WHAT A DRAG — James Mann hauls home one of the more than 17,000 alligators harvested in South Louisiana during the season which closes tomorrow. (Staff photo by P. C. Piazza)

Young 'Gators Feared Killed

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — About 17,500 alligators were killed in southwest Louisiana during the month-long legal hunting season that ends Saturday, but stormy weather may have waged out the newest crop, says a state official.

"We had a couple of storms blow salt water up into the marshes in southwest Louisiana, and it may have destroyed all the young alligators," Johnny Tarver, assistant chief of enforcement for the state Wildlife and Fisheries Department, said Thursday.

"The young gators are killed by the salt water, but the big ones swim away," he said. "They can't tolerate salt water."

"But when you have an animal population that loses a year, it's generally compensated for by the next year."

"They can't tolerate salt water for very long."

"They were just hatching out when the water got there. They were in no way equipped to handle it. They didn't know where to go, if they could have got there."

"But animal populations have a way of bouncing back."

"Two or three years ago, we lost the entire crop before they were even hatched. This time, they had just hatched out when the water got them."

He said such things as tropical storms regularly make inroads on alligator populations.

"Next year, we could have a successful hatch, there'll be more habitat for them," he said. "Less competition for food. They'll grow faster."

"In four years, you might not be able to notice the difference."

He said a rough check of hunters and land owners indicated that about 90 percent of the tags issued for alligators will have been used by the season's end — about 17,500 all told and about a thousand more than were taken during last year's hunting season in 13 Louisiana parishes.

Hides brought an average of 417 a foot last year, and the average gator taken was 7 feet long. Anything under 4 feet is illegal, and hunting methods are regulated to prevent the taking of little ones.

"Prices are down a bit this year," he said. "But the fellows who are selling now are selling too early. I wouldn't advise anyone to sell right now."

He said he figures trappers who are able to wait a while before selling their hides will get better prices.