Tannery talk no longer just talk

By Pamela Olsin
Business Writer

A number of opinions surround alligator and their skins.

One is that it is no longer accept-able to wear, or accessorize with, wild animal skins — skins that could suggest endangered species.

Another is that increased tanning in Louisiana could create more jobs in a state where they are badly needed.

A compromise, suggested by biologist Ted Jaonen, is that greater use of alligator products, whether made from meat or hides, could help the state and its gators.

Jaonen, who works for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said that in the first place alligators are not and never have been endangered.

He said the 1973 Endangered Species Act “built an empire on the alligator,” but that it was “a conservation tragedy.”

The action, he explained, was a political move by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which brought enough attention to the act to get it passed.

Passage would not have been so easy, he said, if the act had been based on an unknown bird.

Technically, said Jaonen, when a creature is listed as endangered it is because it is dying in greater numbers than it is being born. This was never the case for the alligator, he insisted.

But once the gator was listed as endangered, Jaonen said it became as good as “federal property,” and it cost the Department of Fish and Wildlife “hundreds of thousands” to get it delisted.

The delisting occurred, gradually throughout the state, from ’75 to ’85, he said.

Meanwhile, the number of gators have increased from 150,000 in 1972, when hunting of them first started, to about 1,000,000 today. About 750,000 of those are in the wild, with 250,000 more in the state’s 134 gator farms.

Although the resulting hides are a hot item for European fashion houses, Jaonen said of the U.S. market, “We see people drifting away from buying wildlife products.”

He regards that as an odd trend since he said a percentage of the money paid for these products goes back to gator farmers, who invest it in nurturing and preserving gator marshes. Thus, he regards gator farmers more as gator protectors.

“So people who refuse to buy alligator hides are actually hurting alligators,” he reasons.

At the state level, though, the push is steady to locate more than one tannery here, with Lafayette see as the prime site.

Jaonen believes more tanneries will help to jog hide sales in the United States. But establishing the tanneries suggests a number of additional questions.

According to Larry Michaud, a spokesman for state Commissioner of Agriculture Bob Odom, there’s long been talk of creating tanneries.

“A lot of people discuss and discuss that issue regularly,” he said. “But the problem is the expertise to do it on a large scale.”

Gator hides, he stressed, are much more difficult than cow or deer hides. “It’s an entirely different proposition — much more complex,” he said. “It’s a much more fragile hide.”

Michaud said the state has only one tannery now, Cocodrie Tannery in Baton Rouge, which he said is about 800 hides a month enough to classify it as “a solid, growing industry.”

No stakes have yet been set, but potential has been building with two different firms: TCIM, a French firm which is the world’s largest tanning operation, and Colonial Tanning Corporation of Gloversville, NY.

TCIM has gone so far as to establish a local corporation called Rogwiller Tannery of Louisiana, Inc.

And officials from both Rogwiller and Colonial have surveyed the area for possible sites, such as the old Frey building or space within one of the industrial parks run by the Lafayette Economic Development Authority.

But both firms have been nagged for months in the pursuit of needed financial help, either via banks or through the state.

According to Joe Bourg, special projects manager for LEDA, Colonial is aiming by fall of ’93 to begin construction at Southpark Industrial Park. The action hinges on funding through a state capital outlay bill.

As for Rogwiller, Bourg said, “We’re not supposed to say anything about that.” But Michaud said the French are still working on their financing. “What we feel has slowed it down right now is the instability in the French financial
GATORS: More than talk

Michaud said the state has done everything it can. Last August, the state joint legislative committee approved a $1 million matching loan for the French firm.

But the firm must first provide the matching $1 million in cash, plus $750,000 to get an additional $2.5 million loan which the state will underwrite.

Jaonen — whom Michaud calls “the alligator scientist for Louisiana, the premier” — believes the state will stand to gain a lot if the new tanneries work out.

Louisiana, he said, already is a “major player” in providing skins to other countries. Roughly eighty percent of Louisiana’s skins went to Europe last year, with the remaining 20 percent going to Japan.

“The tragedy of it is very little of the alligator skins stay in the United States,” said Jaonen.

In addition, skins lately have not commanded good prices, though the state’s value for gators in ’91 $25 million — no small change. The value includes gator meat, which finds a market in the southern United States, as well as in Japan, Taiwan, Canada, and England.

And Jaonen thinks the future looks bright.

Louisiana already produces more than two-thirds of the world’s 350,000 crocodilian skins (which include gator hides). It also has about 90 percent of U.S. gators. Other states farming gators include Florida, Texas, and South Carolina, with Mississippi and Alabama lately starting, too.

Along with being in the forefront of the market, Louisiana may also gain, not only from its pursuit of the tanning industry, but even from downsides such as lower hide prices.

As Jaonen said, the declining prices may have an advantage in that they produce, in turn, lower retail prices, which then attract more buyers of gator products.