TANNING THEIR HIDES
A New Iberia alligator outfit wants to bring a tannery to Louisiana.

John O'Brien and David Groner have been farming alligators together for a little more than a year, and they're hoping to soon become the home of an alligator tannery.

The owners of Louisiana Alligator Exchange in New Iberia say an Australian tannery wants to bring its equipment, personnel, chemicals and master tanner to New Iberia. If financing can be obtained, the tannery's current owners are planning to "move it lock, stock and barrel," Groner says. He and his partner would share ownership with them.

Although two or three U.S. tanneries have attempted the "secretly guarded and protected" process, Groner says he has not been satisfied with their ability to produce high-quality results. The process is very difficult, he says. "You don't just go to college and learn that."

Louisiana Alligator Exchange is the first company of its kind that is literally "taking it [alligator] from the egg to the purse," Groner says. The eggs are taken from the wild because it is too costly to raise the alligators to the size required to reproduce, about seven to eight feet. Once the eggs hatch, the babies are placed in almost totally dark pens and kept at 90 degrees Fahrenheit with 100 percent humidity to simulate the most natural environment in which they would typically thrive. David Taylor, a biologist and farm manager for the company, is responsible for controlling their environment and diet.

Groner says one of the company's major goals is the preservation of alligators in the wild. Seventeen percent of the gators raised on the farm are returned to the marsh.

Once every three weeks, the company sends a load of hides to Australia at a cost of $5,000. Groner says attracting the tannery is "typical of what Louisiana needs to start doing—quiet sending all of our raw products out of state ... we have all the ingredients right here."

It takes about two months for the hides to return from the tannery, according to O'Brien. "Almost anything you see in leather we can do in alligator," he says. The finished products such as belts, purses and suspenders are then sold to retailers like Wormser's in New Iberia.

O'Brien and Groner hope to finance the tannery project through the Louisiana Alligator Market Development Authority. The authority was created this year by the Legislature mainly for the purpose of attracting a tannery to Louisiana; however, its members haven't been appointed. Groner says the Legislature has guaranteed financing to attract an acceptable tannery.

He concedes the authority would be ideal for providing the assistance the partners need to get things rolling, but he says that if the board members aren't appointed soon, they'll turn to private investors. Groner and O'Brien are confident the Australian tannery would be approved by the authority for relocation to New Iberia.

O'Brien and Groner are also in the process of closing a deal with Abdalla's and other Lafayette retailers and are branching out into an international market. The meat of the alligator is also "becoming one of the most valuable meat commodities in the marketplace," Groner says.

O'Brien's family owns about 15,000 acres of marshland and has been harvesting alligators for the last 10 years.