Crawfish Farmers Have Bright Future Ahead

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Ask a Cajun what his three favorite things are and one of the trio named will surely be crawfish. Ever since that eventful day when the first crawfish was boiled and consumed, residents of Acadiana have been driven by a delicious passion to enjoy as much bisque, etouffee, casserole, fried and boiled crawfish as possible.

Most of the crawfish which find their way to the tables of restaurants and homes in Louisiana have come from the Atchafalaya Basin. But, says USL research specialist Don Gooch, this may not be the case in the future.

"For as long as anyone can remember around here, the basin has meant crawfish. But, with the changes brought about by man, the quantity of crawfish brought out of the swamp will some day be equalled, if not surpassed, by crawfish produced from ponds," Gooch points out.

For some years now the USL professor and crawfish expert has diligently directed his efforts toward improving all aspects of crawfish pond farming.

Gooch sees pond farming as the "savior of the multi-million dollar crawfish industry in Louisiana."

"There are so many things in the basin that we just can't control," he points out. "As a result, the harvests in the basin are never consistent from year to year."

"Any one who has an understanding of marketing knows that if a product is to be successful, it must be available on a consistent basis. This is next to impossible in the basin. But, if a pond is well managed a farmer will be able to forecast his annual harvest accurately and consistently."

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The idea of producing crawfish aqua-agriculturally has advanced to the point where it is beginning to be more profitable to grow crawfish than soybeans.

Gooch says that in the last five years more farmers have taken the time to seek education in crawfish farming techniques.

"Since we began offering a crawfish farming course at USL, several of the students from these classes have devised farming techniques which have greatly advanced the pond farming industry."

"The boat method of harvesting pond crawfish is considered a revolutionary breakthrough in the industry. This innovation originated at USL and is now standard procedure on most large, open ponds," Gooch explains.

According to Gooch, farmers would be surprised to find out how little initial investment it takes to get a pond in operation. With the price of beans on the decline and the price of tractors and chemicals skyrocketing, Gooch has a valid point.

What kept farmers from turning to crawfish at first were the risks involved in maintaining the ponds. However, the risks were not so much the issue as was the hesitance stemming from a lack of education.

"In the last five years education has played a major role in getting the pond farming crawfish industry off the ground," says Gooch.

"Today, a well managed pond can produce on the average of 400-600 pounds of crawfish per acre.

At an average price of 60 cents per pound, that comes out to a pretty penny per acre," the USL prof points out.

The 1980 crawfish season is a good example of the important role played by the ponds. Without the supply brought to the market place by crawfish farmers this season, Cajuns would have had fewer of the crustaceans to eat.

Why? Because the usual crop from the basin is late and if conditions don't improve, the swamp crop will be below the average Cajuns are accustomed to. "Seasons like this are great for farmers," Gooch says. "With the basin the way it is, dealers have had to rely heavily on pond crawfish."

The USL researcher can see only good things happening in the pond farming industry.

"We are a long way from where we want to be concerning pond farming. But with the strides we've been able to make the last five years, I'd say that the future of farming crawfish is very bright," says Gooch.

Acadiana hopes that Don Gooch is right. If there's one thing a Cajun can always use more of, it's ecrevisses.