Alligator farms growing too fast, some believe

By DICK WRIGHT
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The alligator, long hunted in the wild for its hide, has become an important Louisiana farm animal. Raising alligators in captivity is growing so rapidly that established farmers are worried the growth will undermine the price of hides, according to speakers at LSU’s Aquaculture Conference recently.

One foot of alligator hide can bring $30 to $32, but, said one speaker, there are predictions the price will be down to $15 a foot in three years.

While farming alligators for their hides and meat is growing rapidly in the United States, crocodile farming is catching on in Africa and Australia, speakers said.

Louisiana has an estimated 41,000 alligators on 31 farms now, and the numbers are increasing, said Larry McNease, Wildlife and Fisheries Department biologist at Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge and Game Preserve in Cameron Parish. McNease said Florida has 75,000 to 80,000 farm alligators in production, Texas has some production, and Mississippi has just rewritten its laws to allow alligator farming.

Alligator hide is not an easily consumable product like food, alligator farmer Steele McAndrew said. The market for alligator hides is “very, very small” and can’t take a large increase in supply, McAndrew said.

“I basically want farmers to be aware of the facts so that we do not have a big surge without good reason,” McAndrew said.

Farmers do not favor promotion of alligator farming, he said.

“We are doubling every year, and this is going to hit.”

What they would like to see is more effort put into the marketing end, he said.

McAndrew called the hide market a “vicious game,” and farmers have been taken advantage of because they didn’t know the

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May 8, 1988
He downplayed the meat production side of alligator farming, saying carcasses do not yield much meat, and it does not bring the price sometimes publicized. McAndrew said maybe some alligator meat sells for $10 a pound, as he said has been reported, but an alligator farmer is more likely to get $4 to $5 a pound, and less if the bone is in.

Mark Staton, a University of Georgia researcher, held out the prospect that alligators can be fed more non-meat food. Right now, the major food is nutria, or some other flesh or fish.

Getting away from a purely meat diet would allow some mechanical feeding and mean easier, less costly food storage for the alligator farmer, Staton said.

Georgia experiments show good growth results with non-meat supplements in the diets, proving that vegetable carbohydrates and protein can be helpful if the farmer knows what he is doing, Staton said. Supplements must be fed in the right proportions, he said.

Alligator farmer Wayne Segrera welcomed the news about food supplements. He said using nutria only means a farmer had to buy a whole year's supply of the meat, due to the nutria season, at one time and freeze it. He said that ties up capital all at once. Supplements would allow food supplies to be bought over the course of a year, he said.

The Aquaculture Conference brought 450 people to Baton Rouge, about 15 percent of them from out of state.

Larry de la Bretonne of LSU told one session Louisiana has the water, soils, temperature and the research for aquaculture. The state is in the forefront of aquaculture, de la Bretonne said. He said he believed it would stay there.

Crawfish is the leading aquaculture "crop" in Louisiana, with 135,000 acres of ponds, he said.

He said crawfish farming has several advantages — low investment, it fits easily into some crop rotations, it can be done on land that must be idled otherwise under federal farm programs, it involves no feeding and there is almost no disease. One of the disadvantages is the cost of labor to harvest crawfish — some 60 percent of the cost of crawfish raising, he said.

Speakers covered other kinds of aquaculture:

- Soft-shell crabs have a good market, and "most crabbers are completely booked up."
- Oysters remain a major harvest in Louisiana, but are facing major problems — loss of habitat due to a receding coastline, pollution that has closed 50 percent of the oyster beds, predators, disease and, in recent years, poachers stealing from leased oyster beds.
- Louisiana leads the nation in shrimp catches, but shrimp farming has not caught on as it has in Ecuador and the Orient.
- Malaysian freshwater prawn, a kind of large shrimp, have not succeeded in Louisiana experiments. "At this particular time we only recommend prawn culture as a recreational endeavor," a speaker said.
- Raising bait minnows and game fish and hybrid game fish for stocking ponds holds some potential, and research continues on raising red drum or redfish.

There has been some interest in grass carp, or white Amur, that eat water vegetation.

"They are a tremendous fish vacuum cleaner," a speaker said. But because they are a foreign introduction, they still are prohibited in Louisiana waters because of what they might do to the swamp ecology, the speaker said.