Exhibit features fact, fiction about alligators

By Becky Tillson
Staff Writer

NEW IBERIA — From curative oil to man-eating maniac, alligator lore has inspired an exhibit in New Iberia from the Louisiana State Museum.

“The Earth Trembles With His Thunder: A Social History of the American Alligator” will feature the reptile as “urban myth, mascot, monster, memento and mun-chie,” according to exhibit coordinators.

The show, featuring live baby alligators, opens today at the Main Library in the New Iberia Civic Center and will be open to the public until April 15, during regular library hours.

An opening reception, complete with both living and cooked alligators, is scheduled for 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. today at the library.

The exhibit consists of historic images, artifacts and memorabilia that tell the reptile’s story from the time of his discovery until the 1990s.

“The Mythological Alligator” examines how European explorers transferred the legend of the Nile crocodile to the newly discovered species.

Later observers attributed it with curative powers — alligator oil was supposed to cure rheumatism.

“The Scientific Alligator” traces the age of study, classification and illustration that in 1803 separated the alligator from the crocodile and gave it its current scientific name, Alligator Mississippiensis.

More recent studies have revealed the alligator to be one of our most successful life forms whose ancestors (along with the cockroach) can be traced back some 200 million years to the fossil records of dinosaurs.

“The Useful Alligator” shows how alligator oil was used in 18th Century indigo refining, how hollow alligator teeth were used as hunters’ powder chargers and how silver-mounted alligator teeth were given to Louisiana infants as pacifiers in antebellum days.

At the exhibit, viewers can also learn the story of tanning alligator hides — early experiments failed and the first boots leaked.

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““There is no denying the obsession of tourists and children with the alligators of Louisiana,” according to Carla Hostetter, Iberia Parish Library director.

“This exhibit could teach even the experienced swamp dweller a thing or two about the beast,” she said.

Vaughn L. Glasgow, director of special projects for the Louisiana State Museum, created the travelling exhibit that is locally sponsored by the Friends of the Iberia Library and the Iberia Parish Library.

The display opened in New Orleans and also was featured in Shreveport, before arriving in Iberia.

For more information, call the library at 373-0075.