Crabber ‘nets’ industry breakthrough

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LACOMBE — "I wanted to get out of that lake," said crabber Cultus Pearson. He did it by creating the state’s first commercial closed recirculating holding tanks for crabs.

Pearson’s first tanks held blue crabs caught in Lake Pontchartrain until they molt and temporarily become soft-shelled crabs, which are considered a delicacy and sell for higher prices.

"I'd been working in the lake the conventional way," he said recently. "I was researching a way to get out of the lake, and five or six years ago I went to Gulf South Research Institute in Baton Rouge. Harriet Perry told me about biological filters for fish tanks, and I came back and built one.

"It worked really well, and in appreciation for her helping me get started, I allowed her to document my system and publish it.

"Interest was aroused in Louisiana, and I built some bigger systems, and the Sea Grant Program at LSU took over and monitored the water daily," Pearson said. "This year the LSU project is to determine if they can improve on the filter and see if they can carry more crabs than I do."

LSU professor Ron Malone credits Pearson with showing how a holding-tank operation can be done. He and assistants have a model of the tanks and filtering system set up at LSU for study.

The system is basically simple, Malone said recently. It consists of a fiberglass tank for holding the crabs, a sump as a reservoir of extra water, a pump to circulate the water, and a filter.

LSU and Mississippi sea grant programs hold annual seminars for crab fishermen at Lacombe. Pearson’s place is one of the stopping points. Response to the seminars has been good, Malone said.

"But that is not surprising when you look at the difference in cost between soft crabs and hard crabs.

Recently, a Baton Rouge seafood market quoted a retail price of $5.50 for live hard-shell crabs, while soft-shell crabs cost $4.49 for two or $5 to $30 a dozen.

"Crabs shed better where they’re comfortable," Pearson said. "When they’re in a box tied out in the lake and the water comes up it can bounce them around and kill them. And when they shed in here there’s no grit in their gills."

Pearson, an LSU forestry graduate, said he went into the service-station business to support his family. He said he was introduced to crabbing while in high school to earn spending money.

"About 12 years ago I hired someone to work in the service station and went to crabbing full time," he said. "I run 400 crab pots a day. Every time I lift one up there’s that anticipation of what’s going to be in it.

"He said he or a crew member select crabs that are within 14 days of molting for his 24 soft-shell tanks. The fiberglass tanks hold 100 crabs each.

"Crabs with a white line near the fringe of the second lobe of their flippers are placed in the top level of his two tiers of tanks. They are called "white-line" or "green" crabs and have to be kept away from soft-shell crabs, which they will eat, Pearson said.

"About four days before molting, the lines on the flipper lobes turn reddish in color, he said.

"These can be grouped together because when they reach the red-line stage they won’t eat anything," he said. "The unique thing about this is that you don’t need live boxes in the water. You can be any distance from the water because you make your own salt water."

Pearson said a crab increases in weight by 100 percent and in measurement from 23 to 33 percent every time it discards its shell. It takes about 24 hours for a soft shell to become hard. He said crabs nearing the soft-shell stage make up about 5 percent of his catch.

"You don’t go out to catch the ones about to molt. It’s just an incidental catch, but the soft-shells bring me about the same amount of my profit as the hard-shells," he said.

LSU professor Ron Malone and graduate student Don Manthe check crabs ready to shed their hard shells.