FINDING GOLD IN GATORS

Both culturally and economically, alligators are becoming the latest boon to rise out of Louisiana's bayous.

By Tina Marie Macias

The horned backs and smooth bellies of at least 600 alligator skins line the floor-to-ceiling shelves at Mark Staton's workshop. Their olive and creamy white hides have been dyed vibrant shades of pink, blue and purple. The reptile scales have been buffed to a high gloss or matte finish, ready to be transformed into handbags, belts, sandal straps and other trendy merchandise.

For more than 200 years, these fierce predators of the south Louisiana swamps have been the prized catch of hunters who have helped supply the upscale fashion industry.

"Alligator is a luxury item, and a lot of the designers are able to price products far beyond the value of the skin," said Staton, owner of Mark Staton Co. on Lafayette's southwest side.

Businesses like Staton's — a supplier and small manufacturer of alligator leather — are part of the luxury garment industry in Louisiana that begins with the 30-day alligator hunt in September. After the kill, the gators are

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Source: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

Tourist Otto Ritter captured this alligator in a swamp near Gueydan, Sept 11. The Louisiana Seafood Promotion & Marketing Board estimated the total economic impact of the alligator harvest at $104 million per year. PAUL KIEL/THEDAILYADVERTISER

Workers at Vermilion Gator Farms measure an alligator before processing. Skins will bring $23 or $24 a foot this year, according to the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. The price was $13 two years ago. BY PAUL KIEL/THEDAILYADVERTISER

Louisiana supplies an estimated 75 percent of American alligator leather used worldwide for luxury goods, such as this alligator-skin belt with a covered buckle, made by the Mark Stanton Co. in Lafayette. LESLIE WESTBROOK/THEDAILYADVERTISER.
Gators

Workers at Vermilion Gator Farms in Abbeville measure an alligator before processing it Sept. 17. [PUBLIKIEU, THEDAILYADVERTISER PHOTOS]

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Business of alligator hunting changes with popularity of television shows

Tutwiler, a Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries employee, said, "I was so inferior."

I am where the

null and stained at a processor, fixed and driven at a tannery, and traveled through multiple dealers and designers. The journey of the Louisiana alligator hide begins with a $28,928,900 customer's visit to the showroom and then off to intermediate and final market, heading to a high-end designer's show.

It's an industry that is "local, local, local," as Katie Tutwiler, a Louisianan from West Virginia, explained: "Here I am where the American alligator is on a-stick."

Reggie Little of Opeoula's south Louisiana Gator Farm said, "For a long time, the money's end could come as quickly as $400 belt or a $100,000 gator leather detail, can be on the upswing, in part, because "Swamp People" is just one way Little and other hunters make a living, and perhaps a good one, too." He explained that his gator hunting business has been good because of the popularity of Shows like the History Channel's "Swamp People." Little gets more gators, sells more gators, but he also dealt with the effects of a rise in people hunting illegally.

A changing business

The Gator and Peterson families wanted to diversify for different reasons. Peterson, who was just 20 when "Swamp People" premiered, explained that his family's business is based on "a summer vacation trip. When Peterson's wife wanted to diversify, that's the introduction to a new television. He now makes a living on the basis of Wildlife and Fisheries and then off to intermediate market," she said. "The big money's end could come as quickly as $400 belt or a $100,000 gator leather detail, can be on the upswing, in part, because "Swamp People" is just one way Little and other hunters make a living, and perhaps a good one, too." He explained that his gator hunting business has been good because of the popularity of Shows like the History Channel's "Swamp People." Little gets more gators, sells more gators, but he also dealt with the effects of a rise in people hunting illegally.

Alligators, like the ones in this photo, are a major part of Louisiana's wildlife and tourism industry. The state's economy, which has begun to turn around, is due in part to the health of the alligator population.

As much as 80 percent of the world's alligator hides are exported and sold at a tannery, and travel through multiple dealers and designers. The journey of the Louisiana alligator hide begins with a customer's visit to the showroom and then off to intermediate and final market, heading to a high-end designer's show.

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