ALLIGATOR HUNTING REGULATION OVERVIEW

LOUISIANA WILDLIFE & FISHERIES

July 2010

OFFICE OF WILDLIFE

Introduction

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) manages the American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) as a commercial, renewable natural resource. LDWF's sustained use program is one of the world's most recognizable examples of a wildlife conservation success story. Louisiana's program has been used as a model for managing various crocodilian species throughout the world. Since the inception of LDWF's wild harvest program in 1972, over 800,000 wild alligators have been harvested and sold bringing in millions of dollars of revenue to landowners and trappers. Conservative estimates have valued these resources at over $230,000,000, providing significant, direct economic benefit to Louisiana.

Historical Perspective

Alligators have been used commercially for their valuable leather since the 1800s. This harvest was generally unregulated throughout the 1900s, until a gradual population decline resulted in severely reduced harvests in the early 1950s. In 1962, the alligator season in Louisiana was closed, and research studies, focusing on basic life history factors, were undertaken which led to development of a biologically sound management harvest program.

The goals of LDWF's wild alligator harvest program are to manage and conserve Louisiana's alligators as part of the state's wetland ecosystem, provide benefits to the species, its habitat and the other species of fish and wildlife associated with alligators. The basic philosophy was to develop a sustained use management program which, through regulated harvest, would provide long term benefits to the survival of the species, maintain its habitats, and provide significant economic benefits to the citizens of the state. Since Louisiana's coastal alligator habitats are primarily privately owned (approximately 81%), our sustained use management program provides direct economic benefit and incentive to private landowners, and alligator hunters who lease land, to protect the alligator and to protect, maintain, and enhance the alligator's wetland habitats. One of the most critical components of the wild harvest program is to equitably distribute the harvest in relation to population levels.

Alligator populations quickly increased between 1962 and 1972 while alligators were totally protected. In September 1972 LDWF initiated a closely regulated experimental commercial wild alligator harvest in Cameron Parish. Additional parishes were included in subsequent years and became statewide in 1981. Currently over 2,000 licensed alligator hunters harvest 30,000 to 35,000 wild alligators annually in Louisiana.

Alligator Hunting

General

An alligator hunter must either own land or have permission to hunt alligators on land that is classified as wetland habitat in order to qualify for alligator harvest tags. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries issues harvest tags for property containing sufficient alligator habitat capable of sustaining an alligator harvest. Alligator hunters apply for alligator tags prior to the season. Wild alligator tags can only be issued to licensed alligator hunters and are nontransferable.

Licenses

Hunter

An alligator hunter must possess on his person an alligator hunter's license as well as one or more current alligator tags for the property on which he is hunting. Tags are property specific and must be used on the property indicated on the hunter's license. Alligator hunters must have their alligator hunter's license in possession to possess or sell wild alligators, their skins, or parts. Alligator hunting licenses cost $25 and there is no cost for alligator tags.

Helper

Individuals other than the hunter harvesting alligators for the hunter must possess a helper license. Licensed helpers can hunt independently of the alligator hunter. Anyone assisting the hunter but not harvesting alligators does not need a helper license. A helper license costs $25 and must bear the name and license number of the hunter(s) being assisted.

Sport

Individuals can harvest alligators as a sport while being guided by a hunter possessing tags. Sport hunters must always be accompanied by a licensed hunter or helper. A sport license costs $25 for Louisiana residents and $150 for non-residents.

Seasons

Louisiana is divided into east and west alligator hunting zones. Each zone has specific opening and closing dates. The east zone opens the last Wednesday of August and the west zone opens the first Wednesday of September. Each zone remains open for 30 days from the opening date. Baited hooks and lines may be set no more than 24 hours prior to the general open season and shall be removed no later than sunset of the last day of the open season.

Hunting Hours

Alligators may be harvested between official sunrise and sunset only. No nighttime harvest is allowed.

Limits and Size Restrictions

The daily and season quota is equal to the number of alligator tags that a licensed alligator hunter possesses. There are no size restrictions on wild alligators taken during the general open season.

Legal Methods

Alligators may be harvested by hook and line, bow and arrow and firearms (except shotguns). The possession of shotguns is prohibited while hunting or taking wild alligators. The fishing (hook and line) method is the most common.

Fishing Method (hook and line)

Baited hooks and lines are suspended above the water by some type of structure. In most cases hunters will use poles, branches or trees to suspend baits as well as provide for a stationary object for securing the end of the line. The most commonly used baits are chicken quarters and beef melt. Approximately 30' of line is tied off to the bottom of the structure while the baited hook end is suspended about 1-2' above the water surface. Line must be a minimum of 300 lb. test. The baited end is suspended in such a manner to allow for easy line removal by an alligator.

Clothes pins are sometimes used to hold lines to facilitate easy line removal. Excess line is rolled up near the base of the structure. Alligators (feeding primarily at night) will take the bait. Once alligator lines are set and baited, alligator hunters must inspect their hooks and lines and remove captured alligators daily. Alligators should be dispatched immediately upon checking lines. Shot placement should be centered directly behind the skull. No person shall release any alligator from any taking device for any purpose without first dispatching the alligator. Alligators shall not be cut loose from hooks and lines for the purpose of selecting larger alligators. All hooks and lines shall be removed when an alligator hunter's quota is reached. In the event an alligator is hooked and the hunter's quota has been reached the hunter must release the alligator in the most humane method possible.

Bow and Arrow

Bow and arrow can be used to dispatch alligators while on hook and line (see Fishing Method above) or to capture alligators. Barbed arrow must be used to capture alligators. A minimum of 300 lb. test line must be securely attached to the head of the arrow in such a manner to prevent separation from the arrow head. The other end of the line must be attached to a stationary or floating object capable of maintaining the line above water when an alligator is attached. Bow and arrow use may not be permitted if hunting on public lands or public lakes.

Firearms

Firearms (except shotguns) may be used to dispatch alligators while on hook and line (see Fishing Method above) or to harvest free swimming alligators. Harvesting free swimming alligators with firearms may increase chances of losing alligators. Extreme caution should be used when harvesting free swimming alligators to ensure that alligators can be retrieved once harvested. Alligator hunters should practice firearm safety at all times and pay close attention to ricochet hazards. Harvesting free swimming alligators may not be permitted if hunting on public lands or public lakes.

Tagging

Alligators are to be tagged immediately upon harvest before moving from the capture location. The tag should be placed about 6” from the end of the tail on the bottom side of the tail. Once the tag is placed through the tail it must be locked using the tag’s locking device. The tag must stay affixed to the alligator or alligator hide until the tanned hide is used for product manufacturing. Be careful not to prematurely lock tags or catch tags on objects that may rip out or break tags. Be careful not to lose or drop tags overboard. Tags do not float and will not be replaced if lost.

Alligator Care

Alligators should be kept cool and covered with damp coverings (burlap sacks, blankets, etc.) and away from gasoline, oil or other contaminants. Contaminants will cause hide damage which will substantially lower value or even make the alligator worthless.

Selling Alligators

Alligators/hides can only be sold to licensed fur buyers or fur dealers. Most wild alligators are sold whole to fur buyers/dealers at processing facilities. Make sure that arrangements have been made to sell alligators prior to setting lines or harvesting alligators.

Processing Alligators and Hides

Properly skinning alligators can be difficult. Minor knife cuts, holes or poor skin preparation can severely decrease alligator hide value. Alligators should be skinned by someone with prior alligator skinning experience whenever possible. If no experienced skinner is available and a hunter chooses to skin his own alligator(s) for personal use, the first step is to prepare for skinning with a table at a comfortable height, a sharp knife, a sharpener, a scraper and salt. Begin the skinning process (see Appendix I for detailed instructions and diagrams). Once skinning is complete all meat and fat must be removed from the alligator hide to prevent decay. The most common scraping method is to use dull tools such as blunt knives, paint scrapers or beveled pipes to scrape excess meat and fat from the underside of the skin. Once the skin has been scraped and cleaned it must be salted. Salt removes moisture and helps cure the alligator skin. A fine grain salt should be applied generously (1/2 to 1 inch thick) and rubbed into all parts of the skin. The skin should then be tightly rolled and stored in a cool and well ventilated area where it can drain. After three to five days, the old salt should be thrown away, the skin resalted, rolled and refrigerated if possible.

Alligator Parts

Alligator hunters may give alligator parts* to anyone for personal use. Any alligator parts or containers enclosing alligator parts must be tagged with the name, address, date, hide tag number, and the license number of the person donating the alligator part(s). This information must remain affixed until the part(s) has been stored at the domicile of the possessor. In addition an alligator transaction parts form must be submitted to LDWF by the end of the calendar year if any parts transaction has taken place. (* alligator part - any part of an alligator excluding the hide and includes the bony dorsum plates, if detached from the tagged alligator hide)

Storage, Tanning or Taxidermy

Alligators/alligator skins may be stored at any location provided that they are properly tagged and documented. An alligator hunter must have any alligators/alligator skins being shipped out of state or being tanned or used for taxidermy instate inspected by LDWF, pay the appropriate tag fee and severance tax and receive a shipping tag prior to shipping. A hunter needing an inspection should contact their local LDWF office, or the office that issued their license and tags, in advance to schedule the inspection.

Research Alligators

Many alligators have been marked by LDWF biologists for research purposes. Some of these were caught in the wild, and some were released to the wild from commercial farms. These alligators have one or more notches cut out of the tail scutes and have had two metal tags placed in the webbing between the toes (usually on the back feet). These tag returns are like duck bands, and allow biologists to follow the movement, growth, and survival of alligators. Alligator hunters should report and submit any research alligator captured by recording the full web tag number (usually 6 digits), the length, tail notch(es) and sex of the alligator on forms provided by LDWF. Sometimes the web tag in the foot is lost as the alligator grows, but the information from the tail notch lets LDWF know what year the alligator was marked. It is very important that hunters report the information to LDWF if a marked alligator is captured, as it helps LDWF's management programs for continued harvests.

Unused Alligator Tags

All unused alligator tags shall be returned within 15 days following the close of the season.

Lost or Stolen Alligator Tags

If alligator tags are lost or stolen the alligator hunter must complete an official lost tag form and submit it to LDWF within 15 days following the close of the season. Lost or stolen tags will not be replaced.

Hides Not Sold or Shipped Within 30 Days Following the Close of the Season

All alligators/alligator skins not sold to commercial buyers/dealers or shipped for tanning/ taxidermy within 30 days following the close of the season must be reported to LDWF. LDWF's official forms require specific information which includes tag number, location, intended use and length.

Reminders

Alligator hunters are responsible for disposition of all issued alligator tags.
All alligator hunters should thoroughly review all current alligator regulations.
Always follow all alligator regulations.
Alligator hunters harvesting alligators on public areas should review and follow all regulations specific to that public area. For specific details check with the office responsible for that public area prior to commencing alligator harvest activities.

Questions

See www.lagatorprogram.com for more alligator hunting information as well as other alligator program information.

For specific questions not covered previously or by the alligator program's webpage contact the local LDWF office or e-mail the alligator program at LAalligatorprogram@wlf.louisiana.gov.

Disclaimer

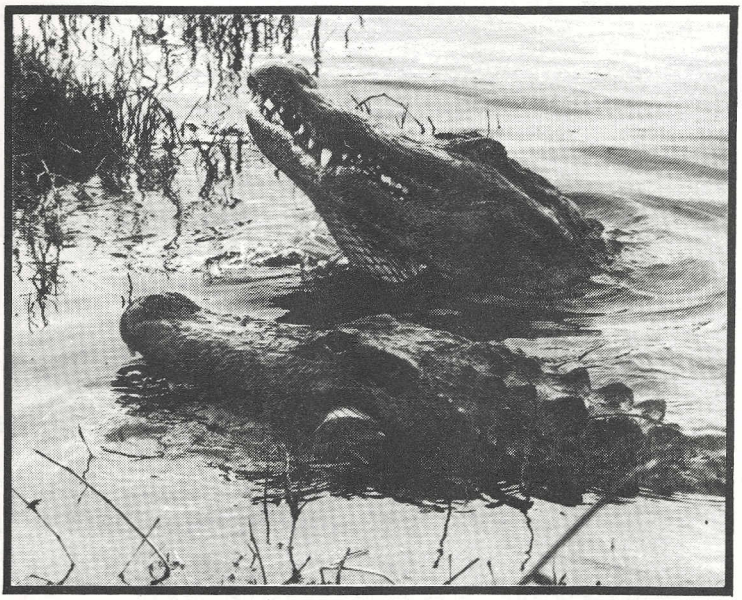
This publication is not an official copy of the laws in effect and should not be utilized or relied upon as such. It does represent an attempt by the publisher to present as a public service, an overview of some of the laws and a set of regulations adopted by the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission and being current at the time of this publication. Substantive changes to the state laws may very well occur following the printing of this publication. For these reasons, the accuracy of the information contained within this publication cannot be guaranteed and the reader is cautioned that it is his responsibility to apprise himself of the laws in effect at any given time. These regulations include those contained within the Louisiana Revised Statutes, particularly Title 56 and the official regulations of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission.

APPENDIX I

ALLIGATOR

LOUISIANA F. & A. A.C.

Hide Care

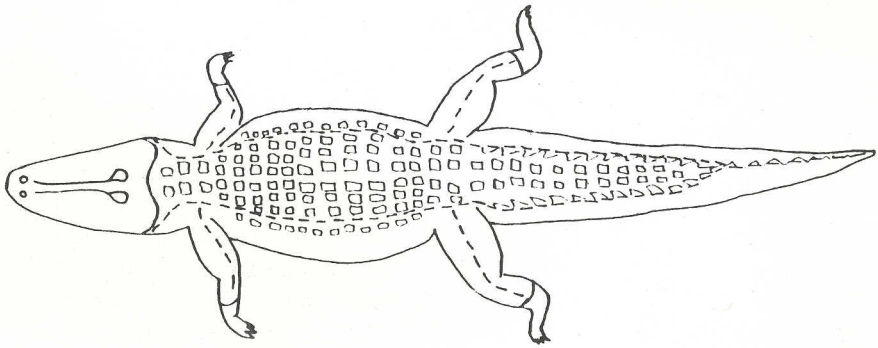


"Louisiana's Commitment To Quality"

HIDE CARE TIPS

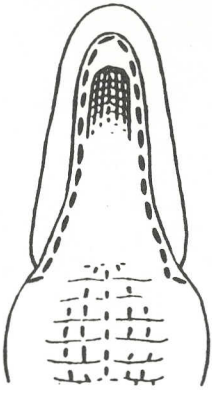
This brochure is not a basic guide on how to skin an alligator, but we can offer a summary of skinning steps, tips on how to best care for alligator skins and explain why careful skinning and scraping is important. Most current quality problems with Louisiana alligator skins can be cured by simply using extra care with the skinning knife and extra effort with the hide scraper.

Start with a good place to skin an alligator and have the right tools to do the job. Obviously, you need a steady table at a comfortable height, a good light, a knife and a sharpener, a scraper and salt to get started. You also need to develop your own skinning routine. The best skinners say this comes with practice and experience, but learn to skin an alligator the same way each time instead of changing from one way to another. That way you begin to develop your own system. You will develop a feel for each spot in the skin, and by doing it the same way each time, your moves and knife strokes almost become second nature. A standardized method of skinning, curing and handling alligator skins increases the value of the product and improves buyer confidence in a uniform lot of skins. Diagram 1 shows the standard opening cuts when skinning an alligator and the belly patterns of the skin.



SKINNING STEPS

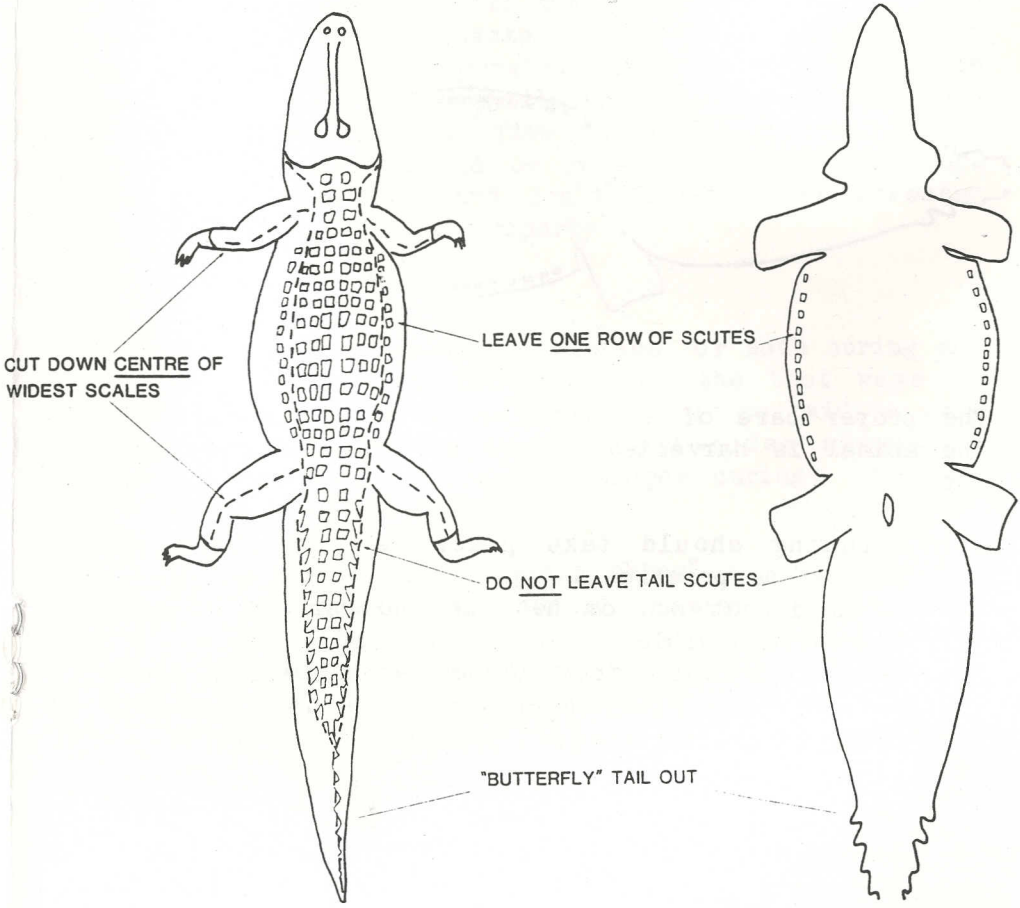
1. Outline the body where skinning will start.
2. The cut along the sides is made between first and second row of scutes on the back.
3. A straight cut is made from the back along the top of each leg (through the largest scales).
4. Cut completely around each foot at the wrist or ankle.
5. The outline cut on the tail is below the top row of tail scutes.
6. When cuts reach the single row of tail scutes midway along tail, cut through base to end of tail (butterfly end of tail).
7. Skin tail completely along the sides.
8. Begin skinning body section with front legs and adjacent side skin.
9. Slowly cut skin away from front legs and side of body.
10. Some pulling can be done on upper leg portions.
11. Skin hind legs and adjacent side skin same as front legs.
12. The sides should be completely skinned and only the belly portion should be left unskinned now.
13. After sides and legs are skinned, turn alligator on its side and make outline cuts along lower jawbone.
14. Cut is made along the outer edge of the lower jaw skin.
15. By pulling on the jaw muscle, the flesh can be tightened, allowing for easier skinning.



16. After skin is cut from lower jaw and neck, the alligator is ready to be skinned down the belly.
17. Skinning the under side of the alligator can be accomplished by both pulling and cutting.
18. Pulling is easier on small alligators, with careful cutting required otherwise.

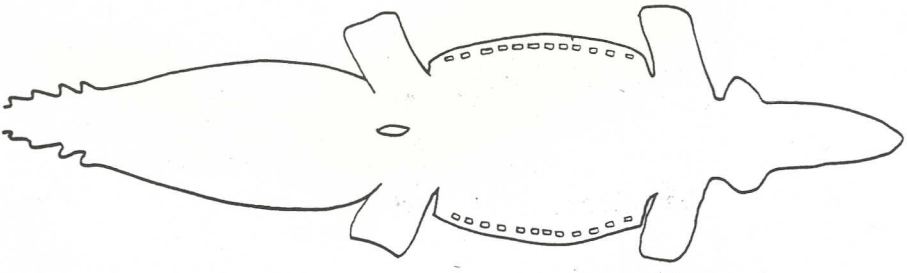
19. Cut carefully around anal opening (vent) so this area won't tear if pulled.
20. Both pull and cut skin from the remaining tail section.
21. Meat and fat remaining on the skin must be removed.
22. Scrape with dull objects (pipes, scrapers, spoons, etc.) taking care not to cut or tear skin.
23. Once scraped, hide should be relatively free of flesh and white in appearance.
24. Skin should be washed in clean, fresh water to remove blood and other fluids.
25. Hang skin in shaded area and allow to drain.

DIAGRAM 1



The shaded area between the neck and vent in Diagram 2 is the part of the belly skin that is graded. Holes or cuts in this part of the skin make it difficult or impossible to cut full belly patterns for purses, briefcases or larger leather articles. Enough holes or cuts in the flanks can even make cutting shoe vamps or smaller leather-goods difficult. The one row of scutes along the sides of the alligator are left so the tanner has some extra skin to tack to when the skin is stretched and dried during the tanning process. Special care should be taken not to cut or put holes in the belly pattern of the skin (particularly around the legs and flanks where the thin skin is easy to nick with a knife).

DIAGRAM 2



The proper care of alligator skins begins as soon as the animal is harvested. Here are some more helpful tips:

1. Skinning should take place as soon after the harvest as practical.
2. Avoid direct sun or heat on the carcass or skin whenever possible.
3. Keep skin away from blood, entrails, or other contact with dirty surfaces where more bacteria can get into the hide.
4. Always skin carefully and particularly avoid holes or cuts in the belly pattern.
5. Scrape excess meat and fat from the underside of the skin with blunt knives, paint scrapers, beveled pipes or other dull tools.

Removing meat and fat from the skin is very important because of the time necessary to store and ship alligator skins overseas for tanning. This often takes several months and the excess meat simply helps bacteria get started and can lead to "red heat" or "slipping" skins. If excess fat is not removed it can prevent salt from properly penetrating the skin. Also, if the fat heats up, it can actually penetrate the skin and leave grease spots on the finished leather.

The purpose of curing alligator hides is simply to remove moisture from the skin so it can be better preserved before tanning. A fine grain mixing salt works best and should be applied generously (1/2 to 1 inch thick) and rubbed into all parts of the skin. Salt should be rubbed thoroughly into the skin, making sure enough salt gets into the creases, flaps, tail and similar places where bacteria can get a start. Salt helps slow bacterial growth. Tightly roll the skins and stack in a well-ventilated place where they can drain. After three to five days in a cool or shaded place, the skins should be resalted for best curing. Don't use rock salt and don't freeze hides (freezer burned hides won't tan properly).

Funding for this project was provided by the LOUISIANA FUR AND ALLIGATOR ADVISORY COUNCIL. This is a cooperative project of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, The Louisiana Fur and Alligator Advisory Council and Ashley Associates, Inc.