Louisiana plays catch-up in aquaculture

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Louisiana people have taken food from the water since time before memory, but crawfish and catfish — not to mention shrimp, oysters and crab — have taken on huge economic importance today.

Growing and harvesting these foods is now called aquaculture. As agriculture means farming the land, so aquaculture means farming the water.

Both are important in Louisiana, and the two can mix. Rice farmers flood fields after harvest and raise crawfish in the stubble during the winter; other farmers can use waterlogged land unfit for row crops for ponds to raise catfish.

A man who speaks fluently and enthusiastically about aquaculture and its value and potential for Louisiana is Larry de la Bretone Jr. A south Louisiana native, de la Bretone specializes in crawfish for the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

“We have seven and a half million acres of marsh in this state. We’ve always been a people of plenty. We have everything in Louisiana,” de la Bretone said recently.

“We’re just such a productive state that people took it for granted,” he said.

Taking the abundance for granted led to problems that today are working against the land of plenty. He mentioned saltwater intrusion into freshwater zones; draining the swamps, water pollution; and the loss of marshlands.

Each of these factors has had an impact on the natural fisheries of Louisiana, he said.

But these factors are also among reasons leading Louisiana — and the world — into aquaculture, he believes.

“We’re at the point now we have to do something,” he said.

“Our commercial fisheries are at their maximum sustainable yields” — he is speaking of the situation worldwide.

Enter aquaculture, in which seafood is cultivated.

He compares the raising of catfish in ponds to the raising of chickens in broiler houses.

That has happened in Mississippi, and it is beginning to happen in Louisiana.

Besides large-scale crawfish farming and crabbing in Louisiana, spinoff enterprises of raising soft-shell crab and soft-shell crawfish have developed rapidly.

Along with aquaculture have come related industries — bait and feed makers, equipment manufacturers, processing.

Mississippi farmers, working mainly through cooperatives, have turned the channel catfish into a prime food industry, and catfish-raising is spreading across the South.

Gary Jensen, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service’s catfish specialist, said the total amount of catfish processed in the South in 1988 will exceed the 1987 record of 280 million pounds. And the market continues to expand, he said.

Louisiana is playing catch-up in catfish business. It seems to be moving fast.

Jensen said Louisiana had 9,000 acres

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of constructed catfish ponds in 1988. In 1994, there were about 1,000 ponds in commercial production.

“We’re seeing the strengthening of the infrastructure to support the industry that has been lacking until now,” he said recently.

The industry is building feed mills and processing and manufacturing equipment for catfish-farming.

“We have farmers cooperating by providing custom harvesting and live fish-hauling services,” he added.

What that means is that small producers do not have to invest in buying specialized harvesting equipment or trucks to move fish.

They can contract services to others.

Besides the established fish and seafood sellers, Louisiana researchers and producers are trying other aquaculture prospects — bait minnows, redfish and hybrid striped bass, for example.

Alligator-farming has caught on in recent years, primarily for the hides, but the meat is also used.

Aquaculture has moved into the mainstream of LSU research, and in the face of severe cutbacks in state funding, Dr. Paul Rouse, chancellor of the LSU Agricultural Center, has said aquaculture will be spared. He told a meeting of soft-shell crab producers last year:

“We’re not cutting the aquaculture budget. Why? Because aquaculture is the coming thing in the state of Louisiana.”

Center official Bill Brown said the bulk of $600,000 the center received from the Louisiana Education Quality Support Fund (the “94” fund) went to aquaculture. It helped pay for the preparation and production of 13 publications, seven videotapes and management software for seafood processors, over 14 months of work. The publications were not for a single audience, but are useful to a number of different interests, Brown said.

Jensen and de la Bretonne say Louisiana has what it takes for aquaculture — the right kind of soils, a good climate and the water.

Growing fish and crawfish and crawfish in captivity allows control of production rather than depending on the natural cycles, de la Bretonne said.

Louisiana’s 163,000 acres of catfish ponds have stretched the crawfish season, and raising catfish in ponds means the producer is not dependent on

high and low water periods, he said.

Farming crawfish also means more to sell outside Louisiana.

At one time, Louisiana produced 99 percent of the crawfish, and Louisianans ate almost all of them, he said. Louisianans are still big crawfish-eaters, but today there is some for shipping out of state, even to foreign countries.

Louisiana has 600 soft-shell crab producers and 150 soft-shell crawfish producers, he said.

“IT is the consumer who is driving the need for seafood and for having seafood when they want it,” de la Bretonne said.

But Louisiana still needs some work in marketing. Louisiana produces an excellent product, de la Bretonne said, but the growing, processing and selling are always separate enterprises.

Marketing means selling and creating new markets to be filled.

Sewage pollution has closed 30 percent of Louisiana’s oyster beds, though depletion, or closing, the oysters in a facility is being tried, he said.

In seafood, “the shrimp industry is king, the Cadillac, the premier operation,” de la Bretonne said. “We had an unbelievable demand for our shrimp when they came in in May and again in August.”

But in the last 10 years, he said, shrimp grown in ponds in Bolivia have taken over the shrimp market. Growing in ponds allows the shrimp to be frozen quickly, and individually, providing just what a restaurant wants, he said.

De la Bretonne sees a future of growth for Louisiana aquaculture.

“I think we’ve seen changes to where people are putting their money into high value-added production,” he said.

Other places put money into processing while Louisiana puts its money into oil and gas, he said. But he believes that is now changing in Louisiana.

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