whole Country May Learn About Louisiana Crawfish

If USL Research Successful

And taste. If biologist Don Gooch and his friends are successful, people from Maine to California will learn what folks hereabout have known for generations - crawfish make good eating.

"You could quadruple the production right now and sell every crawfish," Gooch said as he stood at the edge of his research pond inspecting a swarming catch of the big-clawed crustaceans. "People are calling for crawfish from all over the world."

Louisiana crawfish look like small lobsters and are at least three inches long when they hit the market. Often they're much larger. They taste like spicy shrimp and have been a delicacy in these parts for years. Fishermen plying their ancient trade in the wild Atchafalaya Basin and in the dark bayous of southern Louisiana are hard pressed just to keep up with local demand.

Six in recent years, crawfish have been grown in ponds, and some large restaurants even manage their own so they'll have a steady supply. That's where the scientists come into the picture.

Gooch said crawfish farmers won't be able to expand their markets until they use more scientific production methods. "Nobody can sign a piece of paper now and guarantee a certain supply at a certain price," he said. Gooch is also trying to convince rice farmers they can make extra money by turning their fields into crawfish ponds during the offseason.

"They have everything they need," he said. "Their fields are surrounded by levees and they can drain them if they need to," he said. "Rice stubble left after harvesting is an ideal forage for crawfish."

An efficient, educated farmer, he said, can get 1,000 pounds of crawfish an acre each year.

The market price for crawfish varies considerably, but just now fishermen are getting about 60 cents a pound. In France, Gooch said, where crawfish also are a gourmet's delight, live crawfish sell for as much as $8 a pound.

Gooch said genetic studies won't be producing giant crawfish for some time, but harvesting can benefit from research immediately.

Using a specially designed pond, crawfish boat and traps, Gooch can cut a fisherman's work while increasing his catch.

For generations, Louisiana fishermen have used the same crude methods to harvest shallow water crawfish. A fisherman slogs through the muddy marshlands, pulling a small boat behind him. As he works his stand of crawfish traps, he empties his catch into the boat.

It's slow, hard work. Gooch and graduate assistant Charles Lutz ride in a flat-bottom boat equipped with a special outboard motor that runs in the shallow water of the experimental pond, which is equipped with levees and pumps to keep the water circulating.

As they go, one man pulls up full traps and dumps the crawfish into a trough that feeds them into bags. The other man, meanwhile, is baiting traps and dropping them back over the side. They can run the 30-acre experimental pond in an hour.

"That used to be one full-day's work for one man," Gooch said.

But Gooch said his harvesting methods, though far superior to the old way, still aren't good enough.

Eventually, he said, rice farmers may lay out their fields leaving open strips every so often. When it's time to harvest the crawfish, fishermen will drop a line of special pellets that attract crawfish, return with a seine and scoop them up.

Gooch said one area of research that must be better explored is what to do with crawfish waste. About 80 percent of a crawfish is inedible, but the waste is high in lime and protein. Gooch said scientists are trying to find ways to make fertilizer or livestock feed from it.