Alligators mean big business for Vermilion farmer

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ABBEVILLE — For Wayne Sagrera and his four sons, alligator farming is a big business.

Sagrera's farm, which raises alligators for meat, skins and breeding, is located south of Abbeville in Mouton Cove.

"About 10 years ago, the State Wildlife and Fisheries Department contacted me and several other farmers about an experimental program to raise alligators," Sagrera said. "Facts had been gathered that almost 95 percent of alligators born in the wild did not survive due to weather conditions, natural predators and man."

A program was initiated where participating licensed farmers were encouraged to raise alligators under a controlled environment, hoping that it would be economically feasible to save the 95 percent that would be lost in the wild.

About 10 farmers were given free breeding gators and permits would be issued to allow eggs to be removed from the wild.

In return, the farmers were to build the sheds and other buildings necessary to hatch the eggs and raise the alligators.

Within a few years, other farmers were then permitted to pick up eggs in the wild and begin their alligator farms.

The number of farms grew to more than 125.

"When the market value of alligators dropped a few years back and expenses were on the rise, many farmers got out of the business," Sagrera said.

He believes there are less than 50 effective farms now operating.

The farming process begins in the incubator shed. More than 6,000 baby alligators were hatched there recently.

Under Sagrera's supervision, the natural vegetation in each roosting cage was carefully removed to allow mobility for the newly hatched babies.

Each roosting cage consists of about 30 eggs from one female's brood.

When picked up from the wild, the eggs and the vegetation are kept intact and placed in a small wire cage. That cage is then placed in a huge temperature controlled incubator.

The natural vegetation helps decompose the hard egg shell during the nine-week incubation period.

After they are hatched, the baby alligators stay in the incubator for 24 hours.

The baby 'gators are then brought to one of the dozen or so buildings that house the alligators in small ponds.

Each of the buildings contains at least eight ponds that are drained and washed daily.

In the climate-controlled buildings - kept in the mid-80s - the alligators are fed a controlled diet and allowed to move and swim about.

Because of state regulations, 17 percent of each alligator crop must be returned to the wild when the gators reach four feet. That takes about 18 months, Sagrera said.

Each alligator must be tagged, identified and returned to the same area from which the eggs were originally taken.

Also at the site is a skinning shed, where the alligator hides are harvested.

Once skinned, the hides are salted and put in barrels for several days. The salting allows the skins to shrink to their actual selling size, Sagrera said.

When the skins are ready to be shipped, Sagrera or a family member then grades the skins. Each skin must be tagged and certified before any exchange can be made.

According to Sagrera, 95 percent of the hides are exported, usually headed for Singapore, Hong Kong or Europe.

"The U.S. manufacturers have priced themselves out of the market," Sagrera says in explaining why most of the hides are exported. "Instead of absorbing some of the expenses, the manufacturers pass it on to the American consumer who then cannot afford to pay the high prices of alligator boots, belts or purses."

The alligator meat gathered during the skinning process is sent to area meat packing plants where much of it is exported, Sagrera said.

Most of the meat, he said, is shipped to Taiwan.

However, in recent years many restaurants are beginning to serve alligator and area meat processors are hoping for an increase in local and regional demand.