Nutria, trapped in the swamps of Louisiana, are a main ingredient of dog biscuits made by Marsh Dog in Baton Rouge. The business was started with help from a grant from the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, which helps fund creative ideas to help curb the nutria population in Louisiana's fragile wetlands. Nutria are an invasive species that gnaw root systems of marsh vegetation, which causes plants to die and contributes to coastal erosion.

Company uses nutria for dog biscuits

BY SKIP DESCANT

Advocate business writer

If an animal is eating its way through thousands of acres of marsh, wouldn't the obvious solution be to turn it into dog food?

That's pretty much the conclusion arrived at by the makers of Marsh Dog, a gourmet line of dog biscuits made from nutria. Marsh Dog is locally produced and sold in numerous pet care outlets in Baton Rouge and New Orleans to a growing number of devotees.

"People like that it's all-natural and has no preservatives, and, of course, that it's made locally," said J.T. Hackett, a manager at Peta Plaza, a Baton Rouge pet boarding, spa and retail shop.

"And he loves them," Hackett said, pointing to Tucker, a well-mannered and docile blond Labrador and Great Dane mix sitting at her feet.

The Marsh Dog idea was born last year when owners Veni Harlan and her brother, Hansel Harlan, were awarded a $7,022 grant by the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, which helps fund creative ideas to help curb the nutria population in Louisiana's fragile wetlands. The animals are an invasive species native to South America.

In Louisiana's marsh, nutria are known to gnaw the roots of marsh vegetation, causing the plants to die, which then contributes to coastal erosion.

"We both cook for our dogs," said Veni Harlan. "We've both been involved with dogs all our life."

"I show dogs," she added, noting she's also worked in animal rescue and animal fostering. "So, we're just animal people."

The Marsh Dog treats are made predominately from nutria hunted and trapped in the state's coastal areas. Trappers there are able to participate in the state's Coastwide Nutria Control Program, which pays trappers $5 per nutria for each tail they bring out of the marsh.

The program is federally funded and managed by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Trappers also have the option of selling the animals to companies like Marsh Dog and others. For example, some nutria become hats, messenger bags, purses and other accessories and garments produced by New Orleans-based Righteous Fur, another commercial idea with a distinct mission to stem wetlands loss.

The goal is to shrink the nutria population in south Louisiana by 40,000 animals a year, said Edmond Mouton, nutria control program manager for the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

The Marsh Dog biscuits may turn out to be a stroke of genius as pet care products seem to be one of the few recession-proof industries and savvy, smart shoppers increasingly drift toward natural, locally produced foods — especially those offering the added cachet of stemming the loss of Louisiana's coastline.

"All of that is good for us," Veni Harlan said.

Nationwide, dog treat sales have grown 62 percent since 2003, according to the Pet Food Institute, a trade group that tracks the industry. Dog pops...
The Harlans say they spend nearly every spare minute making dog biscuits in their new commercial-grade kitchen in the backyard.

It takes about four days to produce and bake a “run of treats.”

Veni Harlan and her brother both have full-time day jobs. She’s a graphic designer and Hansel Harlan is an attorney.

“We make a little bit, and sell it,” Hansel Harlan said. “We make another little bit, and sell it.”

“But the challenge has been that the demand keeps increasing,” he added.

In addition to nutria, which makes up about 20 percent of each biscuit, the treats also include other Louisiana products like brown rice from Falcon Rice Mill in Crowley and blackstrap molasses from Alma Sugarcane Plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish. The treats are gluten-free and an 8-ounce bag, with about 25 to 30 biscuits, retails for about $8.50.

“We honestly didn’t know how well they would be received,” Veni Harlan said. “And we’ve just been blown away. The people have really responded. They get it. They understand what this is about—that it’s about Louisiana.”

“It’s a natural for dogs,” she added. “It’s fresh. It’s local. And it’s making use of a species that would just go to waste.

“We don’t want to just sell biscuits,” remarked Veni Harlan. “Part of our mission is to not only create an awareness, not only about wetlands, but also about invasive species.”

And as far as causes go, perhaps few are as mammoth and close to home for Louisianans as the daily loss of countless acres of marsh.

Louisiana loses about 25 square miles of coastal marsh a year—nearly a third the size of Baton Rouge, said Michael Massimi, invasive species coordinator at the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program.

It is a problem that is gargantuan and seemingly unstoppable, say those devoted to raising the awareness of coastal loss.

“You know a lot of stuff is real heavy and sad and tragic, and you really feel helpless,” Veni Harlan reflected. “What can an individual do about coastal erosion? Not a whole hell of a lot. So this is just a little tiny avenue to attack a big problem.”

“For us, it makes sense on so many levels,” Hansel Harlan said, adding he hopes the Marsh Dog treats will inspire others to come up with creative approaches to nutria control and wetlands restoration.

“We like to think that our biscuits are sort of a vehicle to engage people in the issues in a way that’s fun and interesting,” Veni Harlan added. “At the base level we’re selling a dog biscuit. But we’re really selling more than that. We’re selling an idea; we’re selling an idea about Louisiana. We’re selling an idea about what’s possible for an individual to do with regard to these sort of overwhelming environmental problems that you otherwise might think, ‘Oh, we’re doomed.’

Nutria roam all over the state, said Massimi, making it hard to get an accurate population count, if only because they reproduce so prodigiously and the state’s eradication program is only in place in the fragile coastal regions. “But it’s probably in the tens-of-millions,” he noted.

However, offering an incentive encouraging nutria trapping does seem to be aiding in controlling their rapid population growth and slowing the loss of marsh lands. In 2002, the first year of the Coastwide Nutria Control Program, some 79,443 acres were under attack by nutria, according to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. By 2011, the number of damaged sites was down to 10 affecting 6,296 acres.

“Each year that program has existed we’ve seen a decline in the damaged acres surveyed,” said Massimi.

“It’s down to under 10,000 acres surveyed now, from a high of over 100,000 acres,” he added, citing the 1999 survey showing 102,585 acres of coastal areas under attack by nutria.

“People have asked, ‘What happens when you run out of nutria?’ And what I say is, ‘Great, put us out of business,’” said Hansel Harlan.

“But quite honestly, there’s no way that’s going to happen. There’s no way you can eliminate the nutria in Louisiana’s wetlands.”