

And Then Came the Nutria: Part Two

The population of nutria in coastal Louisiana reached its peak between 1955 and 1959, when it was estimated 20 million nutria lived in Louisiana's coastal marsh. The meat was used for everything from mink food to human consumption. During the mid 1950's reports started coming in describing the damage done to marshes, rice and sugarcane fields, and levee systems, as the nutria population increased. Biologists described areas where nutria had completely denuded natural levees at the mouth of the Mississippi River. The marsh had been weakened by severe over-grazing, and then in 1957, Hurricane Audrey hit southwestern Louisiana. Its storm surge weakened the marsh as a huge wave of seawater pushed thousands of nutria inland, accelerating the rate at which the animals spread (See www.nutria.com/site2.php). In 1958 nutria were taken off the list of protected wildlife (Figure 7.).

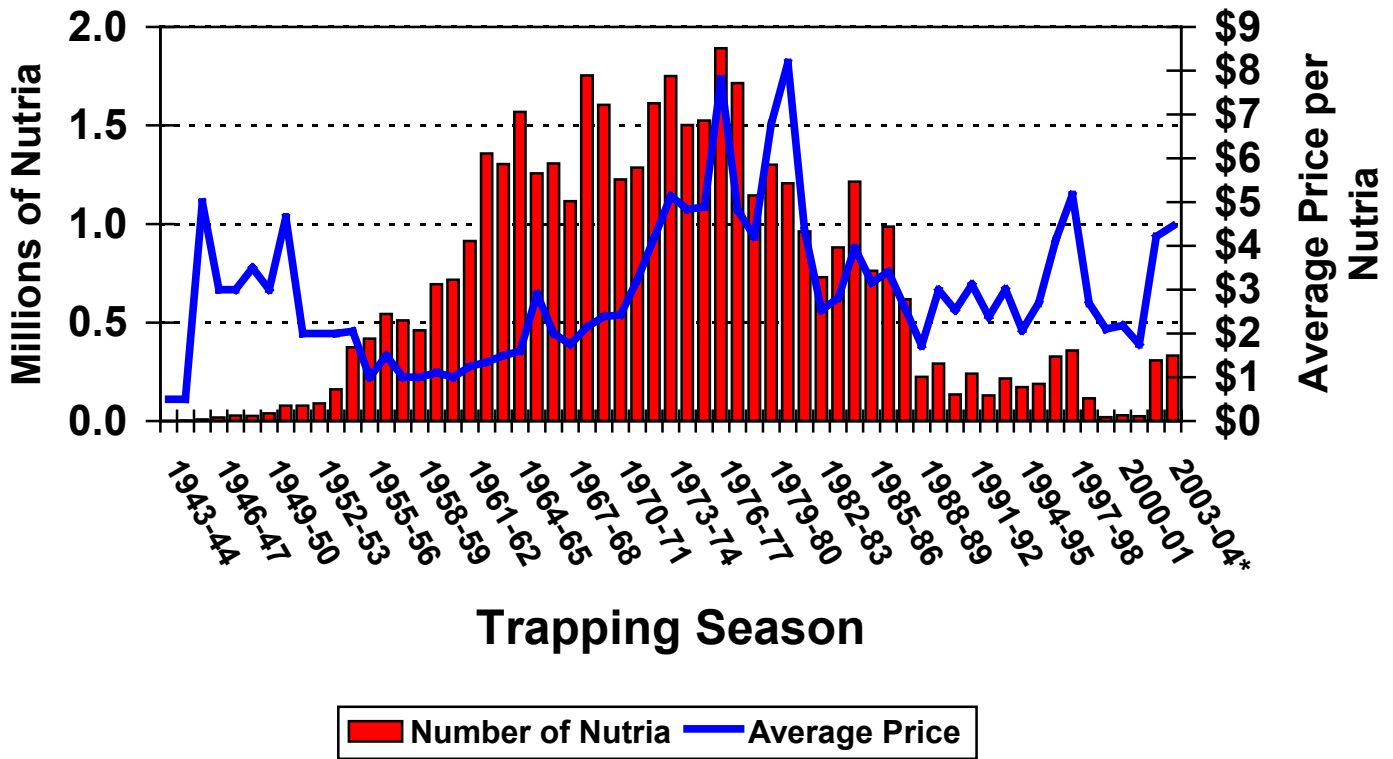
The LDWF (Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries), with the help of BTNEP, conducted aerial wetland damage surveys in 1993, 1995, 1996, and 1998–2002. Survey results clearly noted nutria damage is concentrated in the Deltaic Plain in southeastern Louisiana. This indicates high nutria populations that are exceeding the local carrying capacity. In 2000, the U.S. Congress passed an appropriation to address Brown Marsh Dieback and to provide research studies on nutria.

The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act, also known as the Breaux Act, (see BTNEP CD [Thibodaux Treasures](#)) has provided grant funding for coastal restoration and conservation. In 2002, a final report on Nutria Control Methods was completed by the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources. After reviewing a number of possible methods to reduce nutria, the report concluded that the best method of reducing nutria was an incentive payment program. Nutria hunters would be paid to kill nutrias. In 2004, the going rate for a nutria tail as proof of the animal's demise was \$4.00. The goal of the program is to encourage the harvest of up to 400,000 nutria annually from coastal Louisiana.

Let's go back in time and see how the earliest trappers used the marsh for a source of income and some of the obstacles they faced. To reach the deep marsh the trappers would dig small ditches through the marsh called a "trainasse." The trainasse allowed the trapper access to the deep marsh. The trapper generally worked a lease of 100 to 300 acres setting out 250 traps. On a good day he would catch 80 to 90 muskrat, which he would skin on the spot. He would then take the pelts back to his cabin and place them on drying frames.



LOUISIANA NUTRIA INDUSTRY HARVEST AND AVERAGE PELT VALUE



1. This figure includes the CNCP \$4.00 incentive payment that began in 2002-2003. Graph by: Jeff Marx (LDWF)

Figure 7. Figure annual harvest and average price of nutria from 1965-2004.

Every two weeks or so the land manager would visit the cabins in a boat bringing provisions and taking away dried pelts. The highlight of the season came with the big sale at the end of the season. The buyers would bid on each trapper's lot and submit it to the land manger as a sealed bid.

The modern fur industry has changed a great deal. Today's trappers act independently, dealing directly with the buyer. The trapper may operate as many as 300 to 400 traps on a lease that may reach several thousand acres. Most of the marsh cabins are gone, with the trapper taking each day's catch home for processing. Between 1947 and 1967, the number of fur dealers dropped from 40 to 21, the number of buyers from 263 to 128, and the number of trappers from 12,000 to 5,000. The numbers for the 2003–2004 season show that there were 14 fur dealers, 42 licensed fur buyers (only 5 actually bought furs), and 1,432 licensed trappers.

The pelts are used for making fur coats, jackets, and hats all over European countries. The meat is considered a delicacy in restaurants in Europe. The Far East, China, Korea and other Pacific Rim countries also are very interested in the nutria meat. These countries are considered to hold great market potential for Louisiana. Locally, Chef Philippe Parola and others have come up with a number of recipes that use nutria meat. Even the Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Conservation and Restoration Task Force has come up with a plan to promote the eating of nutria. "Eat a Nutria, Save Louisiana." After all, Nutria eat only vegetation, so the meat is similar in taste, texture and appearance to rabbit.

A Coastal Nutria Control Program has also helped in the Barataria–Terrebonne basins. Here enclosures, similar to fencing, are used to keep the nutria out of certain areas. This strategy has been very effective. (nutria.com/site5.php).

