the *bulteok* has changed. Along with improved diving gear, they have updated their dressing rooms to permanent structures with modern heating. However, the hierarchy of the *bulteok* is still in practice.

When a diver loses her life, the women stop diving for a while. If they find the body, they have a funeral, but if they fail to find the body, a shaman is invited to soothe the soul of the body and send it to heaven. The shaman also performs an exorcism to prevent evil spirits from preventing further disasters.



Painting of the haenyeos coming from the sea. Painting hangs in the Haenyeo Museum in Jeju



제주해녀의 삶





Mermaids

LEFT TO RIGHT:
An historical photograph illustrating the different dress styles of the women divers; Teawaks made of gourds and polystyrene carved into balls. This represents the evolution of the symbol of the women divers; Display of spear guns

1500 women divers went to Japan every year. Instead of using the traditional taewak, they used a *dampu*, which is similar to a drum with a small net pocket, or they



DIVING TOOLS

EYES

The goggles worn by the women divers are called 'eyes' in Jeju dialect and have gone by that name since the 19th century. There are two types of goggles: 'small eyes' akin to swimmers goggles and 'big eyes' masks with one large lens. The women could choose between *guet* eyes, a fragile frame with a wide lens that stood up better in deep dives, and the smaller *umjang-e* eyes. The frames were made of metal before the widespread use of rubber.

TAEWAK

The taewak is a symbol of the women divers. The taewak used to be made from a gourd, but today they are polystyrene. The taewak is used as a floatation device while swimming, and from it is hung the mangsiri, a large net. The divers also use the taewak as a guide to the surface when diving deep.

MANGSIRI

The mangsiri is a loosely woven bag that attaches to the taewak to store the diver's catch. The mangsiri is a round net approximately 40-50cm in diameter at the top and 7cm in length. The lower section is wider at the bottom. Modern mangsiri are made of nylon.

BITCHANG

This is an iron tool 30cm in length used to pick abalone off the rocks.

JUNGGAE WEEDING HOE

The hoe, resembling a sickle, is used to cut and gather seaweed.

GONGJAEGI

A tool used to hook a *gamtae* (a sea plant) that has been pushed to the shore by the wind.

RAKE

This tool is used when the diver is gathering wide brown seaweed on a boat.

GAKJI

Similar to the weeding hoe, this tool is used to pick up shellfish and baby abalone from cracks in the rocks. ■



used a board. The Japanese often referred to the divers as *itaama* or 'board women.'

In Xingdao, China, after being introduced to brown seaweed by a Korean businessman, there was a need for the women divers. In China, the women were called 'dragon women' (dragons were a symbol of water and rain and were said to live below the earth). The women worked from May to August making good money.

A number of women went to the frigid waters of Russia to harvest kelp that was too large to harvest from the surface. Because whales often shook the ships they were working, they were asked by the person in charge to dive silently.

During the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, the women divers of Jeju rose up against atrocities of the Japanese to fight for their rights. They led anti-Japanese campaigns that allowed them to boycott Japanese-run businesses and establish cooperatives to preserve marine resources after the Japanese governor ran up the price of shellfish.

Expanding business

In their determination to support their families the women divers began diving outside Jeju, according to Japanese history, it may have been before the 5th century. In many cases the women were fearful of a new experience in foreign lands, but they packed up their diving tools and set off with determination.

According to the 1937 issue of the Jeju Handbook, the business for brown seaweed increased in the late 19th

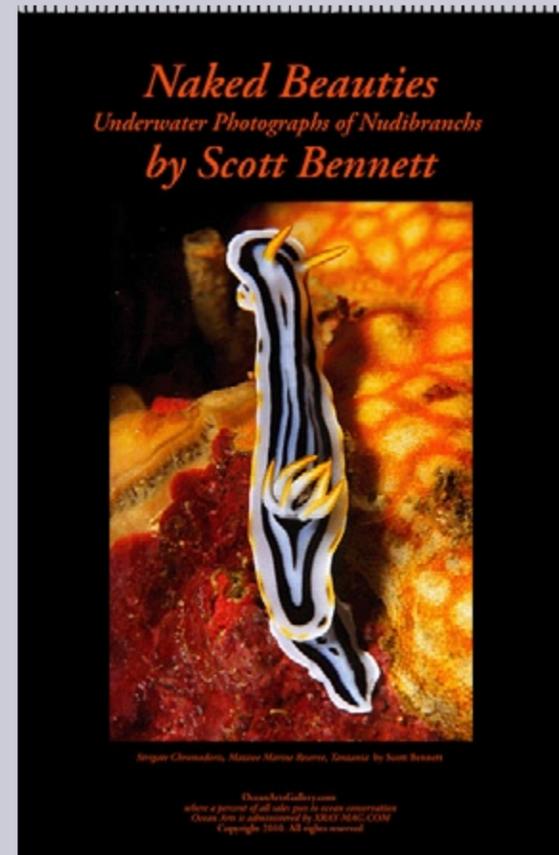
century first in the Busan area, then gradually extended to other cities and countries. The women were often exploited, but because the salary was good they had little choice; they needed the money for their families.

The Jeju women divers began diving, in earnest, in Japan in the early half of the 19th century. Approximately,



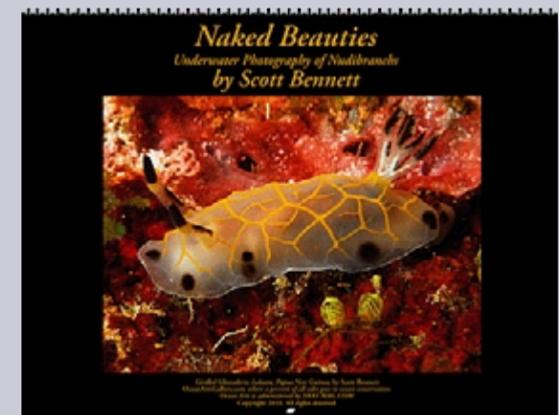
Mermaids

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Tools used by the haenyeos to harvest seaweeds and shellfish, including implements such as the Junggae (bottom left of photo) and the Gakji, bitchang, and gongjaegi (top left to right of photo); Tool used to cut brown seaweed; Haenyeo wearing a traditional diving costume



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accurately reflects the importance of women as the backbone of the Jeju family. Island girls start diving by the age of 10 or 15. At that time, they are ready to earn a living.

A decline in mermaids

The number of women divers has decreased dramatically in recent years. More job opportunities, education and mothers do not want their daughters to follow in their strenuous and dangerous profession. In 2006, there were only 5,406 women divers, and those over 60 years old accounted for 65.8 percent (3,557); those between 50 and 59 just over 24.6 percent (1,331); those between 30 and 49 only 9.6 percent (518); and those below age 30 number only two. In contrast, in 1970, the number of women divers over the age of 60 was only 4.6 percent.

Due to the rapid decline in the number of women divers and their aging population, the Haenyeo Museum was established in Jeju to honor the mermaids. The museum is located in the village of Hado-ri where many haenjeos have traditionally lived. The museum has many exhibits showing the haenjeo's way of life, working tools, diving dress and models of their homes. William Logan the UNESCO Chair of

Heritage and Urbanism said Jeju women divers represent a unique legacy that deserves nomination for the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Logan said, "The point of the intangible cultural heritage is to draw attention of the international community to the threats to this particular heritage around the world and support Korea in finding ways to maintain these skills from donors and educators."

Today, most of the women divers are over the age of 60, some are widowed, and some are still the sole economic source for their families. The haenyeo divers continue to survive through their wits and the strength of their communities. They are incredibly strong and remain healthy, fit and beautiful.

Dutch sailor Hendrick Hammel, a survivor of the 1653 shipwreck on Jeju, recorded in his logbook that "real mermaids" existed on Jeju.

Bonnie McKenna is an internationally known fine art photographer specializing in the beauty of life under the sea and the nature of the great outdoors. She is a PADI certified Master Scuba Diver Trainer. She has written for several publications including D-Log—an interactive dive log for the islands of Palau—Houston Community Newspapers and The

Tribune News-papers as a travel writer after a long career with Continental Airlines. She is currently a reporter for the Houston Chronicle. ■



Girls over boys

Most Koreans aspire to have baby boys, but on Jeju it is different; the birth of a baby girl is valued. There is an old saying in Jeju, "When you have a baby girl, butcher a pig and have a party. If it is a boy, just kick him in the butt." The saying

