Back to nature
Gator release program aids farms, environment

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LAKE ARTHUR — Can Louisiana develop new industry and secure the safety of the environment at the same time? Department of Wildlife and Fisheries agent Ted Joanen thinks so — he heads a program that's working to achieve both aims.

"We're doing what Mother Nature would do," he comments. The program manages and monitors alligator population throughout the state while contributing to the young but growing alligator farm industry.

Three years ago, there were 13 alligator farms in the state. Today, there are 92 farms housing 225,000 alligators, Joanen says.

The industry is turning into a lucrative one with hides bringing $35 a linear foot and demand for the exotic meat increasing. This year, Joanen adds, the sale of alligator skins will bring in $10 million and the farmers will sell 1 million pounds of meat.

Although the numbers are still relatively small, the industry is going nowhere but up. And the DWF program is helping by returning a portion of farm-grown alligators to their natural habitat.

One such project was conducted last week in the marshy areas along Lake Arthur. But Joanen, other agents and the farmers will work through the summer.

"It is expanding," Joanen comments. "The state is monitoring the expansion of the industry because we are utilizing the maximum of resources."

Department of Wildlife and Fisheries agents Ted Joanen tosses young alligators back into their natural habitat while fellow agent David Richard helps him tag the creature. The release program replenishes Louisiana's alligator population while allowing the rest — which studies show would die in the wild — to help cultivate the infant alligator farm industry.

Photos by P.C. Piazza
The process begins when farmers accompanied by a DWF agent collect all the alligator eggs on a specified area of land. The landowner receives a collection fee for the eggs. Indirectly, the income goes to stem coastal erosion and preserve Louisiana's wildlife, Joanen says.

"This gives the owner a return for his land and offsets expenses, ensuring that the land will stay in a wetland state," he says.

The farmer brings the eggs back to his hatchery. The buildings and cages are hothouses, kept at high temperatures to allow maximum growth.

Alligators, like all reptiles, are slow-growing creatures, Joanen explains. In the wild, the animals hibernate. The growing period is shorter and it would take \( \frac{4}{2} \) years for a gator to grow 4 feet long.

In the optimum conditions of the hatchery, where the alligator grows 12 months of the year, it takes \( 1 \frac{1}{2} \) years.

However, the most important number of the program is a percentage — 17 percent.

"Alligators have a high natural mortality rate," Joanen says. "Studies show the population loss is up to 83 percent before they reach 4 feet."

Predators include raccoons, otters, hurricanes, even other alligators. If alligators were left to their own devices, 17 percent would live.

But when an alligator is 4 feet, he is big and strong enough to offset his enemies. Since all the eggs are collected, the farmers and DWF agents replenish the population by releasing 17 percent of all farm-grown alligators.

The alligators are returned to the land where the eggs were collected or released into areas of low alligator population.

An unexpected benefit of the program is the population growth — about 5 to 10 percent a year. And as the population grows, so can Louisiana's alligator farms.