Snagging gators a business to many in Louisiana

By BRIAN BOURQUE

FRANKLIN — In the swamp and marsh of lower St. Mary Parish, brothers Mike and Peter Burke hunt alligators, bringing the men close to what they know and love, the beauty of the state's wetlands.

The Burkes have been hunting alligators since the early '80s on property their family has leased since the early '70s. Although both now live near Lafayette, they maintain close ties with their family and friends still in Franklin.

The Burkes and hunters statewide had all of September to catch their allotted number of gators.

The Burke brothers say they go after alligators more for the fun than the money, but the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries oversees the alligator business with strict regulation.

James Manning, assistant administrator of the Fur and Refuge Division of the LDWF, said the alligator is the “most closely regulated animal” under the division's jurisdiction.

Hunters are issued a designated number of tags according to the reproductive capacity of the land.

Those tags, attached to every gator when killed, are followed to final processing. Several months after the season's end must pass before all tags are accounted for to verify the season's exact catch.

Manning estimated that about 26,000 wild alligators were killed this year by about 1,750 hunters, both figures close to last year's totals.

Approximately 95 percent of those taken come from the coastal areas of the state, he said.

Manning said that, because of close regulation, this year's catch was as good as last year's. He said that last summer two episodes of unusually high water eliminated many eggs in the wild.

Last year, Manning said, gators more than seven feet long sold for about $57 per foot. This year, $68 was received per foot, and the demand for large skins remains high.

Since 1986, alligator meat has become more popular, he said.

“We've got a world market being developed for alligator meat,” Manning said.

Presently, Manning's division is conducting studies to determine the economic effects of the industry on the state, and he expects the results at year's end.

Peter Burke, a 25-year-old insurance salesman, says strangers are sometimes astonished to learn that he hunts alligators to be sold.

“People who aren't from the area want to know about fishing them,” he said.

They catch their prey with five-inch barbed hooks baited with beef or chicken. Beef is the best bait, according to Mike Burke, 27, because it's the bloodiest and "stinks best." The hooks are hung about two feet above the water's surface from outstretched tree branches or cut branches driven a few feet into the mud.

The baited hooks seem strange dangling so high above the water, but Peter Burke said the gators reach them by "raising themselves sometimes more than three feet out of the water."

Once the hook is swallowed, the gator is usually caught. But big gators, when only hooked in the jaw, can get away by pulling hard enough to straighten the hook. When the hook is firmly lodged inside the gator, the end comes swiftly with a gunshot to the head.

On one of the Burkes' hunts, they caught seven alligators hooked on lines baited the night before.

A nine-foot gator taken on this trip bled enough from two 9mm pistol shots to the head to stain a few feet of the brown surface water flowing past it.

Within moments, the reptile stopped quivering and, as the bleeding slowed, the big gator was hauled into the boat. Its fishy smell and prehistoric look became more evident then.

Knowing where to set the lines for sure catches was accomplished with a little reconnaissance before the season opened, Mike Burke said. A few weeks prior to this trip, he and a friend spent a night and early morning frogging the area.

Besides catching more than 70 frogs, Mike Burke said, he spotted a number of the gators he believed they would catch the first two days of the season.

Mike Burke spotted a six-foot gator on that frogging trip. A spot of smashed-down marsh grass informed him that a big gator had been visiting the area, so a line was set there. The hunch paid off with a hooked gator the next morning.

In the early '60s the animal was needlessly placed on the endangered species list, and killing them was outlawed, said Manning.

"Very little was known about the alligator at that time," he said. It was thought that the animal was in danger of becoming extinct, he said. But in 1972, after much study and discussion between environmentalists and state officials, the alligator hunting season reopened.

Since the opening of foreign markets in the late '70s, the business has expanded worldwide, Manning said. France and Italy import Louisiana alligators for the hide, Manning said, bringing important new revenue into the state. Other nations around the world are now practicing management programs, like Louisiana, attempting to regulate the species, Manning said. And because of these recently developed programs, alligators and crocodile management, large skins have become more rare.

Strict regulation reduces the number of hunters and animals taken, he said, which helps keep a high value on Louisiana gators.

Farming alligators is a rapidly growing business in the state, according to Manning. About 135 farms are operating now, he said, and although they do not supply the market with big gators, their product is needed.

Alligator farmers in Louisiana are required to return to the wild 17 percent of the gators they raise and this represents an important boost to the wild population, Manning said.

Because only about 22 percent of eggs hatch naturally, the addition is necessary. He said weather changes and predators account for many lost eggs.

The farming program is "putting a healthier, faster growing alligator in the wild," Manning said.