Businessman up to his neck in alligators

Steele McAndrew bites off piece of infant La. industry

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VILLE PLATTE — Steele McAndrew of Ville Platte is up to his neck in alligators, and he likes it that way. In fact, his business depends on it. McAndrew raises alligators commercially, selling their hides and meat.

Instead of allowing his animals to roam in a natural habitat, they are kept in a warehouse of wall-to-wall alligators. They are housed in a building maintained at a constant 85 degrees. Alligators in the wild hibernate in cold weather, and hibernating gators don't grow, meaning a longer period before they could be harvested, McAndrew explained.

Also, gators kept inside have better-quality hides because the animals aren't as susceptible to scarring injuries to their skins, he said. They are kept in fiberglass trays, 10 by 10 feet, stacked five high, with larger gators kept on lower levels.

McAndrew said the alligators are limited to a certain number in each tray to prevent stress. If too many are placed in one tray, the animals begin fighting, and they eat less, he said.

Hot water is pumped through piping which runs through the concrete floor to provide warmth on the floor, and every inch of wall and ceiling is insulated to retain warmth during cool weather. Since alligators are nocturnal animals, they prefer no lighting, McAndrew said.

“It’s about as energy efficient as you can make it,” he said. “So really what we’ve got is a capsule here.”

The optimum size for the best skin is in the five-foot range, he said. McAndrew said a farm-raised gator is ready for market in two years, about twice as long as it would take for a gator in the wild.

“It is a very long-term business,” he said, “and very labor intensive. He’s got more than 1,000 adult alligators in one large building and several hundred more of the recently hatched animals in a separate building. In seven months, the newly hatched gators will reach 10 to 30 inches, he said.

But raising gators isn’t easy, he said. Every day, the trays must be rinsed clean of wastes, and the animals require a rigid feeding schedule. Regular repairs must be made on the plumbing and electrical systems.

Alligators grow best on nutria meat, but nutria are harvested only during trapping season, November through February. During the rest of the year, nutria must be stored in a freezer on the farm.

“It’s like a dairy farm, 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” he said. “I don’t think we’re going to be making any money for a few more years, and we’ve already been in it for four years.”

He said unusually good skin prices have helped him keep the business afloat. But he says his family lives a simple life on their eight-acre spread.

“It’s like a dairy farm, 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” he said. “I don’t think we’re going to be making any money for a few more years, and we’ve already been in it for four years.”

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But his unusual livelihood is a handy conversation topic.

“Anywhere my wife and I go, if that comes up we spend the rest of the time talking about it.”

He said friends have showered the alligator town with anything featuring an alligator, towels, ashtrays, mugs.

A film crew for Jacques Cousteau filmed the farm for a feature on Louisiana, but the farm apparently ended up on the cutting-room floor, he said.

Breeding alligators in a leisurely moment at Rockefeller Refuge

He admits it took awhile to become accustomed to being alone in a warehouse and getting stared at by several hundred eyes poised behind gaping mouths. The odor of gator was also something that took time getting used to, he said.

Clothes worn in the gator house are a new experiment with a powerful odor removed only by washing.

McAndrew said he’s used to handling the sharp-toothed reptiles, but he treats each one with respect.

“I don’t take any chances with them,” he said. “Out of a thousand alligators in here, there’s got to be a chance of one of them having the red-ass.”

McAndrew got his start in gator farming with help from the state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, which supplied gator eggs to begin the crop. Now McAndrew has enough breeding alligators to replenish the larger animals he harvests throughout the year.

In the early 1970s, Ted Joanen, state wildlife biologist, started the state’s research into the feasibility of raising alligators commercially. Joanen works at the Rockefeller Refuge in Cameron Parish.

Joanen said he learned in his research that the alligator is an efficient animal. At the younger stages in its life, a gator will grow a pound for every two pounds of feed, he said.

He also discovered that temperature determines an alligator’s sex. The warmer the temperature during incubation, the better the chances are for a male gator to hatch from the egg, he said.

“It took a number of years to nail this thing down,” he said.

Joanen said about three dozen would-be gator farmers have signed a waiting list to receive eggs, but the demand far exceeds current supply. It could be several years before the applicants on the bottom of the list receive eggs, he said.

The state has 13 farmers raising gators now, he said.

But he warned that raising alligators is a new and not yet well-researched area of the aquaculture industry.

“It’s a very long-term business,” he said, “and very labor-intensive.

He said the worldwide market for alligator skin is increasing, and several areas of the United States, besides Louisiana, are showing interest in alligator meat, which is high in protein.

The domestic market consumed 154,000 pounds of gator meat last year, and the demand is getting bigger each year,” Joanen said.

Breeding alligators in a leisurely moment at Rockefeller Refuge

“We’re getting a strong demand from France, Italy, Japan and Singapore (for the meat),” he said.

The meat is sold by farmers and hunters for about $4 per pound, and hides fetch about $25 per foot.

Hides are sold to European buyers for tanning; Joanen doubts that the United States could establish a gator-tanning industry.

“Tanning is a very guarded secret,” he said. “It will probably never be let out.”

Some tanning has been attempted in the United States, but the efforts have failed short of achieving the high gloss known as a Bombay finish, he said.

Americans don’t buy many finished alligator-skin products, with the exception of the western boots, Joanen said.

“We still have this endangered-species stigma that this is a poached skin,” he said. “We have probably fallen down on this more than any part of the program.”

Joanen insists that the alligator was threatened with extinction in Louisiana, although the animal was protected from hunting nationwide in the early 1970s by federal Endangered Species Act.

“We never for one day believed that they were endangered in Louisiana,” he said.

It wasn’t until 1974 that the state was able to prove to federal authorities that the alligator was not endangered in the Bayou State.

“We had more gators than we knew what to do with, and there was no way we could keep them,” he recalled. “The Lake Charles airport had to shut down once because they had alligators on the landing strip.”

Louisiana hunters kill only 5 percent of the wild alligator population each year, Joanen said, yet the overall population continues to increase by 5 to 10 percent.

As crocodile populations continue to dwindle, he said, Louisiana gator farmers have an opportunity to tap an expanding market.

About 17,000 gators are taken in the wild annually, and approximately 4,000 domestically raised gators are harvested each year, Joanen said.

The farm harvest could equal the wild harvest in 10 to 15 years, he said.

Steele McAndrew discusses commercial alligator production

A worker holds a baby alligator