TIDIOUS WORK — There’s more than one way to skin a ‘gator, but participants in this year’s alligator hunt must follow a set pattern, which calls for the head flap of the reptiles to be left on the skin. “Preacher” Hebert, who handles the skinning for hunters out of the Precht-Hebert family group which leases the marshland, has to be especially careful not to nick the hide, or some of the value of the skin will be lost. The skin of this 10-foot ‘gator could go for as much as $100 when the hides are sold next month. (Staff Photo by Dave Precht)

Gator Trappers Gonna Get Skinned, Too

CREOLE, La. (AP) — It looks like the trappers also will wind up getting skinned in the nation’s only legal alligator hunt — financially speaking, that is.

As far as the actual hunt goes, it has been a success despite fears that a brief early cold snap had put a crimp in it.

4,000 Killed

These teeming coastal marshes warmed up, the alligators didn’t go into hibernation, and as a result about 4,000 of them got it right between their beady eyes.

“It looks like most hunters have filled out their quota,” reported Ted Joanen, biologist for the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission.

The hunt, limited to 4,500 ‘gators, ends Sunday. Alligators were caught on hooks baited with chunks of meat and hung above the water, above the reach of small ‘gators.

For 24 days, 180 licensed trappers, gliding through the swamps in flatbottom boats, gently “fished” their hooked alligators up from the water, shot them in the head, carted them home, skinned them, scraped the skins, salted them away.

“Hard Work”

“You better believe it’s a hard day’s work,” said Joanen.

Converting those hides into dollars is the next step but the market has snagged on an 11-nation treaty banning international trade in skins stripped from creatures on the endangered species list.

Alligators are on that list, except for those few days in three Louisiana parishes (counties). Therefore, even legal alligator hides cannot be exported from this country — and the best hide markets lie overseas.

“Ain’t that ridiculous?” fumed one large hide dealer, asked that he not be named. They told me, “There’s no way we can give you a permit to export those skins.’ So I’m not bidding.”

He predicted that sealed bids at the sale, tentatively scheduled for Wednesday, will range from $6 to $8 per linear foot — way off the $14.50 average posted after the 1973 hunt in these same swamps.

1973 Hunt

The 2,900 hides taken in the 1973 hunt brought a total of $271,000 and most of them went to firms in Europe, with the best skins made into $350 men’s belts or $350 women’s handbags.

On the domestic market, complications include a New York State law against products made of alligator hide.

Joanen said trappers must pack their hides to the Wildlife and Fisheries office at Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge Monday to be tagged and graded. The ‘gators averaged six to seven feet in length.

The meat, which Joanen says is excellent, rather like frog legs or turtle steak, had to be thrown out or given away. Selling it remains against the law, despite the change in federal regulations permitting the hunt.