NEW ORLEANS (AP) — It was a unique asset in a $3.23 billion oil and gas merger: a dozen blue-eyed alligators with ivory scales.

"Is it real, Mommy?" a wide-eyed girl asks. Her question is echoed by another child, and another, as families move through the exhibit at the aquarium. Then: "He's moving! He's moving!"

Remy Lazare, their keeper, says children have asked, "Are they made of white chocolate?"

The blue eyes are one sign that these are not albinos, but leucistic (loo·SYS'·tic) — they still have some color. They are the only known leucistic alligators in the world, and may be the only leucistic crocodilians. They became Louisiana Land & Exploration Co.'s unofficial mascots after 18 hatched on LL&E land in 1987.

Fourteen are still alive. Three are on display at the New Orleans zoo and aquarium. A couple are being treated at the zoo and the rest are at what used to be LL&E's alligator farm in Golden Meadow.

LL&E got out of the alligator business as the market for hides dropped. Burlington Resources Inc., which bought LL&E in 1997, is interested only in petroleum. It expects to decide what to do with the beasts by the end of the year. For one thing, it is selling the gators' farm.

"We've had a long, close, good relationship with the zoo," says Burlington spokesman James Bartlett. "They provide care for the alligators. We loan alligators to the zoo now. Whenever they have too many alligators of any type we house them. They don't charge us, we don't charge them."

But there isn't an agreement yet. As they say in business, talks continue.

The white gators were caught almost as they hatched. They were cute little critters, easily handed to and cooed over by television reporters.

"They totally infatuated us, and we found out they did the same to other people," says Leighton Steward, LL&E's former president.

Now 14 years old, hundreds of pounds, and anywhere from 9 to 10 1/2 feet long, they're not beasts you'd want to mess with.

What are the alligators worth? Some years back, when LL&E wanted a value in case it gave any more to the zoo, an expert estimated that they could be worth $500,000 to $700,000 each.

"These guys seem to be a bit more fragile than other gators," says Remy Lazare, the zookeeper.