



THE LAST DIVE

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There is a Haenyeo
On the island of Jeju.

They call her the oldest woman diver in the world, the last mermaid of Jeju Island,
And the Cultural Heritage of South Korea. They call her the sea woman.

Nobody knows how her profession came to be.
Nobody knows where her profession will be.

She is the last generation of Jeju women divers.
She is the Korean history, pride and culture.

She is 80 year old,
But she is independent, free-spirited, and strong-willed like a 20 year old.

She is the head of her household.
She teaches and leads other Haenyeos.

She dives up to six hours a day and 18 days a month for less than 17 dollars a day.
She catches everything from abalone, sea urchin to seaweed from the bay.

Without oxygen mask, she can dive up to a minute a dive
And up to 30 feet a dive.

The wind is strong, the waves are violent, and the water is freezing.
Her job is nothing but back-breaking, dangerous, and life-threatening.

There is no Haenyeo like her,
And there will be no more Haenyeo like her.

While younger women flock to the city for better job and education,
This is her sacrifice for her children's better life and education.

This is her way of life,
This could be her *last dive*.



"Aside from the Ama [pearl] divers of Japan, there is no other place on earth where women free dive for seaweed and shellfish."

"[Haenyeos are] scattered throughout more than 100 villages around the [Jeju] island."

Korea

Jeju
Island

Destination

Jeju is a subtropical island located at the southern coast of South Korea. It measures approximately 714 square miles and fills entirely with volcanic rock and soil. Jeju has a population of about 604,771 and it is well known for its world natural reserve, tourism, fishing and citrus crop. The island has its distinct culture, dialect, and traditions, including shamanism.

Purpose

The island is also home to one of the most unique professions in the world, called Haenyeo, or sea woman. They are known as the world's oldest women divers and the mermaid

of Jeju. In 2016, Haenyeo is also recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The purpose of my XPLORE trip is to witness and share this history-in-the-making, the Korean culture and pride, and the last women divers, who are quickly disappearing in front of the world's eyes.

Los
Angeles



The First Haenyeo

The Jeju's diving profession could date back to as early as 503 A.D. It was predominantly held by men with a few women helping their husbands at sea. There was no literature record of women divers until 1629 when a Jeju scholar mentioned the indecency and minimal clothing of women divers. However, possibly due to greater tax benefit for women divers, ability of women to endure better in cold water, and Jeju's men going into

war or deep sea fishing; Haenyeo had become the sole divers of the Jeju Island since the 18th century.

Haenyeos are part of a semi-matriarchal society of Jeju, where they make about 40% to 48% of the family income, while up to 40% of the Haenyeo's husbands are unemployed.




"Haenyeos symbolize the strength, power, and durability of women. They learn the skills and knowledge from their grandmothers and mothers, and learn from their community members how to dive and to catch the sea products."



"[I started to muljil, lit. water work] when I was eight, or ten. My parent's house was the wealthiest people in this town and they had seven children. However, they only supported their

sons for education and didn't let their daughters to be educated. In the old days, my parents forced me to earn money by muljil."





"It is apparent that if one becomes greedy and desires more than her skills, the ocean can be her death bed in any day. Remarkably, Haenyeos humbly accept the fact that the ocean they jump into for a living can easily be their grave."

The Present Haenyeo

Haenyeos are praised as an indigenous marine ecologist, environmentalist, and nature conservationist through their long history of sustainable harvesting practices. In order to maintain the growth of local marine lives, the Haenyeo society has strict rules on their harvesting seasons and sea products. They refuse to use oxygen mask to prevent themselves from their own greed and also to limit themselves to harvest only within their own physical abilities. Haenyeos believe that the ocean is like their mothers, who always give them whatever they need. So, if they become greedy and use modern technologies, they will eventually destroy the ocean, their means of survival, and way of life.

"They all believe that their lives depend on 99% of luck and 1% of skills."





Jung-gun

Level: Intermediate
Breath: 1-1.25 Minute a Dive
Swim: 25-35 Feet Underwater
Harvest: Obunjagi Molusks & Conches
Earn: \$500-750 a Month



Ha-gun

Level: Beginner
Breath: 0.75-1 Minute a Dive
Swim: 15-25 Feet Underwater
Harvest: Smaller Conches & Agar-Agar Seaweeds
Earn: \$250-500 a Month



Dong-gun

Level: Young & Old
Breath: Under 45 Seconds a Dive
Swim: Shallow Water
Harvest: Sea Urchins & Seaweeds
Earn: Under \$250 a Month



Sang-gun

Level: Expert
Breath: Up to 2 Minutes a Dive
Swim: Up 50-60 Feet Underwater
Harvest: Abalones & Cockscomb Corals
Earn: Up to \$1,000 a Month

"A Haenyeo can dive from sunrise until lunch gathering sea urchins, then spend the rest of the day prying them open. For the whole day's work, she would typically make about 17,000 yuan, the equivalent of about \$17."

Haenyeo Breathing Test

A Haenyeo has to earn her job in the Haenyeo community by going through at least four or five years of training and earning a vote from every woman in her village. To determine her class, the depth and duration of her dive, and how much money she can earn; a Haenyeo has to have a good knowledge of the environment and oceanography, possess a good health, and the ability to hold long 'soom', or breath, underwater.

So, use the 2-minute sand timer, test yourself, hold your breath, and see which class of Haenyeo you belong to.





*"People say that Haenyeos earn from
the afterlife and spend in this life."*

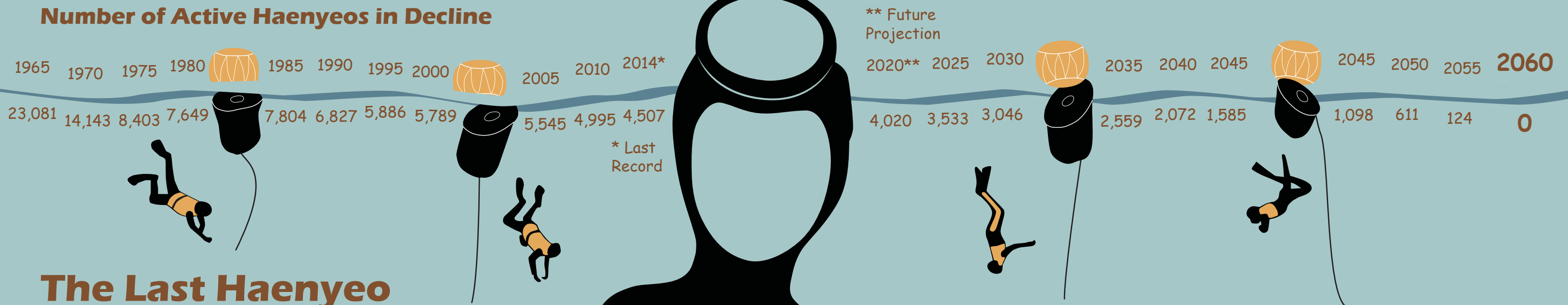


"[Haenyeo has a saying:] Would rather be born a cow than a woman; never lay down babies and miyeok [seaweed], however heavy they may be; Haenyeo work in the sea three days after childbirth."

Haenyeos often suffer from chronic symptoms, including headache, digestive problems, joint pain, tinnitus, and muscle cramping. They also experience 'shallow water blackout' through hyperventilation and hip pain from weight of equipment and belt.



Number of Active Haenyeos in Decline



The Last Haenyeo

Before the 1960s, Haenyeo's work made up an astonishing 60% of the Jeju's fisheries export, and they had over 23,000 women divers in the industry. Due to the environmental pollution and government's push for the island's growth in agriculture and tourism in the 1960s, the number of Haenyeo dropped to slightly over 14,000. New educational and professional opportunities in the mainland also detracted many young women from following their Haenyeo mother

or grandmother's footsteps. In 1970, about 31% of the Haenyeos were 30 years old or younger, 55% were 30 to 49 years old, and only 14% were 50 years old or older. Since 2014, 98% of the women divers are at the age of 50 or older, and some are even in their 80s. Although the respect for Haenyeo is rising and the South Korean government is putting effort to prolong the profession, many believe that this could be the last generation of women divers.

"People have tried so hard to preserve Haenyeo for so long but now it's at a danger of going obsolete due to a lack of people."

"Haenyeo is not merely a profession, but a way of life that may soon be lost."





Documentation

The Big Idea

In several decades, Haenyeos will be a mere memory in our history book. Before the last Haenyeo vanish into the horizon, I want to take this opportunity to experience a living history, the world's Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the last generation of sea women.

The Journey

I plan on reaching out to the local Haenyeo community, including the Haenyeo Museum and Haenyeo Summer School in Jeju. Then, I plan to go to Jeju Island to document their daily lives, their work, their families, and their last dives as Haenyeos.


Raising Awareness

I will share my experience with Ruhnau Clarke Architects through presentation, photos, videos and translated interviews. I will bring back the Haenyeos' stories, struggles, and successes and inspire others by their past and present sacrifices and the legacy of their dying profession.

"I wanted the young people to remember how the older generation of Jeju women lived."





A woman in a black wetsuit and diving mask is swimming underwater. She is looking towards the camera. The background shows a coral reef and some bubbles. The water is a deep blue-green color.

This XPLORE trip is also a dedication to my mom, who passed away six years ago, and all the mothers and Haenyeos, who work tirelessly for all their lives and always sacrifice so much for the well-being of their children and families.

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