A HARVEST OF GATORS

WITH THE FALL AUCTION OF ALLIGATOR HIDES COMES EVIDENCE OF GROWTH IN THE INDUSTRY

By Marcelle Tessier

The center of attention is a makeshift plywood table supported by sawhorses in the center of the arena. This is where the alligator hides continuously move along, shuffled on and off the table in a sort of manual assembly line. This is how potential buyers view the raw product that will one day be made into classic leather goods and worn by chic men and women worldwide.

But this Abbeville alligator sale is a far cry from the high fashion scene, so the bigger gators that come from the wild are drawing higher prices. But even considering that farm-produced animals fetch about $10 less per foot, this industry has the potential to bring in much-needed revenue to the farmers who needed revenue to the farmers who

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DWAYNE SAGREIRA FARM ALLIGATORS SOUTH OF ABBEVILLE

The alligator hide sale at the Vermilion Parish Cooperative Extension barn in Abbeville is the biggest of the three public sales in the state. Although the hides are brought in almost exclusively by trappers, alligator farmers are attracted also to keep in touch with the industry, and see what prices the hides are bringing. Farmers generally do not sell here because they contract to sell their skins on a year-round basis.

The number of animals hunters can legally kill is regulated by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, which issues tags to landowners who contract with trappers for a portion of the proceeds. The month-long alligator hunting season ended last week, and was extremely good, according to Joanne. Farm production is spread more equitably throughout the year. Wildlife and Fisheries monitors production on each farm, but does not set limits on harvesting. Presently, some 45,000 gators are being raised on farms in Louisiana.

There are obvious differences between the two methods of production, not the least of which focuses on the research that’s being conducted on alligator farming. The data that’s provided by Wildlife and Fisheries has enabled the first farmers to begin this tentative business and has helped them anticipate some of the pitfalls involved. Their studies have furthered the efficient harvesting of the animal and their hides.

A big advantage of the farming aspect is the fact that conditions can be closely monitored. The animals are housed in controlled chambers with a constant temperature and established eating times. One of the consequences of this regulated production is that alligators in captivity grow faster than their counterparts in the wild. Gators in a natural habitat take about five years to reach the same size as a two-year-old on a farm. Additionally, the hides from farm animals are usually preferable because they receive less scarring than those in the

Business Flash

St. Landry Bank and Trust Co. in Opelousas was named one of the 175 “safest banks in the nation” by Money Magazine. “We’ve always tried to be a conservative bank, as well as one of the safest ones around,” says President Robert S. Tomlinson Jr. He credits the rating to qualified and well-trained employees.

Tomlinson’s father, Robert, Sr., and his grandfather, Allen Dezauche, each worked over 30 years at St. Landry Bank and Trust. The bank’s main service area is St. Landry parish, with branches in Eunice and Port Barre...
THE MAJOR DRAWBACK FACING THE INDUSTRY IS NOT THE obvious absence of a tanning facility in Louisiana, but the lack of available markets for the product, according to Joanen.

"The tanning process is not a hold-up in developing the industry. It may give a competitive edge, but it's not really as important as developing the market."

The biggest consumers are currently in Europe and Japan, with the United States only accounting for 20 percent of the skins that are sold. Most alligator manufacturing is done by western boot companies, with big-name buyers in the Northeast shying away from the skin because of environmental concerns.

"We need to make people aware that it's not endangered," says Joanen. "We are trying to educate the nation." This is one of the goals of the Fur and Alligator Council, a state board that promotes and researches the marketing end of the program. "We need to bring in people to teach us how to sell this product to the general public."

Alligator farming is definitely not for everybody. Already, there is fear that too many people are counting on it to fill the economic gap brought on by the decline of oil prices. As recently as two years ago, there were only 13 farms in the state. That number is now four times as large. Some experts think it's time to put on the brakes.

Wildlife specialist Dr. James Fowler, of the LSU cooperative extension service, advises caution. "It would be easy to flood the market," he says. There is a tendency by some to limit the industry because of concern that the price may be reduced if too many people get into it. But Fowler doesn't think alligator farming will ever be as prevalent as major agricultural crops. He does feel there is a place for it in Louisiana's economy.

"I think if we do it slowly, cautiously, and with good judgment, it can develop. If it develops too fast, then you kill your business and it won't come back."

Sagrera sums it up this way. "The potential is still there if we don't overproduce. It's an untested market."