

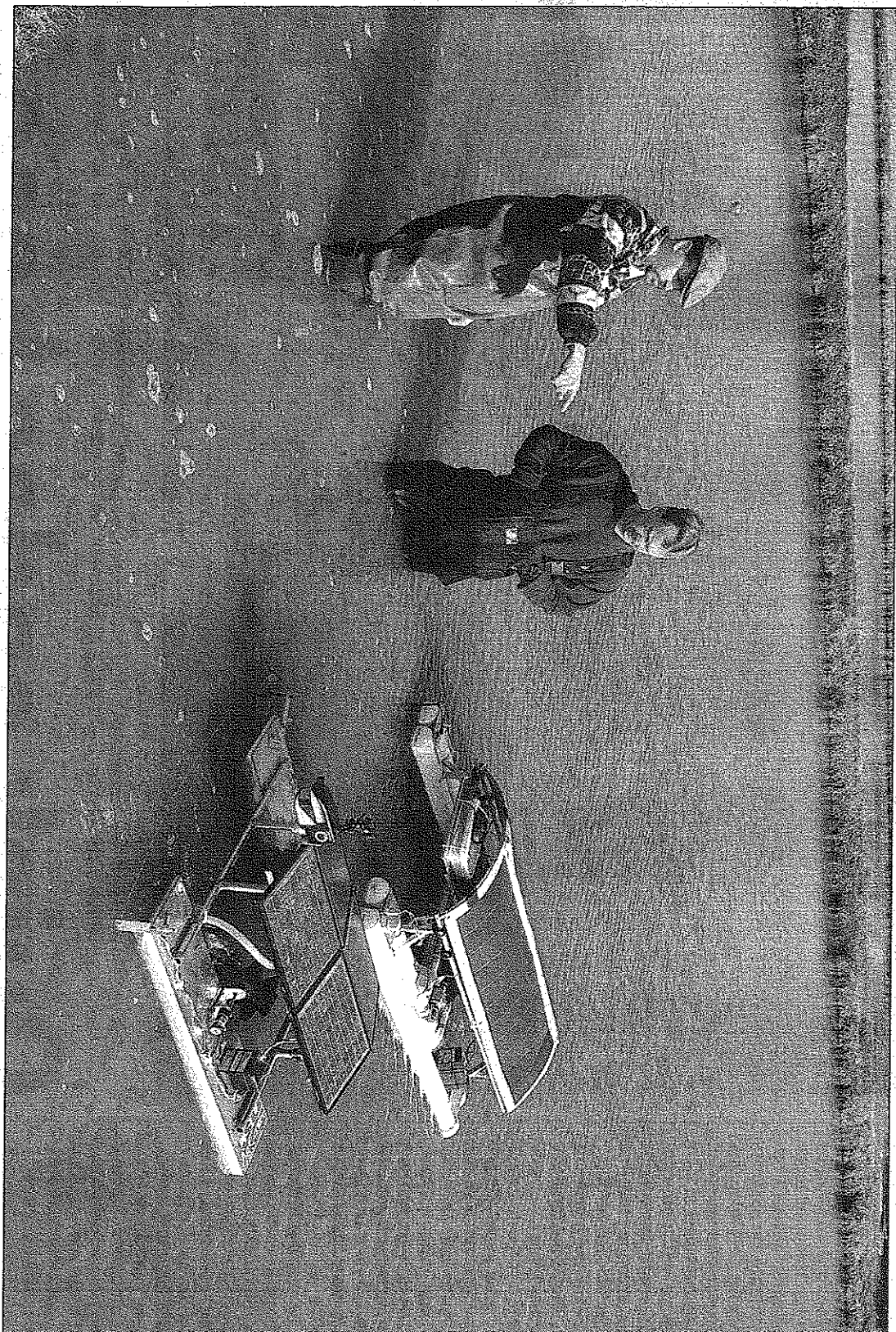


THE ADVOCATE BUSINESS

SECTION F

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Photos provided by the LSU AgCenter
LSU AgCenter engineer Steven G. Hall, left, and Randy R. Price, now an assistant professor at Kansas State University, created a series of robotic boats to solve the age-old problem of birds stealing the livelihood of cattfish and crawfish farmers.

Robots deter birds from fish

BY TED GRIGGS
Advocate business writer

A decade ago, a horde of white pelicans flew into town for a week, hanging out at the LSU Aquaculture Center ponds and eating. And eating. And eating. By the time they left, the pelicans had churned through 200,000 young cattfish and striped bass and left a \$60,000 hole in the AgCenter budget.

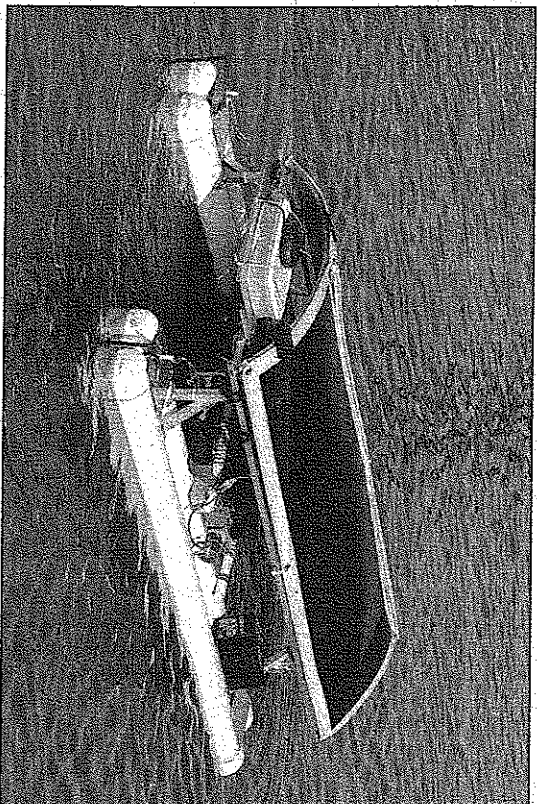
But the slaughter inspired two LSU AgCenter researchers to come up with a solution: a robotic, solar-powered boat that chases away birds. Now, 10 years after the Scarebot's debut, the AgCenter has licensed the technology to Mt. Pelia Innovative Solutions, of Martin, Tenn.

"We did have some offers, which in retrospect I would say we kind of squandered those opportunities," said Steve Hall, an engineer in the AgCenter's Department of Biological and Agricultural Engineering and one of the device's inventors. "And it kind of sat for a while."

There were a lot of people interested in buying the devices because of the threat predatory birds pose to aquaculture producers, Hall said.

According to the Southern Regional Aquaculture Center, the double-crested cormorant alone causes more than \$10 million worth of damage a year to Mississippi's catfish production.

In addition, Hall said the Scarebot has some other potential for many environmental management appli-



Scarebots are each about 4 feet by 4 feet in area and about 18 inches high. Larger models can be used in lakes and reservoirs.

cations.

The device can be used to measure water quality, biological activity or other environmental variables, he said. The boats can talk with each other by radio and act as a group, so they could be used to track an oil spill and identify where the highest concentrations of oil are.

But LSU is a university not a manufacturing facility, Hall said, and early inquiries for its bird-scaring ability went nowhere.

However, last year the Scarebot caught the attention of John Cole, owner of Mt. Pelia Innovative So-

lutions, Hall said. The AgCenter is happy he licensed the technology.

Cole said he has talked to more than a dozen cattfish farmers to gauge their interest in the product.

"Everybody was interested, though it was cool, though it would be a good application," Cole said.

"The only thing was it was probably too expensive to mass implement on farms because you're dealing with large, large acreage."

The Scarebot is driven by a dual paddlewheel and a solar-powered battery. One or more microcontrollers provide navigation, Hall

said. The bot can reach speeds of 5 mph to 7 mph and can be equipped with feelers to sense the shore or a global positioning system (GPS) device will allow the Scarebot to operate within "virtual boundaries."

The Scarebot can remain quiet until it senses a flock of birds, Hall said. Then it can move erratically and shake to chase the birds from the fish ponds.

Cole said he plans to develop a basic, off-the-shelf model that will cost somewhere around \$1,500 to \$2,000. Larger, customized versions, such as those with sensors to detect birds would run more, Cole said.

The consensus among the cattfish farmers he talked to was that they might buy one or two of the devices and use them in ponds where they had problems with large numbers of birds or ponds with new fingerlings.

The Scarebot could also find a market among producers of specialty fish, such as koi and baitfish like minnows, Cole said. Those producers have much smaller operations. The Agriculture Extension Service agents with whom he has discussed the device, in Florida and elsewhere, liked the idea.

"They seemed positive that some of the farmers they worked with would be interested in something like that because their ponds are small, and they do have a lot higher-dollar fish that they're dealing with," Cole said.

Luxe condos become rentals

MICHELLE CONLIN
Business writer

Rental Class has never
it so good.
e to a plot of elitzy condo

in Manhattan — the tallest
residential tower in the world
— was originally supposed to
include 200 sprawling condos
alone with 700 rentals. Now

Agua, with its liquid, undulat-
ing glass skin and curving bal-
conies, can be had for \$1.571.
In late April at Silicon Valley's
Three Sixty Residence the

