Harvesting season keeps population under control, generates millions

Every September, hunters and trappers flock to the marshes, swamps and bayous of Louisiana in the hopes of landing a creature that has become synonymous with the state: The Louisiana alligator.

The hunting tradition, handed down from generations past, has become an industry worth millions of dollars to the state.

According to the LSU Agricultural Center, last year 3,063 wild alligators produced more than 240,000 linear feet of hides, worth an estimated total value of $8,182,598 to the state.

This year, that figure will be higher.

Ruth Elsey, a wildlife biologist for Rockefeller National Wildlife Refuge, said the state issued 85,192 tags this year to alligator hunters.

"This year, people were buying 7-foot gators, you know the whole carcass, for anywhere from $20 to $22 per foot, compared to last year when it was $13 per foot," she said.

More than 30,000 alligators killed last year may sound like a lot, until you consider that there are an estimated 1 million wild alligators in the state.

"We first started doing surveys in 1970 and started having harvests in 1972," Elsey said. "This year was our second best year ever in terms of nesting and population size."

From marsh to market, the alligator will move...

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“It’s a pretty good business, but it cost a lot of money to get into it. It’s not all fun, though. It’s a lot of work. It’s every day. Every day except on Sunday. Our one day off is on Sunday.”

Raywood Stelly
Owner of Cajun Gator Farms

“...we have traveled across the world before it ends up on a plate, or as a designer purse, or as a pair of boots, the book stated.

One of those hands belongs to Ricky Canik.

Canik, one of more than 2,000 hunters and trappers who requested tags this year, has hunted alligators every September since the season began in 1972. It’s a family tradition, he said.

“My father and grandfathers and all of them. It’s just kind of like a family deal,” he said. “They always did hunt and trap and fish and everything.”

The money Canik makes from the harvests will go toward buying boats, boat motors and other things that help to keep him out on the water.

“We got $22 a foot this year, which is not too bad. If you got a 7-foot gator, that’s $140-plus.”

Ricky Canik
One of 2,000 hunters and trappers who requested tags this year.