On Marsh Island, they are up to their you know whats in alligators. So the Wildlife and Fisheries Department has authorized a limited hunt to take about 2,500-3,000 of the estimated 40,000 gators on the 80,000 acre barrier island. That's just more evidence of the dramatic comeback of the reptile which was declared an endangered species in the early 1970s. Annually some 1,100 Louisiana hunters are adding nicely to their winter income with sales of hides and meat from the tens of thousands of alligators killed each year in Louisiana.

But now state Agriculture Department officials are pushing to bring the alligator industry to a new level in the state. Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom has been courting representatives of the Italian leather industry who are eyeing the possibility of constructing a tanning plant in coastal Louisiana. Such a facility would turn hides into handbags, belts and shoes for fashionplates throughout the world.

The Odom initiative is in line with the general thrust of economic development activity in Louisiana today—to add value to our natural resources here, through manufacturing, rather than shipping them off to other states or countries to be processed. But there are still some tough marketing and production equations for foreign companies to balance before they'll be putting out the gator bait here.

Scoping out the landscape in Louisiana are representatives of Dalmar International Tanning of Milan, Italy and Italerettile Tanning of Cremona, Italy. Dalmar officials met last week with Odom, officials of LSU and the Wildlife and Fisheries Department and representatives from five industrial parks in coastal Louisiana. The other company will be here later this month.

Why the necessity of Italian involvement? It has to do with expertise. The process of turning alligator hides into high fashion items is a closely-guarded secret understood by only a handful of companies in Italy, as well as France and Japan. State officials are hoping to marry that knowledge with our natural resources. "We don't have the tanning expertise. We do have the aquaculture expertise," says Larry Michaud, spokesman for the Department of Agriculture.

The biggest concern of Dalmar officials at the present time is whether there is an adequate harvest of hides in the state to provide enough raw material for a tannery, says Michaud. State hunters are currently capturing 16,000 alligators per season, while the state's 13 alligator farms are producing an additional 5,000 hides, says Michaud. "We have enough for one good-sized [tannery] now," says Michaud. "We have enough for the beginnings of one."

But the head of the Wildlife and Fisheries' alligator research program is not so optimistic. Ted Joannen, a biologist based at the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge in Cameron Parish, contends that European tanneries generally process from 5,000 to 10,000 skins per month—considerably more than our annual output.

Alligators caught in Texas, Florida and other coastal states could increase the amount of raw material available here, but Joannen feels that there are real marketing obstacles that must be overcome before a tannery is located here. "I don't really see it, because the consumers are not here," he says. "Most of the skins go to Europe, are tanned in Europe and consumed in Europe."

When alligators earned a spot on the endangered species list in 1973—unjustifiably, state officials thought—self-respecting environmentalists in this country deemed it poor taste to wear or carry items made from their hides. And Joannen contends that the resistance is still there, even though the alligator is now off the list.

But Michaud disputes that observation. Yesterday's eco-freak is today's Yuppie. And women who wouldn't have been caught dead wearing the skin of a dead animal a decade ago today shop for furs, he observes.

Still, tannery or no tannery, Joa-
nen feels that the alligator can play an important role in the economy of the state. Last year hunters earned an estimated $4 million from the sale of hides and about $500,000 from alligator meat, which is receiving increased acceptance in the marketplace.

And the current harvest on Marsh Island is allowing biologists like Joannen to study in greater depth the reproductive habits of the alligator. That could lead to a switch in the alligator season from its traditional fall date to a spring one, which he says hunters would prefer.

In the end, says Joannen, the future health of the species depends on its economic value to individuals who own alligator habitat. “The only way to manage the resource is as a renewable resource,” he says. “By demonstrating that this is a renewable resource, [landowners] can afford to spend money on management.”

And consumer interest in the alligator as a product is also important for its continuation. In fact, suggests Joannen, bleeding heart environmentalists could advance their cause more successfully by promoting the sale of alligator items rather than evincing horror at the idea. Says Joannen, “If you want to save the alligator, buy a handbag.”

—RICHARD BAUDOIN

**Ragin’ at Cajuns**

- Adofo Harmon and Takuna Dixon are two men swimming against a rather strong tide. As the moving forces behind the Un-cajun Committee, the two local businessmen are fighting the use of the word Cajun to designate all residents of this region, whether they are of that ancestry or not. They take particular umbrage against the identification of blacks as Cajuns. Their slogan: “Cajun, it just ain’t us.”

Since its organization in 1982, the committee has struck out against the Ragin Cajun moniker for USL athletic teams, the naming of the Lafayette civic center as the Cajun-dome and most recently the awarding of an “Honorary Cajun” certificate to a black guest of city government. Now their battle is taking a new offensive with the release of the Un-cajun rap, a recording which expresses lyrically the group’s...