Harvesting beloved red swamp crawfish

By Kenneth C. Danforth
National Geographic News Service
CYPRESS ISLAND—"You scared of gettin' wet, you leave da crawfish alone!" hollered Ralph Daigle.

Daigle wriited out of his chest-high rubber waders and splashed a quart of cold, muddy water out onto the levee. He had to holler, if he wanted to be heard. He was harvesting crawfish in the eye of Hurricane Juan, and the outer swath of the hurricane was getting close.

The sentence was a rare one for Daigle: It was all English. If he hadn't been talking to one whose antecedents were Anglo-Saxon, Daigle would have been spouting French to match the 80-mp velocity of the hurricane.

The out-of-season harvest of crawfish, which academics and bureaucrats in South Louisiana unblushingly call the "delectable crustacean," continued, because demand never flags. If the 90 farmers of St. Martin Parish can get their contract fishermen to wade out into the parish's 20,000 acres of wind-whipped crawfish ponds, the gourmet restaurants of Acadiana will eagerly buy out their catch.

This is Evangeline Country, where great waterways such as the Atchafalaya River and Bayou Teche and the surrounding swamplands became home to the French Acadians whom the English drove out of Nova Scotia in 1755. No food is more typical of the "Cajuns" than their swamp-loving "creevisse," the truly lowly and absolutely delicious crawfish, a.k.a. crayfish, crawdad, creekcrab, and mudbug.

What you eat is the tail, mainly, although Cajun cooks prize the "fat," which is really the hepatopancreas, an organ in the head. At country crawfish boils, where a man will work through 10 to 15 pounds of crawfish, he will first suck out the fat; only then will he crack open the tail.

A recitation of renowned crawfish dishes can sound like a litany, with the Cajun chef-priests standing at a hot altar, calling to their faithful: Crawfish pie, etouffee, bisque, gumbo, jambalaya, and tails eaten just boiled, soaked in rum and lime, or deep-fried in crispy batter and served up as "Cajun popcorn."

The tail is only 15 percent of the little creature's total weight. This might seem impractical in a cow or a catfish, but from a farmer's point of view the crawfish is about as efficient as livestock get. Crawfish-farming dovetails beautifully with traditional agriculture, and can be double-cropped easily with rice.

Nature Cooperates

With a three-foot levee, a pump, an aerating machine, a flat-bottomed pirogue, and a willingness to get awfully wet, a landowner can even grow crawfish on land that once had been used for sugar cane and soybeans. Basically, he allows a crop of waterweeds to become established and remain year after year. For crawfish, the weeds are the perfect host: They don't have to be cultivated.

Of the 300 or so species of crawfish in the world, 29 of the tastiest thrive in Louisiana—mainly in the alligator-weed shallows of the Atchafalaya Basin. Of these, two species are cultivated. Procambarus clarki, the red swamp crawfish, is the most prized, with Procambarus acutus acutus, the white river crawfish, running second. The red swamp variety, which is larger, accounts for 90 percent of the crop.

Louisiana farmers collect crawfish from some 120,000 acres of ponds, most of which are suitable for rice, a combination that can keep the acreage productive year-round. Crawfish are Louisiana's number-one freshwater aquaculture product, with catfish a sluggish second at 5,000 acres.

The annual crop of cultivated crawfish is worth almost $65 million. Nobody knows the tonnage or value of crawfish taken from bayous, swamps, and roadside ditches by nature's lagniappe.

Relatively few crawfish find their way out of their natal precincts. Louisianans engorge 85 percent of them right at home, and Cajun-influenced neighbors in adjacent states devour 10 percent. More remote Americans pick at the remaining 5 percent.

Daigle traps crawfish for Russell J. Huval, who's been a crawfish farmer for 10 years. Huval, a robust Cajun who calls himself a "Coonie," says, "My income is all from crawfish. I got 100 acres of ponds. But I'm a small farmer. Some of the men in St. Martin Parish, they got 2,000 acres."

Running The Traps

In spite of the word "farm," which connotes the possibility of mechanical harvest, farm-raised crawfish must nonetheless be trapped. About 60 percent of a farmer's operating costs go into the labor-intensive running of the crawfish traps, says Larry de la Bretonne Jr., aquaculture specialist

(Continued on Page 16-A)
Crawfish

with Louisiana State University.

Daigle must work very hard both to bait and to empty the wire traps, which are submerged in the mucky shallows. In an unromantic intimacy with nature, he wades beside his pirogue, forcing his way through the thick aquatic vegetation and straining at each step to free his feet from the ingurgitating mud.

Huval himself uses an impressive contraption called a “crawfish combine”—a shallow-draft aluminum boat equipped with a big iron wheel that rotates on a heavy boom at the end of the boat. It doesn’t matter which end, for an efficacious feature of the wheel is its ability to pull or push the boat across the pond or even up onto the levee. Ridges on the wheel churn right through the blackjack mud, and it scorns the thick alligator weeds or water primroses that would truss up any propeller.

This means of aquatic locomotion is unique to the Cajun crawfish industry.

Thomas Hymel, the LSU fisheries agent for St. Martin and Iberia parishes, routinely calls on Huval and the other crawfish farmers of his area. On the day that Hurricane Juan whooshed across Huval’s ponds, Humel was visiting him in spite of high winds and flooded roads. When word came that Daigle had got stuck on the levee, Hymel, wearing kneeboots as part of his standard kit, went with Huval to help. They hauled the truck out of the mud, and Daigle hopped back into the pond to run more traps.

Similar scenes are played out all over southern Louisiana.

Hymel might have been speaking of these tough fishermen when he said, “Crawfish are very rugged and adaptable to changes in conditions. They were built to live in the swamp. Their life cycle is built around flood and drought.”

Loves His Work

Amiably beaming down on the whole crawfish empire from Baton Rouge is de la Bretonne, a dedicated gourmet who has spent 20 years learning everything he can about crawfish, preferably just before, just after, or while devouring a pile of them. (“You don’t suck the fat out of the head, they take away your birth certificate,” he avows.) He enthusiastically advises farmers, merchants, and consumers all over Louisiana and in neighboring states.

“When we talk about crawfish,” says de la Bretonne, “the exciting thing is that it is a product that’s been uniquely South Louisiana. But now we’re seeing a tremendous spread of interest: This Cajun-cooking things has caught on all over the country. So right now we’re in a bind for crawfish. We just sold everything that we could produce.”

But as Huval, down in his pond, laughing, straining to get his crawfish combine hitched back to his truck, said, “Just stand back and watch us Coonies in action!”