



**The
CRAYFISH TALE
By TRAPPER ARNE**

CRAYFISH FARMING – CULTURED CRAYFISH

When Nellie in 'South Pacific' called herself a little hick and Emile a cultured Frenchman, she was talking about a different kind of culture. Not the culture of cultured pearls, salmons or crayfish.

So why do we call the millions of pounds of 'crawfish' from Louisiana cultured? A better word for this might be cultivated. And the opposite of cultivated crayfish is of course wild crayfish. And only an estimated 10% of all crayfish caught in the US are those caught in the wild. That's the 10% I and most of my trap customers contribute to when we go crayfish catching. Crayfish caught in the wild are not from the cultivated fields of rice or soy beans found down in Louisiana and a few other states.

In this respect, most of us are just 'little hicks' as we catch most of our crayfish in the wild, far from the cultured southern rice fields. Wild crayfish are caught in just about every state of the Union. Cultured crawfish come mostly from the South, where huge rice fields do double duty as crayfish ponds where the crayfish eat the leftover vegetable residue after the rice harvest.

Cultured crayfish have been with us since at least the 1950's when a few experimental ponds in Louisiana were developed to supply the rising demand for crayfish and to provide consumers with a more reliable source of high quality crayfish. Since then the pond acreage for rice/crayfish production has risen to well over 100,000 acres. Marginal agricultural land is often combining the cultivation of rice with that of crayfish.

Rice/crawfish farmers in the South commonly add around 50 pounds of adult crawfish, the Red Swamp or the White River, per acre to their rice fields at permanent flood in June, when rice is 8 to 10 inches high. When the farmers drain fields and harvest rice in late August or September, the crustaceans burrow underground. The farmers then fertilize and flood the stubble in October to seedlings or re-grow it as forage. Now the crayfish emerge from burrows shortly after ponds are flooded. Young hatched crawfish, attached to females' tails, grow to market size in 90 to 120 days eating merrily of the rice stubble and un-harvested portions of the rice crop in the pond.

Baited crayfish traps now come into action in these inundated shallow ponds. Some baited with fresh fish such as shad, carp or other scrap fish, and some with the modern artificial manufactured bait from Purina and others. And because the ponds are indeed rather shallow, maybe a couple of feet deep, crayfish traps here have taken on a different shape from what we, wild crayfish catchers are used to. A rice paddy crawfish trap rests upright on the bottom of the paddy, but being shallow, the top of the pyramid trap sticks up and displays its open collar above the water's surface.

The part of the trap that sticks up from the water comes in handy as the harvesting flat-bottomed boat comes along with a worker who simply grabs the top of the trap, tips the trap upside down to empty it in the boat, and then replaces the trap in the paddy.

The crayfish harvest in the South begins around January and peaks in April or May. The warmer the water, the faster the crayfish grow while also getting more aggressive. This is also when the quality of the crayfish meat reaches its peak.

Harvesting usually tapers off around late June, when most vegetation has decomposed and crawfish tend to taste muddy. June may be too late to plant a new rice crop so some farmers plant soybeans while some leave their fields fallow until the next spring, then plant rice again.

All is not a bed of roses for crayfish farmers. For one thing, it is a very labor intensive activity with relatively few automated aspects to it. In addition, there are plenty of animals who also like to help themselves to crayfish. Otters and raccoons and even some wading birds get their fill of crayfish during the peak production months. To keep birds from landing in the ponds, the water level is kept above 18 inches.

Maybe the largest threat to the crayfish farmers in Louisiana is the import of crayfish from other countries, especially China. Some years imported crayfish have even sold for less than the local crop. Lately, import tariffs on crayfish have helped the farmers fight the foreign influx.

In spite of these problems, crayfish farmers usually enjoy a market demand that is higher than the supply. But intense competition keeps the price of live crayfish rather low. The highest prices for live crawfish lies around \$2.00/lb in late fall. During the seasonal peak, in April and May, the price may drop to \$.50 per lb. Most of this production is consumed locally in southern states, but some will be shipped – flown – up to other parts of the country and the world. One source reports that Sweden is the largest foreign importer of Louisiana crayfish

But Louisiana, although very favorably positioned for the crawfish business, now has a few U.S. competitors in Minnesota, Michigan and New York. While visiting Sweden I had the opportunity to watch a few crayfish cultivations, some quite lucrative. But on the whole, cultivated crayfish ponds outside of Louisiana are of a minor importance.

Easter Weekend always falls during the crayfish season. That makes crayfish hard to find in stores on Fridays during Lent. The obvious reason is the large Catholic population living in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast who get around abstaining from eating meat by eating crayfish and other seafood.

Fortunately, we who catch 'wild' crayfish have one decided advantage. Most of our catch consists of larger species than the Cajun crawfish, and contrary to the spindly claws of these Louisiana Red Swamp crayfish, most northern species, Signals and Rustys, exhibit large and meaty claws. And, of course, we have more fun catching them using the productive traps from Trapper Arne!

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