OVER $3 MILLION in alligator hides were sold following the recent record-breaking alligator harvest which ended Oct. 6, according to officials of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Department.

Banner gator crop reported

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Louisiana's hunters have reaped a banner crop of alligators and found eager buyers for the skins and meat.

Figures released today by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries show that in the 31-day season ended Oct. 6, a record of 20,267 alligators were taken, surpassing the previous mark of 17,692 set in 1980.

A total of 1,286 licensed hunters took part in the harvest.

Most of the hides were channeled immediately into the commercial market at an average price of $23 a linear foot, the highest paid since alligator hunting was resumed on a rigidly controlled basis in 1972.

In addition, seafood processors bought up around 200,000 pounds of alligator meat for human consumption, compared with 50,000 to 75,000 in previous years. Alligator carcasses sell for about 75 cents a pound. Prime cuts, when deboned and defatted, bring $5 a pound.

Traders were in a rush to obtain skins for tanning and fabrication into consumer items in the few short weeks left before the Christmas gift-giving season.

Virtually all the available hides are being shipped to France, Italy and Japan for tanning. Only some 500 will be tanned in the United States, but many will be returning to this country to be made into shoes, purses and other articles.

Hunters this year included 1,207 commercial licensees, each of whom paid a $25 fee. Many of these were sportsmen, but they were required to buy a commercial license if they expected to sell their gators.

However, 32 Louisianians who intended to keep their trophies purchased $25 sportsmen's licenses. There also were 32 nonresident sports hunters from as far away as Paris, France. They paid $150. The remaining 15 licenses were issued for miscellaneous purposes such as nuisance control.

The average gator taken measured an even seven feet.

Collectively, the value of the hides was estimated at $3.1 million. Last year, 1,076 license hunters harvested 16,691 alligators and skins were worth $2,482,619.

Lands open to hunting totaled 3.5 million acres, of which 2.5 million acres is spread along the Gulf of Mexico coastline. The other million acres comprised sites throughout Louisiana, including lakes in the northern part of the state.

Three-fourths of the total acreage is owned by private individuals and corporations, and one-fourth is maintained by state and federal government agencies.

Under population and habitat programs conducted by Louisiana's Fur and Refuge Division, the animal continues to gain rapidly in numbers, biologists report, while demand for alligator products is strengthening.

An account of the alligator's growing importance to the economy appears in the November/December issue of the "Louisiana Conservationist," published by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.