Rare white alligators attracting world-wide attention, tourists

By The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Priceless, pretty and so rare they are precious, white alligators occupying the Louisiana Swamp exhibit at this city’s Audubon Zoo seldom move as they laze suspended in their pools.

Blue eyes and white noses regularly poke above the swamp exhibit’s murky waters, seemingly oblivious to the crowds they are attracting and the oohs and aahs they elicit from their visitors.

Like China’s giant panda, the white alligators have become hometown celebrities.

“There is no way to put a price on them,” said Curt Barnett, general curator at Audubon Zoo. “They are the only ones in the world. When something is the only one, it’s priceless.”

They are not true albinos, because they have blue eyes rather than pink, Barnett said.

There are 18 of them, found in a south Louisiana swamp four years ago. Zoos around the world are clamoring for them to visit.

As far as can be determined, no other white alligators have ever been found, Barnett said.

“There isn’t even any folklore about them,” he said. “I have to assume if any had ever been found before, there would be stories about them, but I couldn’t find any.”

Their small numbers aren’t surprising, Barnett said, because without their normal protective coloration, baby alligators normally don’t last long in the wild.

The 18 gators are all males, but that doesn’t mean they are the end of the line, said Barnett. Louisiana Land and Exploration Co., which owns all but four of the gators, hopes to breed them with regular female alligators.

“They’ll breed them to regular alligators and then breed the offspring to see if they produce white ones,” he said.

In the meantime, an estimated 1 million people a year are visiting the alligators at the Audubon Zoo. Sales of white alligator merchandise there run more than $10,000 a year, zoo officials said.

And five zoos, from Zurich, Switzerland, to Fort Wayne, Ind., have requested visits from the alligators this year, said Barnett.

In Philadelphia, a three-month exhibit with two of the white gators was advertised widely on billboards and taxicab placards. Attendance rose about 25 percent during their stay, said public relations director Milly Hudgins.

“They are definitely a draw,” Hudgins said. “We also got tons of publicity from them.”

Products like T-shirts, mugs, toy alligators and candy alligators sold briskly, Hudgins said. Although no figures for the sales were available, per capita sales at the zoo gift shop reached an all-time high, Hudgins said.