Crawfish honored

Louisiana leads crawfish production in the United States and the world with an annual harvest of over 50 million metric tons, live weight. The harvest involves some 100,000 acres of cultured ponds and another 150,000 acres of wild waterways. Yet only about one-third of the land suited to crawfish farming is presently being used for that purpose.

"The key to the future of the crawfish industry in Louisiana is the organization of producers and processors," declared A. P. (Rusty) Gaude, director of crawfish research at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. "If the industry is to grow, we need more integration of processing with production. We have to see the stabilization of price and supply if major markets are to be developed. But the potential for expansion is enormous."

Gaude and his wife Gaywynn are co-curators of a major exhibit on crawfish currently open to the public at the Lafayette Natural History Museum, 637 Girard Park Dr. The exhibit examines the biology and cultural history of the animal, as well as the multi-million dollar industry that has grown up around it in Louisiana.

A major expansion of crawfish farming in the 1970s has poised the industry for further growth. A national infatuation with the crawfish, as well as all things Cajun, would seem to make the timing right. Last year Bennigan's signed a major contract with crawfish suppliers and put the South Louisiana delicacy on its national menu.

But problems with reliable supplies and predictable prices threaten such major restaurant deals. There are other difficulties as well, including the perishability of crawfish tail meat and low meat yield of the individual animal.

New methods for reclaiming crawfish waste and commercial applications for byproducts may be a boost to the industry. The peeling process leaves the shell, muscle, and body organs of the crawfish. From these waste products an animal food, a pigment agent, and a chitin for pharmaceutical use can be made.

The red pigment derived from crawfish shells is used as a dietary supplement to both fish and poultry feeds. Crawfish pigment currently sells for about $20 per ounce. "The industry is not insignificant now, but the potential is enormous," he says.

"If they play it right, it could become as big as catfish for Mississippi — or bigger." Startup time for a crawfish farm in a single year. Yet Gaude warns that crawfish farming is "deceptively easy."

"If you take a pond and add a few crawfish, you'll always have crawfish. It's hard to get rid of them," he says.

"But it's not easy to get commercial quality and quantity and timing. It's hard to make a living at it."