Swamp thing: Alligators, symbolism, and the meaning of animals in the American south

By

Nathan Drake

Approved by:

Peter C. Messer (Major Professor)
Mark D. Hersey
James C. Giesen
Alexandra Hui
Rick Travis (Dean, College of Arts & Sciences)

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in History
in the Department of History

Mississippi State, Mississippi

May 2020
Humans form lasting and unique relationships with the natural world and, by extension, the organisms and animals who have for millennia carved out niche environments. Scholars and general observers agree—at least in principle—that human beings have actively shaped (for better and for worse) the habitats, behaviors, and population of the Earth’s creatures. In turn, those spaces and animals have influenced not only how humans think of the natural world, but also of humanity itself. Animals, in other words, help humans understand themselves.¹

This dissertation is a history of the American Alligator. A study of human interactions with alligators can reveal not only how humans viewed the animal, but also how they created, recreated, and utilized those representations to meet their own ends. Much of what humans attached to alligators—either positive, negative, or oscillating between—were the results of an internal process of dialogue, culture, and human psychology. In simpler terms, this research investigates how human beings understand themselves and how a particular species fits within human understandings of the “natural” world. A large literature exists on the study of species and, in addition, southern wildlife and ecology.

DEDICATION

Someone once told me that writing history is a downright lonely pursuit. I disagree. Most, if not all, historians collaborate, argue, discuss, and share their ideas and research. That process, moreover, begins early in a student’s graduate career. The notion that historians (and academics generally) are awkward, socially stunted shut-ins is a serious misconception. Without a great deal of help, guidance, criticism, and support, there would be no dissertations—or books for that matter. This dissertation is no different in that regard.

At the University of Southern Indiana, Professors Michael Dixon, Casey Harrison, Ginette Aley, and Christine Lovasz-Kaiser built a foundation from which I could venture out into the world of academia. I still miss their guidance. It took a while, but I established my own academic footing in the mountains of east Tennessee. There, Steve Nash and Tom Lee admirably endured my repeated drop-ins and incessant questions about the field at-large. I understood so little at the time, in retrospect, and only now have a full appreciation for every ounce of patience they displayed and every crumb of advice they provided. Had Steve Nash not arrived at ETSU when he did, I would not be writing these acknowledgments today.

The Department of History at Mississippi State University is, I can assure any reader, a very special place. Even those that were not members of this committee still contributed in meaningful ways, which is often not the case at other institutions. Judy Ridner, Michael Vinson Williams, Jason Ward, Alison Greene, Anne Marshall, Matt Lavine, and Brandon Byrd, all helped guide me through teaching courses and becoming a professional student. Jason K. Phillips
was present and fundamental in the early stages of this project, and he deserves a special thanks for having a lengthy discussion about this dissertation late at night, in Florida, when he undoubtedly had a million better things to do. Also, nearly everything I know about Mississippi State University and other American universities came from Alan Marcus. His office is currently, and will continue to be, a weekly destination.

Peter Messer, Jim Giesen, Mark Hersey, and Alexandra Hui are not only imminent scholars, but also fundamentally good human beings. I have known each of them for the better part of a decade, and not once did any member of that group give less than a million percent of attention, direction, and guidance. They have mentored a host of outstanding students through their academic careers and I am eternally grateful and humbled to be a part of that group. Everything that is good about this dissertation is attributed to them. Any shortcomings are mine.

A host of others deserve thanks, notably Bert Way, Mark Barrow, Emmett Essin, Stephen Fritz, Melvin Page, Elwood Watson, Peter Alagona, Bryant Simon, Claire Strom, Mark Finlay, Brien Henry, Brad Moreland, Rebecca Long, and most certainly Jon T. Coleman. Any significant achievement in academia requires the support of your colleagues. Darnell Holland, Karen Senaga, Owen Hyman, Jason Hauser, Alyssa Warrick, Michael Murphy, Aaron Thomas, Michael Abernethy, and Erin McComb each offered insight and inspiration throughout my graduate career. Laurie Pate, an accomplished scholar in her own right, forced me to sit, read, think, and most importantly, type when I wanted to mow the lawn instead. This project would not have been completed without her. Simple as that. My mother, father, siblings, and grandparents have already received their personalized acknowledgments page.

And finally, this is dedicated to M. and R. You are with me every day.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.................................................................................................................................................. ii

LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................................................................................................... v

CHAPTER

I.  INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................................ 1

II.  CREATING ORDER TO CONTROL FEAR.............................................................................................. 23

III. THIS LITTLE GATOR GOES TO MARKET: ALLIGATORS AS COMMODITIES........................................ 54

IV.  GATOR AID: FROM SWAMP TO FARM............................................................................................... 91

V.  REPTILE RESURRECTION: THE REEMERGENCE OF A SOUTHERN ICON ........................................ 129

VI.  WALT GATOR WORLD: ALLIGATORS, SUBURBIA, AND TROPHY HUNTING.................................. 169

VII. EPILOGUE: COME GATORS AND HIGH WATER................................................................................ 212

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................................... 215
LIST OF FIGURES

1.1 Defending the Village Against an Alligator ..........................................................14
6.1 Wakulla Springs Boat Tour ......................................................................................185
6.2 Family Poses with Record Alligator ......................................................................196
6.3 Alligator Biting Hunter Drawing ...........................................................................209
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Humans form lasting and unique relationships with the natural world and, by extension, the organisms and animals who have for millennia carved out niche environments. Scholars and general observers agree—at least in principle—that human beings have actively shaped (for better and for worse) the habitats, behaviors, and population of the Earth’s creatures. In turn, those spaces and animals have influenced not only how humans think of the natural world, but also of humanity itself. Animals, in other words, help humans understand themselves.²

This dissertation is a history of the American Alligator. A study of human interactions with alligators can reveal not only how humans viewed the animal, but also how they created, recreated, and utilized those representations to meet their own ends. Much of what humans attached to alligators—either positive, negative, or oscillating between—were the results of an internal process of dialogue, culture, and human psychology. In simpler terms, this research investigates how human beings understand themselves and how a particular species fits within human understandings of the “natural” world. A large literature exists on the study of species and, in addition, southern wildlife and ecology. This research builds upon those foundational principles. “Any environmental history,” wrote Albert Cowdrey, “must find an inevitable theme in the increasing human power that tends toward both a more refined stewardship and a more dangerous inadvertency.” Such as the story of humans and the American Alligator. For centuries

humans worked to better understand (and control) the species. By *knowing* the species, the more adept humans could become at both managing their emotional reactions to the animals and, indeed, the animal itself. Throughout that centuries-long process, humans inadvertently pushed the alligator towards extirpation. As a keystone species, alligators’ absence resulted in observable changes to the wetland South and the ecological processes that depended on a healthy population of alligators. The “interface between culture and nature in the region,” through which Cowdrey defined environmental history, is the foundational narrative of this research.³

Most—though not all—of this narrative occurs in Florida. Alligators are, of course, native to the southern United States (and a small portion of Oklahoma), but the Sunshine State is perhaps the most advantageous place to examine the intersections of culture and alligators. After all, as argued by Jack Davis and Raymond Arsenault, “Florida is an outstanding place to study nature’s influence in history in large measure because so many cultures…have interacted with the indigenous environment.” Florida’s marketing of and reliance upon tourism, moreover, meant that cultural interpretations of nature change more rapidly in Florida than perhaps other states or regions. This phenomenon occurs in the pages and chapters that follow, as humans grappled with how to manage or manipulate their emotional responses to alligators and the species’ wetland habitat. “With few exceptions,” Davis and Arsenault continued, “to be *of* nature was to be savage; to be apart from it was civilized.” Such is the crux of this research. For centuries humans imagined and utilized a variety of different agendas all aimed as protecting themselves from nature and, in particular, one of its most potentially fearsome creatures. Humans celebrated the order they imposed upon the species through fashion accessories, outlandish tales

of defeating an alligator Leviathan, confining alligators to farms, and using the species as carnival entertainment. A mixture of folklore, science, hunting, emotions, and ecology, the story of alligators and human interactions is a broad one, and one of importance.  

For more than 200 million years, the American Alligator has inhabited the freshwater ecosystems of the American Southeast. A testament to its iconic status, the American Alligator (Alligator mississippiensis) is the official state reptile of Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Though the largest alligator recorded in the United States stretched nearly 20 feet in length and weighed nearly 1,100 pounds, the typical male alligator ranges between 9-14 feet. Largely carnivorous—though opportunistic feeders, as well—adult alligator diets consist primarily of fish, turtles, and snails. In addition to regulating wildlife populations through their diets, alligators provide beneficial and vital refuges for distressed animals. In instances of severe drought, for example, a variety of wetland species rely on abandoned “gator holes” to both regulate body temperature and combat dehydration. Scientific facts as these, however, only present the alligator in physical form. Facts regarding the physical form of the species establish a material base from which a highly embellished superstructure emerged and grew. Far more important to the history of fear and human interaction were the myriad ways in which humans understood alligators and managed their fear of the species. A story of human fear and alligators, rather than a simple collection of observable facts, places an emphasis on contingency. As the

---

civic, cultural, political and economic workings of society changed, so did the ways in which humans confronted and understood their fear of the unknown—in this case, a large predator and the innate fears of nature its presence stirred. Rather than a linear progression of killing animals to manage their fears and create safe(r) spaces, humans demonstrated psychological flexibility and proved—at least to some degree—ideologically adaptable. As American society matured, those forces required humans to refashion their fear of alligators to suit not only their individual ends, but also those of collective society.

Humans wield incredible power with the ability to define and order the physical world, and in the case of the alligator, those definitions and representations have largely been a manifestation of what humans decide the American Alligator is or should be. The stories and images humans created around the alligator created a psychological space where acts of violence became socially and culturally acceptable. In that sense, humans did not fear or kill alligators to punish the animal for being frightening, but instead acted fearfully and violently towards alligators because the plethora of human-created texts and images gave them cultural and, in some instances, ecological permission.

In recent years, historians of science, technology, and the environment have increasingly contributed to scholarly discussions with ecologists, biologists, and a host of natural scientists. Heightened collaboration between their respective fields, historians argue, is not simply mutually beneficial, but instead an effort to rethink and redefine the contours of academic inquiry. In a 2016 roundtable, Daniel Lord Smail and Philip Ethington argue, “It is no longer possible to think of history simply as the story of humanity, or of ecology only as the story of non-human organisms and their interactions with one another and with habitats and climates.” For Smail and Ethington, “Human history and ‘natural’ history are intertwined. Neither can be understood
without the other.”⁵ Smail and Ethington’s argument, in the most reductive sense, posits the notion that humans cannot (and should not) be separated from the world in which they live.

In Smail’s *On Deep History and the Brain*, he argues that history cannot be separated from culture. Fundamental human emotions—fear, in this case—sparked chemical processes in the brain, compelling humans to create (or manipulate) cultures aimed at satisfying a collective or individual desire. The portions of the human brain responsible for fear and terror are older and more powerful than those of intellectual thought and deep grammar; thus, if humans have feared large predators for millennia, they will continually develop and refashion cultures of fear not only about general wild spaces, but particular species, as well. Culture and human biology, consequently, cannot be separated from natural history. This research extends Smail’s methodology and operates under what Smail describes as a neurohistorical approach, in which, “moods, emotions, and predispositions inherited from the ancestral past, where they evolved at the intersection of human biology and human culture, form a structural backdrop for many things we do and have done.” The emotion of fear, and how humans express or manipulate their fear(s), is often difficult to discern. While fear is occasionally explicit in source material, it is more often nuanced or expressed surreptitiously. Where fear is not explicit in the rhetoric or description of alligators, this project assumes that most humans are afraid of alligators—an important notion for the chapters that follow—as Smail notes, “very few hypotheses deriving from neuropsychology could ever be testable in a historical context. But that is not the point.” Following Smail’s model allows for small instances of assumption, as he continues, “The point is that historians habitually

---

think with psychology anyway. We are prone to making unguarded assumptions about the psychological states of the people we find in our sources.”

“The history of emotions is a burgeoning field,” wrote Jan Plamper, “so much so, that some are invoking an ‘emotional turn.’” Four decades ago, researchers Paul Ekman and Carroll Izard—to further define emotions—concluded, “there were only six biologically based emotions…happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust.” Although human responses to fearsome stimuli vary according to specific scenarios, there was at least a universal agreement that fear was (and remains) a biologically observable and measurable emotion. Barbara Rosenwein argued, “emotional communities were [and are] groups of people who share the same or similar valuations of particular emotions, goals, and norms of emotional expression…the very variety of these communities were themselves agents of change as they interacted with one another and responded to changing circumstances.” For this research, colonial Americans expressed their fears differently than those who participated in airboat tours in the late twentieth century. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for instance, the communities’ emotions were fixated upon controlling what many early American believed to be a chaotic natural world. With a degree of order established—or as circumstances changed—the communities’ emotions shifted to scientific observation and taxonomy, and so on throughout the twentieth century. Equally important, Peter and Carol Stearns’ “emotionology” provides a

---


framework for understanding the variety of ways in which humans expressed their fears across changing circumstances and eras. Within the broader function of emotionology was the argument not only that varying societies expressed emotions over time, but also the institutions that support those societies “reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct.” The degree to which humans possessed a deep, biological fear of alligators is debatable. Much more concrete in the pages that follow is evidence that for several centuries, humans taught other humans to fear alligators and the cultural institutions of America supported and massaged that effort.

Humans hunt, adopt, torture, worship, love, eat, save and most certainly, fear animals. In broad terms, fear is a fundamental, though highly variable human emotion that fluctuates widely across a host of demographic categories. “The state of fear,” argued Robert Gordon, “appears to have been a complex evolutionary experiment, perhaps universal among mammals, involving psychological (especially autonomic) arousal, the riveting of attention, readiness for flight, and a disposition to flee.” Fear is such an ancient and wide-ranging emotion, generally speaking, that humans can recognize its power and manipulate the circumstances upon which fear is centered to further their personal agenda. The general emotion of fear is broad, thus its manifestations between humans and animals can vary widely. Fears or anxieties derived from animal encounters or images vary widely across circumstance, aestheticism, and the personal histories or pathologies of individual people. Animals inspire humans to create diagrams, works of art, develop general and species-specific retail outlets, and have even played a role in driving the advancement of some forms of science and technology. In recent years, moreover, professional

---

and academic biologists, anthropologists, ecologists, and historians are reassessing animals’ roles in human societies in new and exciting ways.

Much of the recent research on the relationship between humans and animals is an effort to destabilize the outdated and mythical perception humans associate with a species. To that end, alligators rarely, if ever, exhibit feeding frenzy-type behavior, and certainly do not relentlessly attack fishermen’s canoes. As of 2004, alligators had claimed the lives of fewer than twenty humans—the overwhelming majority of which occurred in Florida. A few of those cases are disputable, for autopsy officials were unable to determine if the victim was deceased prior to being consumed by alligators. Between 1948 and 2004, moreover, alligators were only responsible for twenty-seven attacks across eight southern states resulting in zero fatalities. By comparison, elephants kill approximately 150-200 people per year in India alone. Even so, elephants have not been the subjects of a prolonged, culturally entrenched narrative of violence and have retained a largely benign symbolism.\(^{13}\) Despite the data on alligator attacks and fatalities, Euroamericans have for centuries invented, embellished, perpetuated, and crafted a thread of alligator folklore and mythology with a violence so persistent and so damaging that the American Alligator teetered on extinction in the early twentieth century South.\(^{14}\)

What humans understood (or knew) about alligators varied over time. As with most human understandings of animals, scientific efforts were often undertaken or published concurrently with popular legends and mythologies. “Both science and popular culture, argued

---


Donna Haraway, are intricately woven of fact and fiction...But the etymology of facts refers us to human action, performance, indeed, to human feats.” Equally important was Harraway’s comparison of fiction. “Fiction can be imagined as a derivative fabricated version of the world and experience...But tones of meaning in fiction make us hear its origin in vision...That is, fiction can be true, known to be true by an appeal to nature.” Humans heard or read stories about alligator aggression for centuries, most of which were sensationalized or embellished. Following Harraway’s model, those stores became, in a sense, true. The result was a creature about which humans had scant scientific knowledge, but volumes of recycled mythical knowledge. Human interactions with alligators, then, were largely derived from misunderstanding. The alligator provided a lens into how humans interpreted information and how they acted upon that information over time.15

This project attempts to connect cultural representations and to explain how largely inaccurate portrayals of the alligator spurred prolonged periods of ecological misunderstanding, widespread killing, fervent conservation, boosting tourism, and the creation of physical and psychological boundaries between humans and the species. The result was an animal through which humans expressed their attraction to and fear of wildlife, practiced traditional agriculture, embraced the market economy, composed conservation legislation, and reimagined their twenty-first century relationship with large predators. This project lays out the volatile, nuanced relationship Americans have had with alligators, and in turn demonstrates the species’ turbulent history throughout the southern United States. Fear, and how humans confronted it, explained why and how humans organized their thoughts about animals and, in addition, how they

physically situated themselves in relation to the natural world. Fear explained why humans wanted both to kill—and later—save alligators. Humans need things to fear and rely heavily upon the chemical responses in the brain produced by that emotion. The American Alligator is a window into how humans decided not only what things to fear—but more importantly—how they managed, manipulated, and confronted those fears over time.

This research ultimately demonstrates that powerful, though frequently vague human emotions—examined through the lens of the American Alligator—drove competition not simply between humans and animals, but also between human individuals and groups. The conflict—at least superficially—appeared to be between humans and alligators, but that was the result of competition rather than the cause. Humans were at once creating cultures of fear and subsequently manipulating cultural narratives to suit not the needs not of a prolonged historical era, but instead their most immediate desires. Humans vied for power not solely over the American Alligator, but power over rival strains of political, social, economic, and environmental thought.

Fear of large carnivores has accompanied the development of Homo sapiens through millennia. Author David Quammen wrote, “Every once in a while, a monstrous carnivore emerged like doom from a forest or a river to kill someone and feed on the body. It was a familiar sort of disaster—like auto fatalities today—that must have seemed freshly, shockingly gruesome each time, despite the familiarity.” The shared experience of becoming prey for a large carnivore has evolved with humans, Quammen continued, noting, “Among the earliest forms of human self-awareness was the awareness of being meat.”

place in human psychology. “What makes predators unusually compelling for so many of us,” argued Dan Flores, “lies deeply enough in the human psyche that it could be called a genetic memory. We identify with them because we too emerged out of the dim, hazy consciousness of our early origins to find ourselves fellow carnivores and pursuers of prey.” Most humans, moreover, perceived apex predators as a threat to human supremacy and pitted our ideological and physical battles against them with special fear and effort. “To confront a predator,” Flores continued, “is to stand before the dual-faced god from our deep past. That is why we look longer, more intently, with more studies fascination at predators than at other kinds of animals.”

Prolonged, consistent fear and anxiety of particular animals falls under more generalized definitions of the phenomena. “Anxiety,” wrote Thierry Steimer, “is a psychological, physiological, and behavioral state induced in animals and humans by a threat to well-being, either actual or perceived.” The anxiety in this research is limited to a generalized anxiety rather than pathological anxiety which presents major challenges to “cope successfully with life challenges.” Steimer cited and built upon the work of Charles Letourneau, whose 1878 title, Physiologie des passions, argued that “emotions are intimately linked with organic life.” From the late nineteenth century, psychologists understood the power of human emotions. Powerful human emotions—fear and anxiety—drove a multitude of human actions. The lens of fear helps explain the variety of environmental choices humans made over time. The mechanism and the function of fear and anxiety, as accepted by modern neuroscience, operate within three separate but “closely interrelated” categories: psychological, physiological, and behavioral. The degree to

17 Flores, Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History, 13.
19 Charles Letourneau in Steimer, 231.
which one category influences or produces an effect on another is the subject to deep scholarly debate, yet researchers at least accept the notion that most of the basic human emotions necessary for survival—happiness, sadness, fear, or anxiety—produce responses from or (in most cases) all of these categories.\(^\text{20}\)

Fear and anxiety, for the purposes of this research, are approached as similar but separate phenomena. Fear, defined by an object or present danger, differs from anxiety, which is most often derived from uncertainty or other internal cognitive function. Many of the inert processes of fear are central to human survival. Fear and anxiety, however, can be conditioned in mammals within a comparatively quick timeframe and done so using only visual cues. Building on the work of Pavlov, Steimer displayed a series of images to rats that depicted a threatening stimulus accompanied by small doses of electricity. After minimal engagements, Steimer removed the electric shock from the experiment and noted, “animals will experience a state of conditioned fear when only the [visual] cue is present.”\(^\text{21}\) While humans were not subject to electric shocks and images of fear-inducing animals, the production of animals was not only embedded into modern culture, but largely done so to provoke fear of the species—in similar fashion as lions, sharks, and other large predators. From early depictions of smoke-breathing mythological creatures to twentieth century images of hunters posing beside behemoth dead predators, the representations were visual examples of humans negotiating their internal relationship with fear and their external relationship with the natural world.

Fearing alligators came quite easily to Americans whom, well into the twentieth century, drew a direct intellectual connection between more aggressive crocodilian species and their


American cousins. “First,” wrote David Quammen, “crocodiles are stealthy—amazingly so, for such large beasts...Strong as they are, quick as they are, they take people by surprise, not just by quickness and strength.” Quammen also argues that an added horror is the not simply the fear of being killed by an animal but being eaten by one. Humans are afraid of many animals for a multitude of reasons, but they exhibit a distinctive terror at the prospect of being consumed by another animal. The more humans understood (and witnessed) the alligator’s power to maim, kill, and consume, the more personally and culturally embedded their fear could become.

Scientists, artists, and nature writers had composed depictions of alligators for centuries, some more visually threatening than others. During the mid-sixteenth century, French artist Jacques le Moyne etched a series of engravings to capture the sociopolitical and cultural structure of Native Americans in Florida. Amongst those images was a depiction of men defending their village against two invading alligators. Le Moyne’s alligators—largely recognized as the first European depictions of the species—are disproportionately large and appear both menacing and as possessing human-like physical features. Each alligator possessed highly distinguishable ears, fingers, and round pupils rather than elliptical pupils common to most crocodilian species. Such inaccuracies suggest that Le Moyne either indulged in artistic license or, worse yet, depicted an event he never witnessed.

23 Jacques Le Moyne, Plate XXVI, “Le Moyne Gallery,” Special Collections Department, University of South Florida 
Fear responses in the human brain, though physiological and innate to human survival, are often reinforced by cultural cues. The textual and visual representations of alligators, as late as the early twentieth century, echoed descriptions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—a practice that, over time, molded fear and fantasy into culturally acceptable fact. “The literature relating to crocodilian activities,” wrote Wilfred Neill, “has been further modified by the psychology of authors who, in many cases, have been reluctant to abandon tradition or even question it, and who have sometimes tried to seem knowledgeable by presenting the old folk fallacies as though they were personal observations.” The traditions of which Neill noted, particularly those of the colonial period and early republic, relied less upon careful, balanced observation, and more upon the typical behaviors of the Nile crocodile. Early American observers understood (to a large degree) that the Nile crocodile and American Alligator were different species, but obvious similarities in appearance and wetland habitat allowed authors and artists to conflate the two species. In that context, the Nile crocodile was aggressive and
territorial, and the American Alligator looked quite similar, so it too must share nearly identical behavioral traits. In this sense, the American Alligator has long existed not entirely as its biological and physiological self, but instead a creation, or representation, of the human psyche. Beyond the shrewd scientific studies of the late twentieth century, published accounts of alligator history and behavior, Wilfred Neill noted, “[were] riddled with half-truths and misinterpretations, many of which have not been discovered; it is still beset with folktales, legends, and myths, many of which have gone unrecognized as such.”

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, photographic images cemented the fear of alligators and crocodilians. In 1966, William Olsen, a recent Ivy League graduate, was in Ethiopia on a Peace Corps mission. While swimming in the Baro River, Olson was attacked and killed by a Nile crocodile. News of Olson’s death appeared in Time, and the images of Olson’s severed legs and pelvis appeared in a 1973 work by Alistair Graham titled, Eyelids of Morning: The Mingled Destinies of Crocodiles and Men. Graham’s motivation to include gruesome images is noteworthy, as he was advocating that all large-predators should be eradicated from the planet. Graham understood the general fear of crocodilians, and used these images to further his efforts, noting, “So long as one is constantly threatened by savage brutes one is to some extent bound in barbarism. . . For this reason there is in man a cultural instinct to separate himself from and destroy wild beasts such as crocodiles.” Nile crocodiles are decidedly more aggressive and territorial than the American Alligator. The generic physical characteristics, however, in concert with horrific descriptions and photos of severed human body parts produce

25 Quammen, Monster of God, 127-130.
26 Alistair Graham in Quammen, Monster of God, 128.
the same type of physical reaction within the human psyche. The biological, ecological, and behavioral nuances between the two species became irrelevant once humans were exposed to ghastly imagery. As humans began to understand more about the American Alligator over the course of a few centuries, conflating the two species was less common. Despite a growing literature and knowledge of the alligator, however, humans still operated under the assumption that alligators should be feared. Even those who called for its protection, did so because of the alligator’s fearsome reputation. Humans feared alligators but did not attempt to obliterate the species from the planet. Rather, that fear drove them to redefine and, in some instances, rearrange their temporal and spatial settings.

The American Alligator has historical power. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its power sparked artistic, intellectual, and anatomical curiosity. The alligator’s animal body was powerful (and valuable) enough to satisfy the materialistic excesses of a rapidly expanding market economy. The procession of time and power, however, is not static. Humans did not use the alligator’s power as motivation for violence for a set period of time. While hunters and entrepreneurs raided alligator nests, essayists used alligators as a medium for didactic and moral folklore. With large alligators measuring more than twelve feet long, bearing armor-like scales and long teeth, it has the physical presence to incite fear, but also the nostalgic character to appear as an icon of the southern environment and garner human sympathy.

The legacy of fear toward wilderness and many species of wildlife to which Jay Mechling, Angus Gillespie, and John Stilgoe alluded is indeed powerful, but wildlife folklore is only half of the equation. What possesses individuals to act on those principles? It is one thing to

---

27 Br’er Gator was a character in the *Uncle Remus Stories* collected by Joel Chandler Harris during the late nineteenth century.
fear alligators, it is quite another to ruthlessly pursue, harass, and execute them for centuries. When humans kill alligators, they do so not only because they are afraid of alligators, but rather because the culture in which they live prescribes and ultimately condones such behavior. In this sense, humans create sensational (and exaggerated) tales of smoke breathing dragons and, in turn, feel compelled to justify and perpetuate those myths through the killing of alligators. In the case of the alligator, human actions were governed less by reasoned foresight and more by the cultural myths, rumors, and folktales that saturated society. For American wildlife, the most fitting example is Jon T. Coleman’s *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America*. Coleman traced the trajectory of the relationship between Euroamericans and wolves. In a pitched battle for biological transcendence, Coleman argued, most early American settlers “shared a conviction that wolves not only deserved death but deserved to be punished for living.”

Coleman’s work, moreover, demonstrated the persistence of wolf hatred. Nineteenth-century Mormons, for instance, did not need to kill wolves any more than colonial New Englanders; they merely believed they needed to do so. As such, the final culprits were neither humans themselves nor biological evolution, but rather the Euroamerican conception of property and circulation of violent folklore. Alligators and wolves, of course, differ greatly both in appearance and behavior. Alligators, after all, are not pack animals and do not travel great distances in search of food. Both species, however, wield extensive power over the human imagination. Alligators were a fundamental component of the southern landscape and, as such, required humans not only to construct a specific environmental vision but also to reassess that vision as circumstances changed. Alligators did constitute a threat to the property of landholders

---

and farmers, often killing wayward livestock. Even more frightening, however, was their ability to consume humans as food. The fear of alligators was deeper and more complex because the species posed an imminent threat—whether actual or perceived—to human life rather than only livestock. Humans constructed folklore around wolves’ ability to not only take livestock, but also their ‘mystical’ powers. Alligators, in the human descriptions, wielded no magical or mystifying powers of the wilderness. The rhetoric of fear surrounding alligators was instead a very real and immediate threat to life and limb. Alligators, as humans described, did not need supernatural powers to corrupt the human soul, for they could simply devour it in an instant. The alligator, then, was symbolically linked with human death. As the market for alligator skins and by-products increased during the late nineteenth century, for example, so did the killing of alligators through southern swamps. Treating each animal as a symbol or icon, moreover, provides a context from which stories and images emerged. Symbols—much like paintings and literature—are ultimately another avenue through which to express political, economic, and cultural language. Not only was that society undergoing a scientific and nature-centric transformation, but political, economic, and social implications are becoming increasingly pertinent. Utilizing an animal as a symbol, moreover, allowed humans the flexibility to manipulate its image.

Chapter One argues that early American settlers, used the fear of alligators as a mechanism to bring order to a chaotic, dangerous, and largely unfamiliar natural world. Natural philosophers, botanical collectors, physicians, and amateur naturalists were all “engaged in radically new ways of organizing ideas about the nonhuman world.” 29 Alligators not only provided early Americans with an example of impressive domestic wildlife, the reptiles’

---

resemblance to ancient dragons provided evidence that America’s natural history rivaled that of any powerful society. Early North American interactions with alligators, then, highlight the emergence of natural history in the early colonial period and, moreover, how early American nature writers politicized animals to satisfy their imperial impulses. The competition for power in this chapter is between poles of intellectual and political influence between Europe and North America. Ideas regarding animals, religious or otherwise, traveled across the Atlantic to North America and, although not necessarily applicable, were superimposed onto native wildlife and their habitats. Rather than a colossal divide, then, the Atlantic served as a medium of intellectual and environmental change. In this sense, alligator stories in early America were a hybrid of old cultural traditions meshed with an emerging sense of national identity. A comparatively new world filled with unfamiliar species meant that early Americans needed to develop new narratives designed to manage their fear. The American Alligator was a lens into that psychological, cultural, civic, and environmental process.

Another central focus of the first chapter is the role of the observer and the inclination (or perceived need) to classify and order the natural world. The method and system described by Michel Foucault—of assigning names and titles to species—was as much a linguistic revolution as a biological one. The observer played a crucial role throughout this process, as eighteenth and nineteenth century naturalists utilized comparative analysis to determine family and genus. More complicated still was the direct knowledge of the individuals who attempted to bring epistemological order the natural world. Once animals were classified and ordered, humans could begin the psychological process of assigning value to suit their needs and desires.

In Chapter Two, fear of alligators is manifested in two separate, yet loosely-connected, ideologies. The first manifestation of fear in the early nineteenth century was the scientific effort
to understand the biology, physiology, and behavior of alligators. The early national period was a stage for epistemological debate between the North America and Western Europe. Susan Scott Parrish argues that the exchange of knowledge between the colonies and the metropole was horizontal rather than vertical. This chapter will echo her argument and, in doing so, speak specifically to the intellectual debate of differentiating the American Alligator and the American Crocodile. Though the efforts of early natural scientists were scientific in principle, the cultural ethos of fear—in concert with fear impulses in human brain chemistry—inherently and indirectly shaped their observations, experiments, and tactics. Chapter Two will examine the growth of the less defined fear of Bartram’s era into violent action, in effect the exploitation of the animal and its market value.

Alligator farms and theories of captivity will be the primary focus of Chapter Three. Alligator farms initially served two fundamental purposes: to entertain humans and to conserve the species. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth, a number of conservation-minded alligator enthusiasts, coupled with a handful of upstart entrepreneurs, began confining dozens—and occasionally hundreds—of alligators to facilitate breeding and to promote tourism. Fear of alligators in that era pivoted between the fear of losing the species and the more innate and archaic fear of alligators as predators. The fear of losing alligators ignited a sense to conserve and accumulate numerous animals in one place, while alligator farmers relied upon and even encouraged the traditional fear of alligators for monetary gain. Alligator farms are operations where humans created spaces—typically far away from city centers—to remove portions of the population from direct, broad interaction. More specifically, however, fear of alligators drove human beings to confine the species. Separating and confining the species was an effort to control not simply the species, but part of larger effort
to create safe spaces into which humans could venture and exploit less lethal flora and fauna. Chapter Three examines how fear operated differently within each of these interactions between humans and alligators, but ultimately argues that although fear oscillated with each activity, it still drove the motivations of alligator wrestlers, breeders, and researchers.

Chapter Four will examine the early conservation efforts (or lack thereof). Whereas large-scale efforts to save bison and wetland birds gained national support (aided in no small part by powerful interest groups like the Audubon Society and the American Bison Society), the American Alligator did not capture the attention of conservationists. Alligators benefited indirectly from these campaigns, as conservationists cloaked their language in the conservation of wetland environments. Conservation advocates could hardly convince hunters and trappers to save snowy egrets and green herons, but the preservation of their habitats would keep hunters (and poachers) in flesh and feather for generations. I argue here that fear is an essential component of why humans actively seek “nature” experiences. Though humans want to feel safe in the neighborhoods and on their sidewalks (as argued in a later chapter), they expect and often encourage an element of danger during outdoor activities.

On the heels of a largely successful conservation effort by the American Alligator Council and Florida wildlife officials, Chapter Five will argue that alligators were one of the leading reasons for the rise of tourism in Florida. Alligators became a star attraction in Florida as vacationers gasped at the alligator wrestling shows and even, on a few occasions, were able to interact directly with the star animals themselves. Historians have (rightly so) overwhelmingly pointed to the rise of Florida’s industrial power as the primary reason for the huge surge in post-war population. Through postcards, pamphlets, and newspaper articles, I will argue that Florida’s unique and “exotic” wildlife was part and parcel of its growth as a twentieth century
tourist destination. This chapter will also trace the resurrection of the alligator in the South. As alligator populations began to rebound after several decades of conservation, southern states began placing legal restrictions on hunting and setting bag limits. This is another crucial transition for how people perceive alligators. The alligator was no longer simply an item for purses, boots, and handbags, but instead became targets of trophy hunters and hunting enthusiasts. Using alligators as a lens in this context can help us understand the process by which hunters became modern conservationists (or claimed to be).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, humans managed their fear of alligators through institutional and societal control—alligators were to be industrialized. Human fear of alligators was tightly compacted into farms, zoos, parks, calendars, and hunting seasons. Similar to other large North American carnivores, humans can present the animal as game, an icon, or a dangerous nuisance—all of which were useful in a highly industrialized modern society.
CHAPTER II
CREATING ORDER TO CONTROL FEAR

Jacques Le Moyne, a traveling French artist, arrived in 1564 to document the native inhabitants and geographical features of northern Florida. Le Moyne sketched images of the Timucua Indians’ cultural and social practices. Designed for European eyes, Le Moyne’s sketches enjoyed broad appeal when, in 1591, three years after Le Moyne’s death, engraver Theodore DeBry carved Le Moyne’s sketches. Amongst Le Moyne’s engravings was a depiction of Timucua Indians defending their village against two marauding alligators. By Le Moyne’s representation, subduing the intruders required thirteen men. The size and scale of each alligator, moreover, was depicted as considerably larger than a Timucuan dwelling. The creature’s physical appearance only vaguely resembled that of an actual alligator—Le Moyne’s images displaying human–like ears and fingers with a spiked vertebrae.30

Whether or not Le Moyne actually witnessed the event, or had ever seen an alligator, was unclear and arguably irrelevant. If Le Moyne witnessed the event, he purposefully depicted the animal as not only being significantly larger than an actual alligator but also more aesthetically intimidating and ferocious. If he was not at the scene, then his representation had been fashioned from travelers’ accounts of dragon-like creatures (or Nile Crocodiles) in distant lands. Whatever the scenario, mythology and fear surrounded the alligator from its first widely distributed

---

appearance in the sixteenth century. Le Moyne’s engravings would—at least in some measure—influence not only his European contemporaries but also those who later ventured to North, Central, and South America in the coming centuries. The early images of alligators gave humans a visual “thing” upon which they could direct their fears. As mammals, humans had always been fearful of external threats, so Lemoyne’s depiction provided “Example A.” Early settlers then began to orient their physical (landschaft) and psychological (order) lives in accordance with their collective fear(s). Safety and security from what may—or may not have been—lurking on the fringes of the wild became a daily and prolonged undertaking.

Seventeenth-and eighteenth-century travelers created a mythology around the American Alligator. Some did so knowingly and with an agenda; some did so out of simple misunderstanding. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, travelers penetrated to the interior of North America. In 1699, the Iberville expedition trekked along the Mississippi River and encountered an “infinite number of alligators.” Alligators remained largely on the cultural periphery of North American consciousness until the final decades of the eighteenth century, when a noted scientist and naturalist thrust the species into the public spotlight.

Mastery of nature, the prevailing wisdom in early modern Europe, shaped and guided the images and rhetoric of eighteenth-century scientists, naturalist, and authors. William Bartram, who in the last third of the eighteenth century penned a substantial written account of alligators in Florida, sensationalized his interactions with alligators and, in so doing, presented the alligator as something to be feared. To be sure, Bartram was a scientist, and familiar with a relative of the American Alligator—the Nile crocodile. Whether he did so intentionally or not, Bartram

---

attached a handful of behaviors and characteristics of the more aggressive Nile crocodile to the alligators in Florida. Bartram, then, used the images and texts of fearsome alligators not to kill, maim, and torture alligators, but instead to legitimize North American natural history in the face of European skepticism. He did so, moreover, on the rhetorical heels of a few earlier natural scientists who described the alligator in a largely negative and fearsome manner. Though Bartram described the physical characteristics in some detail, his primary literary purpose did not appear to be one of scientific classification and taxonomy. Rather, he created an idea of the alligator, both in text and in image—and that image was a frightful one. By presenting alligators in this manner, and subduing them with a weaponized boat oar, Bartram could create the image of a fearful animal and his mastery both of the alligator and the fear it provoked.

The stories that Bartram and his contemporaries told, moreover, occurred in a rather unique temporal and spatial setting. Eighteenth-century nature writers were at once representative of older, more archaic cultural legacies, but also actively shaping a new cultural narrative for a comparatively new audience. As noted by Ashton Nichols, “Bartram’s work was also linked to much wider, even global, connections among explorers, collectors, scientists, and nature writers.”32 Bartram’s alligators differed from LeMoyne’s because Bartram observed alligators within the context of a different culture and, most especially, under different political and historical circumstances. LeMoyne, after all, was a French artist while Bartram was a scientist and a Quaker from Pennsylvania. Although the images they created were markedly different, each produced a similar psychological reaction and, in addition, each devoted special attention to protecting themselves from alligators.

Many of the intrepid travelers who ventured onto American shores and soils arrived with not only material goods but also complex conceptions of wildlife and its cultural significance. The cultural and social symbols Europeans attached to American wilderness—and most especially the wildlife within that realm—were developed over several centuries and, perhaps more importantly, deeply rooted in folklore, mythology, and religious theory. Much of that cultural legacy, moreover, exhibited a pronounced tenor of fear. So much in fact, as John R. Stilgoe argued, fear of wilderness and wildlife manifested itself in the configuration of the early modern village, or *landschaft*.

Pre-industrial religious dogma identified wilderness as a feasting ground for predatory, demonic beasts. As such, only a tightly ordered and well-maintained spatial configuration could protect both the human body and the celestial soul from the wicked, satanic creatures born of wildwood. An unkempt *landschaft*, therefore, invited not only threats from the animalistic realm, but also from “human evils.” Witches, hermits, and lurchers, spiritually and vitally contaminated by the seductive and mystical wilderness, stalked the unmanaged fringes of the early modern stead. Although modern society has largely accepted the notion that humans are animals, sixteenth and seventeenth century religious doctrine drew a sharp distinction between humans and animals. Humans, according to Judeo-Christian belief, had unrivaled dominion over wildlife and could utilize wildlife however they saw fit. In early America—a society spatially and temporally contextualized by religion—violence against animals was not only accepted but also divinely ordained. Village construction and orientation in early modern Europe in concert with archaic religious traditions might seem a strange place to begin a history of alligators, but such a
discussion—albeit a brief one—demonstrates the fantastic power that the fears of wilderness and of wild animals have on a particular society.\footnote{John R. Stilgoe, \textit{Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 3-21; Joyce E. Salisbury, \textit{The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages}, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1-8.}

The \textit{landschaft} model was a psychological exercise designed at creating safety and control, in effect, a conscious effort to manage fear. The physical configuration of homesteads, barns, and ancillary structures was a logistical operation by early Americans to help them feel safe and secure—both physically and emotionally. The \textit{landschaft}, moreover, was constantly evolving to meet the physical demands (and psychological desires) of eighteenth-century Americans. As scientists, writers, and naturalists disseminated an increasing amount of information about the continent, humans updated their \textit{landschaft} model. Although spatial configurations were variable, the primary motivation of safety remained a constant.

Eighteenth century North America, to many of its inhabitants, appeared as a disordered landscape. The \textit{landschaft} model they and their forbearers had carved into the western European landscape had eventually led to highly ordered and tightly managed parcels of land. They had created spaces where nature’s dangers—largely imagined—and wild animals could be comfortably managed, if not generally ignored. North America presented a new challenge, however, as a host of Europeans from varied backgrounds and even more varied motivations confronted a comparatively strange natural world. By the middle of the eighteenth century, North American residents were not wholly ignorant of the continent’s flora and fauna, nor were they seasoned naturalists. They understood enough about their natural surroundings to realize one thing: they \textit{knew} it needed to be organized and subdued. Doing so was paramount to the imperial vision. The backwoods and outlying regions of colonial America—frightful and dangerous—
were a hindrance not simply to practical human advancement, but also to the burgeoning American spirit. Conquering wildness, or at least reducing and reorganizing it, was as much an ideological pursuit as a tangible one. Early American needed to prove to themselves they could wrestle a civilization out of what they viewed as a harmful and potentially lethal natural world. Only with the confidence of achieving this environmental and psychological triumph, could the economic and civic structures succeed.\textsuperscript{34}

Creating safer places meant domination (and ordering) of the land and the species therein. The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were the setting for the first steps toward domination. Humans in later decades and centuries continued that tradition, though some occasionally strayed from the median. The centuries that follow were a series of rhetorical and linguistic battles within humans and how they imagined their future within the natural world, where individuals and communities could control or distance themselves from the elements of nature that appeared to impede human progress and comfort.

Towards the middle of the eighteenth century, hunters, writers, and scientists began to temporarily leave the security of the \textit{landschaft} to conduct the initial (European) observations on the natural history of North America. From those efforts came descriptions of plants, animals, and natural processes and, in effect, the effort to control. Describing a particular plant or animal—depending on the observer—was innocuous enough. Attaching names, physical characteristics, and behavior patterns, however, was a calculated effort at control. The more humans could know about a species, the more easily they could organize it into tight psychological compartments. After all, the process and language of taxonomy was the human endeavor to manage their fear of the unfamiliar. Peter Hanns Reill argued that a logical,

mathematical approach to understanding the natural world provided order. “A mathematical
description of reality [classifying] was seen as the way to escape the perceived horrors of
contingent, and hence, unsure knowledge. The mechanical philosophy,” he continued, “offered a
haven for many…seeking intellectual and emotional security in a world marked by chaos, unrest,
and revolution.”35 Classifying and assigning degrees of value to the natural world was, as early
as the seventeenth century, an effort to subdue the unknown. “As the English catalogued their
accomplishments,” argued Joyce Chaplin, “they defined an affinity between themselves and
American environments which promised that they could dominate America instead of
themselves being transformed by it.”36 The American Alligator is a lens into that intellectual and
linguistic process.

Mark Catesby’s description of alligators spoke to an international audience. In The
Natural History of Florida, Carolina, and the Bahama Islands, Catesby provided both his
domestic and foreign readers with dazzling accounts of alligators. “In Jamaica and many Parts of
the Continent they are found above twenty Foot in Length: They cannot be more terrible in their
Aspect than they are formidable, and mischievous in their Natures, sparing neither Man nor
Beast they can surprize, pulling them under Water, that being dead, they may with greater
Facility and without Struggle, or Resistance, devour them.” Catesby’s depiction of alligators as
mischievous and terrible was highly effectual. Most of Catesby’s readers, situated primarily in
England and in the settled areas of North America, possessed comparatively little knowledge
about alligators and, much less, had ever seen a live alligator. With a stroke of his pen, and a nod
from Hans Sloane, Catesby at once echoed medieval reptile narratives and crafted a new story

36 Joyce Chaplin, Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500-1676
that highlighted the supposed violent nature of alligators. “In South Carolina,” continued Catesby, “they are very rat numerous, but the Northern Situation of that Country, occasions their being of a smaller Size than those nearer the Line, and they rarely attack Men or Cattle, yet are great Devourers of Hogs.” Drawing from these linguistic images—violent, aggressive alligators infesting the southern landscape—it is little wonder why humans exhibit unmitigated brutality when faced with alligators. In other words, the seeds of a culture of violence germinated, in many instances, long before any of Catesby’s readers interacted with an alligator—if in fact they ever did. ³⁷

Humans had long read and heard cautionary tales about large dragons and beasts. “Europeans looked to the Bible, noted Vaughn Glasgow, “and found Ezekiel speaking of ‘the great dragon that lieth in the midst of the Pharaoh’s rivers. From the Book of Job, the dredged up the Leviathan, which despite its lovely ‘eyelids of the morning’ was a fierce fighter with an impenetrable covering of scales.”³⁸ Words and phrases, especially those from direct interaction and experience, carried with them a great deal weight and were a direct correlation to human thought and interaction with the observed species. The degree to which alligators attacked humans or livestock was less developed in the colonial period, but early writers insisted on one common theme: the animal should be feared. Alligators, if not a direct threat to human lives, was at the very least a clear and present danger to livestock, which were the tools of colonization and economic progress. Alligators, because they feasted on cattle and hogs, were an impediment to colonial advancement. Linguistic and psychological subjugation of potentially dangerous animals was equally important to the colonial project as physical domination. The emotion of

fear was static, but the ways in which humans manipulated that fear were contingent upon societal visions and contingencies. Catesby’s descriptions of alligators also engaged ideas of the Enlightenment. “Normalization, rationalization, domestication—key themes in the research of eighteenth-century monsters—are closely connected to the idea of the Enlightenment,” wrote Lise Camilla Ruud. Catesby and his contemporaries wrote with the purpose of, “reducing the unknown by explaining the natural world through empirically based knowledge, and of establishing order and rationalizing the world through the classification of the natural world itself.”\(^\text{39}\)

In 1774 Oliver Goldsmith—inspired by Buffon—depicted crocodiles and alligators (though Goldsmith conflated caiman and alligators) as animals not only to be feared but also associated with “uncivilized” peoples and lands. “To look for this animal in all its natural terrors, grown to an enormous size, propagated in surprising numbers, and committed unceasing devastations, we must go to the uninhabited regions of Africa and America […] where arts have never penetrated, where force only makes distinction, and the most powerful animals exert their strength with confidence and security.”\(^\text{40}\) By associating alligators and crocodiles with “less civilized” people and places, Goldsmith contributed to the theory of degeneracy and to the alligator’s reputation as an animal to be feared—the latter a tactic that would continue well into nineteenth century North American rhetoric. That ethnic argument was powerful tonic to interested humans. Through a racial, ethnocentric, and human-centric ideology, humans could


transform places deemed as uncivilized—rife with uncivilized people and animals—into safer spaces where the imperial model could continue.

Goldsmith’s description of the physical animal appeared as if he were describing a beast in a mythological horror story: “the animal grows to great length, being sometimes found thirty feet long, [...] the fore legs had the same parts and conformation as the arms of a man, both within and without. The hands, if they may be so called, had five fingers; the last two of which had no nails, and were of a conical figure.” Goldsmith appeared to be undertaking two tasks: making a concerted, scientific effort to accurately describe crocodilian species and, equally important, instilling a sense of fear about the animal by adding the description that the animal “could easily enough take in the body of a man.”

Not only was the physical animal daunting, but its behavior, according to Goldsmith, added to the fear. “In the times of inundation, they sometimes enter the cottages of natives, where the dreadful visitant seizes the first animal it meets with,” and akin to Bartram’s account noted, “There have been several examples of their taking a man out of a canoe in the fight of his companions, without their being able to lend him any assistance.” Goldsmith then offered an explanation why travelers and naturalists had recorded inconsistencies in the behavior of crocodilians. For Goldsmith, the species’ behavior varied according to locale and, at least by his definition, level of civilization. “The truth is,” he argued, “the animal has been justly described by both; being such that it is found in places differently peopled or differently civilized.”

Human beings appeared to modify crocodilian behavior, for, “Wherever the crocodile has reigned long unmolested, it is there fierce, bold and dangerous; wherever it has been harassed by

---

42 Goldsmith, Of the Crocodile,” 125, 132.
mankind it retreats invaded, and its numbers destroyed, it is there timorous and inoffensive.”

Goldsmith was ultimately discussing power. Humans, at least those with what Goldsmith deemed appropriate civilization, could subdue large and potentially dangerous species. Much of the racial rhetoric in his description of African peoples bore a striking similarity to the early newspaper articles that would emerge later in nineteenth century North America. The image of alligators Goldsmith created was in the same vein as Bartram. To both observers, alligators were dangerous, could instantly remove humans form boats, yet were eventually defeated—giving hope to the mission of early American safety and security and, later in the nineteenth century, convincing droves of Americans to travel beyond the landschaft to establish order in new spaces.

Goldsmith also authored a history of quadrupeds, in which he not only described various processes by which animals behave and propagate but also saved a special place on his list for reptiles. “Thus Nature seems kindly careful for the protection of the meanest of her creatures: but there is one class of quadrupeds that seems entirely left to chance, that no parent stands forth to protect, nor no instructor leads, to teach the arts of subsistence. These are the…lizard, the tortoise, and the crocodile.” Without a host of other animals to destroy newborn reptiles, Goldsmith claimed, “they would soon over-run the earth, and cumber all our plains with deformity.” Few would have disagreed with Goldsmith’s suggestions, and, indeed, much of that sentiment remained a fundamental component of human perception—and rhetoric—of alligators well into the middle of the twentieth century. Adhering to the landschaft ideology, then, was an effort to avoid the perceived ills in Goldsmith’s descriptions. As these types of observations slowly permeated society—and as the public’s view began to shape those

observations—there appeared to be little difference in the behavior of Nile Crocodiles and American Alligators. Alligators always looked dangerous, but science had given humans additional permission to fear alligators. As the fear grew, the more ways in which humans needed to manage or manipulate that fear were created. Many of those decisions would unfold over the course of centuries, but during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, alligators were not commodities or deserving of positive societal status. They were to be feared and, if possible, killed on sight. Personal encounters with alligators often followed this cultural ethos and, of course, published in increasingly available circulations.

In the spring of 1774, noted botanist and naturalist William Bartram observed the setting Florida sun and intended to catch a few fish before his evening repose. Between the crappie-rich lagoon and William Bartram, however, lurked a grave and formidable danger. “His enormous body swells. His painted tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils.”45 Even those unfamiliar with southern wildlife can recognize that William Bartram was painting a rich, verbal tapestry of perhaps the South’s most iconic reptile—the American Alligator. Bartram’s depiction, though laden with powerful descriptors and adjectives, was an expression more of cultural mythology than of balanced observation. To date, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service possesses no record of smoke breathing reptiles in the American South. More telling than Bartram’s physical description of the creature was the chronicle of his rather short canoe ride to the edge of the lagoon. “I was attacked on all sides,” Bartram claimed, “several endeavoring to overset the canoe.” The hungry traveler’s peril only mounted. “They struck their

jaws together so close to my ears, as almost to stun me, and I expected every moment to be dragged out of the boat and instantly devoured.”

Alligators also seem to “roar.” William Bartram certainly thought so. Bartram interpreted alligator roars as primordial aggression intended to establish territory and to attract a potential mate. Miscommunication between alligators and humans fostered a number of activities that ultimately produced negative consequences for both parties. Those misinterpretations were, however, symptomatic of a larger phenomenon in which the circulation of folklore, myth, and rumors feed a culture of violence and fear.

More than a meandering naturalist, William Bartram was a respected member of the colonial scientific community. In addition to his work in botany, Bartram was also a skilled storyteller and, as such, recognized that sensational stories of man versus wilderness carried with them significant cultural and socioeconomic benefits. His father, John Bartram embarked on a scientific sojourn into Florida in 1765. William, who accompanied his father on the initial sojourn, visited the same patch of Florida savannah that his father did only a decade earlier. William was a scientist, but a scientist with aesthetic tendencies—as seen in his writings on alligators. The younger Bartram wanted to see an “enchanted” Florida, rather than simply record and publish cold scientific observations. The alligator, complete with its mythic history, captured Bartram’s attention. Bartram’s penchant for romantic and nature writing found an appropriate and fascinating reptilian vehicle and established “root-taking” in North America.

Bartram was neither the first nor the last to propagate alligator myths. Indeed, descriptions of alligators (and crocodiles) were present both in a variety of religious texts and

---

46 Bartram, Travels, 115.
The stories that Bartram and his contemporaries told, however, occurred in a rather unique temporal and spatial setting. Eighteenth-century nature writers were at once representative of older, more archaic cultural legacies but also actively shaped a new cultural narrative for a comparatively new audience. In this sense, alligator stories in early America were a hybrid of old cultural traditions meshed with an emerging sense of national identity. As noted by Ashton Nichols, “Bartram’s work was also linked to much wider, even global, connections among explorers, collectors, scientists, and nature writers. Natural philosophers, botanical collectors, physicians, and amateur naturalists were all engaged in radically new ways of organizing ideas about the nonhuman world.”

In short, when Bartram wrote of alligators, he did so not out of whimsy but instead with deep purpose. Though Bartram’s scientific works were more highly read in European circles, his writing on alligator behavior represented many of the common assumptions of the era. Bartram and his cohorts undoubtedly contributed elements of new “knowledge” about the species, but perhaps more importantly solidified what most humans already assumed (or thought they knew) about alligators. Bartram did, after all, echo the sentiments—or at least the tone—of previous writers. Be it in Europe or the Americas, Bartram was a man of science and the erudite circles of Europe.

William Bartram’s description of alligators in Florida was, of course, highly sensationalized—which is not to suggest his accounts were wholly unfounded. Under certain circumstances, alligators can be territorial and—if repeatedly agitated—dangerous to human life. On the surface, Bartram’s account depicted an uncontrollable creature bent on devouring

humans. Rather than a simplistic account of his fight with a ravenous beast, Bartram was imposing order on the natural world by describing the alligator as he did. Catesby’s descriptions of alligators, with which Bartram would have been familiar, were pedestrian enough to encourage more investigation but also cautionary enough to elicit a sense of fear and danger. Catesby’s descriptions of the alligator appear rather dull when juxtaposed with Bartram’s. At the time of Catesby’s observations, North America remained a British colony. Bartram, however, wrote as the United States was in its embryonic stages. Presenting the alligator as a formidable, territorial, and unpredictable creature, Bartram expressed his patriotism to the fledgling country. A handful of Bartram’s contemporaries—most notably Thomas Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis—used the natural history of North America as an effort to both assert control over the continent’s natural history and, in addition, to place American flora and fauna alongside—or perhaps superior to—the natural world of Europe and Asia.  

Jefferson, moreover, devoted much time and energy to provide a counter to Comte de Buffon’s theory of degeneracy. For Buffon, the cold climate and abundant moisture in North America rendered much of the continent’s species “weak and feeble.” North America, Buffon further asserted, was a vast swampland, “where life putrifies and rots.” When panther skins and mastodon fossils failed to convince Buffon of America’s natural splendor, Jefferson obtained an enormous moose. Much like the alligator, Lee Alan Dugatkin argued, “This moose became a symbol for Jefferson—a symbol of the quashing of European arrogance in the form of degeneracy.”  

Alligators, as described by Catesby and Bartram, not only provided early Americans with an example of impressive domestic wildlife, the reptiles’ resemblance to ancient

---

dragons provided evidence that America’s natural history rivaled that of any powerful society. Though Catesby’s observations were primarily conducted in the Caribbean, the murkiness surrounding alligator classification and biology made it difficult for humans to draw clear distinctions. To be sure, Jefferson did not view the alligator as the answer to the theory of degeneracy. Obtaining a large alligator, after all, required not only travel to the southern regions of the continent, but also the ability to kill and transport to Europe a gargantuan apex predator from the Book of Job. Buffon theorized that reptiles grew to enormous proportions in the Americas, but reptiles were associated with degenerate places and, by extension, undesirable people.

Rather than rely on European knowledge and intellectual authority, early American naturalists sought to solidify their position not only as a legitimate political entity but also to establish authority over American natural history. Bartram’s description of alligators, lengthy and detailed as they were, could also establish him as North America’s resident expert on alligators—despite some inaccuracies. “The alligator when full grown is a very large and terrible creature, and of prodigious strength, activity, and swiftness in the water.” Bartram injected more detailed observations of the alligator than his predecessors, noting, “The head of a full grown one is about three feet, and the mouth opens nearly the same length; their eyes are small in proportion and seem sunk deep in the head...Only the upper jaw moves, which they raise almost perpendicular, so as to forma right angle with the lower one.”

Bartram’s entries, though read primarily by a European audience, were intended for American readers, as well. Succinctly, they were simply more appealing than those of Catesby. Humans wanted to fear alligators, and early Americans needed a domestic foe—or at least an

---

animal through which they could channel their fears—and Bartram’s version of alligators was more closely aligned with their collective visions and perceptions of alligators. Troubled and frightened by the supposed alligator roars, Bartram claimed, “when hundreds and thousands are roaring at the same time, you can scarcely be persuaded, but that the whole globe is violently and dangerously agitated.” From these passages, Bartram set forth the notion that certain species of North American wildlife not only rivaled those of the old world, but many New World creatures were superior in size, ferocity, and charisma.

The alligator was thus already something other than its physiological self; it was serving the needs and desires of human beings with a variety of intellectual, cultural, and nationalistic goals. In colonial America, argued Andrea Smalley, “Explorers, travelers, surveyors, naturalists, and other promoters routinely advertised the richness of the American faunal environment and speculated about the ways in which animals could be made to serve their colonial projects.”

The alligator, used initially by Goldsmith to delegitimize the species and the humans associated with it, allowed Bartram to write sensationalized accounts of its size and a more detailed description of its behavior and physiological features. In so doing, Bartram challenged European notions of North American illegitimacy. The first step was using the fear of the alligator to promote American legitimacy. Once North American natural history gained a degree of legitimacy, early Americans began organizing and subduing the natural world they had recently promoted to Europe. Humans utilized fear and nature both as powerful to tool to promote North America’s natural history and, in turn, to justify their efforts at ordering and subduing that world.

53 Bartram, Travels, 122.
Smalley also suggested that early explorers described North American wildlife in positive language to attract settlement and promote civilization as she argued, “Casting the American landscape in its best light, English texts downplayed any risk to colonists from forest-dwelling beasts characterizing the fauna as benign.” Though certainly not inaccurate, that particular argument lacked nuance. The most dangerous animal in her litany of species were wolves, which in the evidence provided seemed to pose no real threat to human life but only to livestock. In the colonial and early national era, Catesby’s observations on the alligator were the least inflammatory. Bartram, however, presented alligators both as dangerous and worthy of scientific inquiry, ultimately arguing for their superiority. Not until the first few decades of the nineteenth century would John Audubon position the alligator as indifferent to human interruption, yet balanced as Audubon’s descriptions were, they were dwarfed both in language and volume of violent and deathly accounts from further afield. Inserting alligators into the colonial and early national rhetoric of natural history illustrates that while Smalley was initially correct in that colonists used North American wildlife to serve individual colonial projects, her argument that early naturalists presented North American wildlife as harmless is problematic. Fear unites those two threads. Early Americans did use wildlife to promote colonial projects, but they did so with an understanding of the dangers those animals presented—alligators in particular.

The North American landscape, moreover, was more than an all-inclusive term for humans and animals sharing a space. Landscape, when considered alongside animals that pose a threat to human life, becomes a highly negotiated space where individuals, groups, and communities devote significant psychological and physical energy to determine which animals belong to which particular landscape. Alligators, then, add important—and fearful—wrinkles to

---

the colonial and early national periods. North American animals did not exactly “face colonization,” and adapt accordingly, but instead, colonists faced an array of unfamiliar wildlife and devised a series of definitions, laws, and physical barriers centered upon colonists’ understanding of each species at a given moment—definitions that were, as this research seeks to demonstrate—fluid and variable over time. Colonial boosters did—as Smalley suggested—highlight the benign temperament of a handful of North American fauna. Presenting these animals as abundant and harmless was a powerful rhetorical tool in attracting newcomers to North America. Other writers, however, wrote extensively about the more enigmatic and more dangerous animals for the same purpose(s). The appeal of alligators was twofold: their presence inspired danger and adventure and, equally important, imposing order on that danger and outlining the adventure was vital to the civilization process. Each of those two undertakings was one of the early American tactics for managing both individual and societal fear.

The alligator, at least in the final decades of the eighteenth century, was a symbol of America’s natural wonder and, by extension, America’s control of its own knowledge. During the mid-to-late eighteenth century, then, the alligator teetered on two definitions: an animal through which early Americans could address their fears (when expedient), and a dangerous reptile that posed an imminent threat to livestock and wayward children. William Bartram’s account—whether intentional or not—categorized the alligator in the latter category and, in doing so, imposed order on the alligator by placing it in the bad animal category. Prior to the nineteenth century, many North Americans feared alligators in a nebulous, distant sense. The natural history of the alligator remained broadly unwritten, so humans could not feel entirely safe, even within their landschaft model. Once the alligator became associated with the disorder that lay beyond the landschaft, however, humans could then devise a multitude of ways of
managing their fear of the animal and venture into the disordered spaces with a distinct purpose. Humans could create a fearsome, mythical beast, and then by describing its physiology and behavior, impose order on its existence as a way of confronting their fears. By the final years of the eighteenth century, humans had placed the alligator as separate, as “other.” The species was beneath them and represented an amalgam of negative cultural symbols and connotations. Even if humans were geographically removed from alligators, they believed it represented a hazard to their livelihood and well-being. Such is the basic function of fear and anxiety, to believe that one is in grave danger even if the source of their fear poses no actual or immediate threat. Humans, consequently, spent the bulk of the nineteenth century fixated on one particular tactic: killing alligators to impose order.

Bartram’s claim of seeing hundreds, if not thousands of alligators during his Florida sojourn was in part to claim ownership of North America’s natural history. A second consequence of his travels and writings—perhaps unintentional—revealed the fear that would motivate later generations of Americans to venture into the swamps and wetlands of the South to destroy alligators. In 1840, the Lodi, New York publication Freeman and Messenger published a first-hand account of the hunting and killing of a large alligator. The proprietor of a place known as Halahala, contacted the author of the piece and reported a behemoth alligator terrorizing locals and killing livestock. Though skeptical of the owner’s claims regarding the size of the alligator, “All doubts as to the existence of the animal were at last dispelled by the destruction of an Indian, who attempted to ford the river on horseback, although entreated to desist by his companions, who crossed at a shallow place higher up.”

---

56 “Capture and Death of a Mammoth Alligator,” Freeman and Messenger (Lodi, New York), June 4, 1840.
Humans during the early-to-mid nineteenth century remained committed to imposing order on what they perceived as disordered spaces. Their ultimate goal, however, was not to completely remove the sense of danger. The author of this piece understood that, as he described the death of the unnamed Indian in detail. As an initial strike by the stranded Native American, “The animal repeated the assault and the Indian his blows, until the former, exasperated at the resistance, rushed on the man, and seizing him by the middle of the body, which was at once enclosed and crushed in his capacious jaws, swam into the lake.” As if the struggle was not over, the author continued with a few additional gruesome details and wrote, “His sufferings were not long continued, for the monster sank to the bottom and after reappearing alone on the surface, and calmly basking in the sun, gave the horror-stricken spectators the fullest confirmation of the death and burial of their comrade.”

After describing the death of the unfortunate horseman, the author penned a lengthy account of the hunt, the events of which possessed repeated instances of death-defying adventure more closely aligned with Bartram’s travails than of simple description. Once subdued and measured, the author claimed, the alligator measured thirty-feet in length, in all likelihood an exaggeration, but a conscious effort to instill upon readers not only the triumph of man over dangerous and disordered nature but also the satisfaction of securing the landschaft for locals, who situated in their cane huts, “were ready to assist in freeing themselves from their dangerous neighbor.”

By seeking and killing this alligator, the hunters created, at least in their minds, a safe(r) place for local inhabitants and affirmed the landschaft. By not providing the names of the author

---

57 “Capture and Death of a Mammoth Alligator,” June 4, 1840.
58 “Capture and Death of a Mammoth Alligator,” June 4, 1840.
or any of the other participants, interested and impressionable individuals could assume they too could travel to remote corners of the wetlands to kill alligators and create safe places. The parties involved were not the famous John Audubon, William Clark, or Thomas Jefferson. They were instead nameless, faceless individuals who possessed little to no training and expertise in alligator hunting. If they could do it, other brave humans certainly imagined they could follow suit. A host of ill-informed trappers and hunters determining the cultural face of alligators pushed more scrupulous scientists to investigate alligator’s scientifically.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, an epistemological competition emerged that blurred the lines between mythology and science. Alligators were at once the objects of human fears expressed through folklore and highly sensationalized accounts of violence and the subjects of acute scientific interest. The settings and the brutality of scientific killings are a snapshot into not only the validity of science in the nineteenth century but also that orientation of the human brain within that cerebral and geospatial circumstance. Dissecting the body of an alligator in 1853, turned on its end, allows historians to dissect the fears, actions, and expectations of those individuals, groups, and societies. There, at the chronological intersection of the late Industrial Revolution, the Second Great Awakening, and Indian Removal, the alligator’s presence in the American mind oscillated between mythical creature and scientific specimen. Even with Bartram’s extensive account of the creature, early naturalists struggled to understand alligator behavior and physiology.

Benjamin Smith Barton, writing in the early nineteenth century, attempted to better understand alligators by comparing his observations of alligators in North Carolina to Bartram’s Florida specimens. Utilizing local sources, Bartram reported that while many alligators inhabited the wetlands around Cape Fear, and several had been spotted near the Great Dismal Swamp,
alligators were “never farther north.” Barton continued his comparison further stating, “W. Bartram does not know, for certain, whether the alligator becomes torpid. He tells me that he has seen those animals on the river St. Johns, in East-Florida, in the middle of winter, but he also observed that they were then very dull and seemed stupid.” The governor of North Carolina directed Barton to John Smith’s account of alligators in which Barton observed, “The alligator sometimes attacks men, though he is a timid animal.”

Barton created a more balanced and reasoned depiction of the alligator to combat Bartram’s unbalanced account.

By the first decades of the nineteenth century, N.M. Hentz, a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, wrote to the American Philosophical Society that while a small number of European scientists had conducted alligator dissections, their findings were difficult—if not impossible—to obtain in North America. In addition to his discussion of the alligator’s heart and circulation, Hentz also, “thought proper to add the drawing of the alligator, which I have taken from the recent subject, because in the *Dictionnaire d’ Histoire Naturelle* I find that no correct representation of this animal has yet been made.” The competition between the comparatively new United States and Europe over scientific authority again involved alligators, and those describing the animals did so with an eye toward their own national vision. Hentz remarked on a European dissection by M. Cuvier, “whose anatomical knowledge is well known, has dissected only a small alligator…though it died on the passage…[and] rendered this body an unfit subject to examine with certainty those organs.”

---


Much more interesting—and accessible—to the American public in the early nineteenth century than the results of dissection presented in Philadelphia, were adventure tales of alligators and the dangers associated with the species. Journalists in the 1830s continued to capitalize from a context of fear around the alligator. Those articles, moreover, were widely circulated to other regions of the continental United States, thus spreading the mythology to significant numbers of people, most of whom had not traveled to the alligator’s traditional habitat. An article printed in a Richmond, Indiana newspaper further cemented alligator mythology to the Great Lakes. As steam vessels voyaged down the Mississippi River, their occupants claimed to lose several dogs to alligators, as one observer claimed, “indeed, the varmints seem to love dog meat more than any other, and they were such devils that they used to try to climb up into the boat and git at our dogs, so we used to stand guard to keep them off every night.” The story continued that by the next morning, an alligator had slipped a snare, climbed aboard the vessel, and devoured all but one of the vessel’s canine occupants. Hunting and indiscriminately killing dogs aside, the article offered a lesson on alligator vocalization. A “consequential and poppish looking chap” inquired if alligators barked like dogs, to which his traveling companion answered, “For sartin they do, and I’ve heard them myself a mile off, like hounds in full chase.”

Famed wildlife naturalist John J. Audubon described the alligator and, in so doing, argued for the impressiveness of North American wildlife. In a letter to William Jardine and John Selby, Audubon argued, “One of the most remarkable objects connected with the Natural History of the United States, that attracts the traveler’s eye, as he ascends through the mouths of the mighty sea-like river Mississippi, is the Alligator.” Audubon responded to European writers who

62 “Sam’s Story Of The Alligator,” Richmond Weekly Palladium, Richmond, Indiana, August 5, 1837.
63 “Sam’s Story,” August 5, 1837.
claimed that even the weakest vultures could easily pillage alligator nests. “In the United States,” Audubon contended, “I assure you, it is not so, nor could it be so, were the vultures ever so anxiously inclined; for, as I have told you before, the nest is so hard, and matted, and plastered together, that a man needs his superior strength, with a long sharp stick, to demolish it.” Audubon not only championed American wildlife but also provided a counter-narrative to the culture of fear. “It is here neither wild nor shy,” Audubon observed, “neither is it the very dangerous animal represented by travelers.” Moreover, Audubon informed his readers, “groaning and uttering their bellowing noise, like thousands of irritated bulls about to meet in fight, but all so careless of man, that unless shot at, or positively disturbed, they remain motionless, suffering boats or canoes to pass within a few yards of them, without noticing them in the least.” Audubon conducted direct, reasonably balanced observations, but his actions belied his words.64

Audubon’s behavior toward the American Alligator was strikingly more violent when tasked with a scientific purpose. Richard Harlan, a Philadelphia doctor and Audubon’s associate, asked Audubon to retrieve the heart of an alligator—presumably in the name of science. The young ornithologist obliged. Upon “seeing an alligator that I thought I could put whole into a hogshead of spirits,” Audubon wrote, “I shot it immediately on the skull bone. It tumbled over from the log on which it had been resting into the water, and, with the assistance of two negroes, I had it out in a few minutes, apparently dead.” When a group of women asked to see the inside of the alligator’s mouth—much to the surprise of all those gathered—the alligator proved to be still alive. Audubon chronicled the events that followed, noting, “at this instant, the first stunning effect of the wound was over, and the animal thrashed and snapped its jaws furiously, although it

---

did not advance a foot. The rope still being around the neck, I had it thrown over a strong branch of a tree in the yard, and hauled the poor creature up, swinging free from all about it, and left it twisting itself, and scratching with its fore-feet to disengage the rope.” Audubon left the alligator dangling from rope and tree overnight, unfazed by the horrific and gruesome act he had committed. Audubon commenced and completed his task under the guise of advancing human knowledge, which allowed him to sleep restfully as a young alligator swung, twisted, and gasped for air just outside his bedroom.⁶⁵

Though the published account did not appear until nearly a century later, in 1836, Frederick Skinner traveled to the Deep South to stay at the Maryland Settlement in Mississippi and recorded his encounter with an alligator while fishing. “The silence was broken by what sounded like a human sigh. Looking carelessly over my shoulder in the direction whence it came,” Skinner recalled, “every faculty of my entire body was instantly paralyzed with fright and creeping horror. There, within reach of my extended hand, prone upon the surface of the water, lay the largest alligator of the lake!” Skinner’s initial reaction was understandable. Human physiology, and the internal mechanisms that drive fear, demands such a response to a threat—whether perceived or actual. Once the frightened individual compartmentalizes and reassesses the severity of the threat, rational thought processes quickly guide humans to the realization that they are, in fact, not in any grave danger. The culture of fear and mythology surrounding alligators was so pervasive that Skinner remained convinced he had narrowly avoided certain death. Throughout the entirety of Skinner’s story, however, the alligator never emerged from the

water nor gave any indication it viewed Skinner as prey. The severity of this particular threat, then, rested chiefly in Skinner’s imagination—and the imagination of his reader(s).  

Three decades in the wake of Audubon’s exploits, alligator deaths became increasingly theatrical. In June 1853, the Natchez Daily Courier posted a story in which a collection of at least twelve doctors—surrounded by a curious audience of onlookers—immobilized, decapitated, and dismembered three live alligators. The author opened within a context of fear, “The very name of the animal, recalling its formidable appearance and strange habits, has something about it that at once arrests attention. We believe, also,” the author continued, “that its tenacity of life—superior to that of almost any other creature—is one reason why the doctors of New Orleans seem to have a preference for experimenting on this American crocodile.”  

Although scientists and naturalists had been conducting experiments on alligator anatomy for several decades, the animal’s distinct physiology—distinguished from the American alligator—was not firmly established in the Gulf South. The chief physician, not only provided the “three monsters” but also conducted the fiasco in his personal courtyard. The author deepened the context of fear by referring to the alligators as “monsters,” though two of the three animals were less than four feet in length. The physical science, however, began soon thereafter; “[c]utting off the head of the animal, jobbing out the spinal marrow, dividing the nerves coming from them […] they still retained this independent sensibility, and the mutilated limbs of the headless animal would make intelligent motions for getting rid of the local torture! These are curious and important discoveries.”  

68 “Great Alligator-Killing,” June 5, 1853.
Nineteenth century scientists killed alligators—utilizing some of the most brutal and grotesque methods—in the name of science. Scientists were determined to discover more about the animal’s physiology. Within that practice, however, developed a paradox. While scientists conducted experiments to deepen their understanding of alligator anatomy, the alligator provided a lens through which to view the human mind. While doctors searched for movement from headless, limbless animals, those animals, in turn, illuminated the synapses of the human brain. Those synapses were conditioned by cultural forces which cannot be separated from history.

While Audubon and his colleagues cited empirical data for killing alligators, the sight of alligators was enough motivation to kill. During the winter of 1865-66, George Franklin Thompson toured the Florida wilderness and recalled his encounter with alligators. “We made our way alongside a small creek the banks of which were covered with monstrous Alligators which had crawled out to sun. Not liking their looks we introduced a few Minie balls into their bodies to see them jump and were highly gratified at the exhibition of their sprightliness.”

In Thompson’s narrative, however, additional passages suggested that he engaged in a broader, more primeval struggle with nature. When the alligator supposedly mocked George Thompson, the reptile committed the gravest insult to Thompson’s imagined top spot on the biological and evolutionary hierarchy. In this sense, Thompson was not only shooting alligators for amusement but also attempting to convince himself that humans possess unmitigated dominion over the physical environment. In short, Thompson felt as though he needed to punish the alligator for challenging the invented status-quo. George Franklin Thompson had a choice. He and his entourage could have marveled at the large alligators taking advantage of a mild day

---

during the Florida winter and harmlessly drifted on. Thompson, of course, chose to not overlook the opportunity with which he and his group had been presented. His actions and those of his peers were driven not by a reaction to any perceived threat but instead by a cultural legacy that placed humans above all of nature, perceiving alligators as a threat both to human lives and to human control over the natural world. Fear of alligators was the driving force behind his actions and committing the act of killing only reinforced and strengthened the cultural practice.\textsuperscript{70} Killing alligators was not only an effort to ameliorate fears of dangerous animal, but part of a larger inclination to control nature or the unpredictable. The group was not simply killing alligators for mere sport, they took their cues from the decades of earlier writings that tacitly suggested killing alligators was doing an important societal task. Each alligator kill was, in their minds, an effort to become more civilized both as individuals and collectively.

Hunting and killing alligators was not the sole mechanism for managing human fears of alligators. Indeed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, newspapers printed folktales where alligators could not only be tamed but also provide a source of personal luck. Jarvis, an almost certainly fictional character, traveled to the Deep South to soothe the pains of lost love. When he arrived in New Orleans, Jarvis occupied his mind and time with killing alligators. This practice, however, soon grew tiresome, “Of killing alligators he had become tired, but to catch a tame one was his new idea—the mission of his life.” He thought that if he could only catch and tame a live alligator, the star of his fortune would again rise in the ascendant, and in the amphibious creature he would find a guide, philosopher, and friend.” Jarvis caught and tamed his alligator, and upon selecting tickets for a lottery and noticed, “the mysterious reptile’s eyes brightened, and his tail

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid, 26-27.
wagged wisely.” Jarvis interpreted this as an amphibious sign of wisdom, purchased the ticket and, of course, won the lottery. The final paragraph asked, “Who will hereafter say that the tail of an alligator is not a thing of wisdom? With this philosophic query our own tale shall end.”

John Calvert Smith and his cohorts, it appeared, represented the human characteristic that views violence as entertainment.

One of them jumped up about 4 feet and started for the water as fast as his ungainly legs would carry him. Another daring to be braver than the rest stood with head erect as if to mock us with his courage for about 5 minutes when a ball introduced under & just back of his fore leg induced him to lie over on his back very quickly as though attacked with intense pain in the heart & bowels. These were the largest Alligators we had seen being from 14 to 18 feet in length.

Describing alligators as “monstrous” and “ungainly” indicates a continuation of the mythology and folklore of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Smith’s record, however, does signal an important change. Smith provided a detailed account of how best to kill alligators. In this sense, killing became a process—with specific recommendations and codes of conduct. Providing a rudimentary “how-to” on killing alligators, moreover, was an effort to persuade readers this dangerous animal—and nature itself, by extension—could be subdued. John Calvert Smith was, of course, not the first to pen an account of alligator killing. His story represents a prolonged and sturdy ideology of killing alligators in the name of fear and control.

While human fear was constant throughout the early descriptions of alligators, the context in which it was espoused (or managed) varied over time. Each observer—from LeMoyne

---

72 Thompson, “A Tour of Central Florida,” 27.
through Audubon—expressed a contextual fear. Humans could use the fear presented in LeMoyne’s depiction as a directive to revise the landschaft model more suited to their needs. In the context of early America, the fear generated by Bartram’s accounts, and the fact that he survived, spurred nationalists to begin to take ownership not only of their civic history, but also of North America’s natural history. Audubon’s writings were less polarizing than early language, and because of their unusual balance, were especially informative. Those descriptions of lazy and uninterested alligators suggested first that some of the initial efforts to impose order and bring safety to the wilderness had succeeded. Second, Audubon’s account occurred in a contextual setting in which alligators were universally feared. Audubon, finally, was also encouraging others to travel to the swamps of the South to commence the real work of rescuing the wetlands from wilderness. By presenting alligators as indifferent, slow, and lazy, the easier it seemed to kill them—thereby allowing a market for their hides and by-products to flourish in concert with creating fresher, safer places for humans to travel and seek (slightly less) dangerous adventures during the latter half of the nineteenth century.
CHAPTER III
THIS LITTLE GATOR GOES TO MARKET: ALLIGATORS AS COMMODITIES

In February 1874, Martha Allen boarded a vessel and embarked on a tour up the Ocklawaha River north from central Florida. Allen kept a log-book for her journey and, tucked between mundane accounts of the dinner menu and trinket shops along the way, Allen paid particular attention to Florida wildlife. Noting several species of wading birds, turtles, and snakes, Allen also appeared interested in alligators. Near Palatka, Allen expressed frustration with a group of fellow passengers, noting, “The Gunners are a bothersome set of fellows, crackwhacking at the animals, not often to their damage, but making the Alligators skoot before we can see them.”

Allen recorded a handful of fleeting alligator sightings but was most intrigued by the possessions and occupation of another passenger. As the party came ashore on the evening of February 22, Allen watched as a group of men, “got a boat & went out for Alligators.” The men returned, much to the delight of Allen, with a significant catch. “They returned with one 6 ½ ft. long from tip to tip. Quite a collection of specimens of Natural History were brought in board,” she continued, “Stuffed alligators, otters, a gar fish, a deer, and quite a number of deer horns.” The specimens Allen recorded belonged not to a simple hunter or poacher but instead to a man of learning. Allen devised a few assumptions about the man, stating, “They belonged to a man who

came on board & who appears to follow gathering such things as an occupation. He appears well
versed in Natl. History & is dubbed Dr.” The “doctor” appeared the next morning with a bucket
of live alligators and held an informal symposium regarding alligator length and biology,
including how to distinguish an alligator from a crocodile. What eventually became of the man’s
live alligators is unclear, but he did possess several dead animals, presumably in the name of
science.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, then, natural science was not only an
emerging medium of education and inquiry but was indeed an institution of killing. Though
crimes might not have been the only means to “know” an animal, it was an act of partial nobility.
Each animal—classified, stuffed, examined, displayed, and observed—served an important
intellectual and educational purpose. Accompanying individual animals, moreover, are the
stories of their demise. The stories humans told about their interactions and conflicts with
wildlife accentuated the connection between science and death. They were, indeed, stories not
only about nature but also about humans themselves. Martha Allen was frustrated by her fellow
passengers frightening away alligators but was quite intrigued—and tacitly supportive—when
she observed dead specimens firsthand. If frightened for the sake of entertainment, human
actions against the animal were unacceptable. If humans killed alligators in the name of science,
however, those actions were endorsed and often championed both by the scientific community
and the public. The initial forays into the scientific alligator were comparatively brief, as killing
the species transitioned from science to domination. The transition in human activities was the
result of a change in how humans understood or manipulated their fear of alligators. “Knowing”
the animal through science was no longer an adequate outlet for their fear. The alligator was

74 Allen, 6-7.
more than its biological self. They were repositories for human fears about not only predators, but the places in which those predators habited and the people within those marginalized spaces. Each demonstrated that humans found a variety of definitions for alligators and conducted themselves according to those parameters. Outright killing, communication, and domination for the market economy helped humans come to terms with fears.

Fear began to operate slightly differently in this era and drove the impetus to commodify alligators. Acting upon the principles of fear established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, American hunters and trappers were slaughtering alligators by the millions. The monetary gains, which on the surface appeared to have been the primary motivation were instead an acceptable and fruitful outcome of the privilege to kill animals that have haunted humans for centuries. The primary motivator for killing and commodification, however, was fear. Moreover, killing alligators did not remove the fear of alligators, but rather demonstrated that fear could be converted into a profitable market commodity as fashion accessories and tourist dollars. Numerous examples of hunters seeking the adventure against nature or the monetary gain from the dominated animal depicted that these wild spaces and the animals within them required human control.

During the middle and latter portion of the nineteenth century—an era largely defined by the solidification of the market economy—hunters and trappers both from the South and from adjacent regions, decimated alligator populations throughout the region. By the last third of the nineteenth century, the culture surrounding alligators had undergone a distinct alteration. Fear, hatred, and mythology remained as the most fundamental ingredient in the relationship between humans and alligators, but the cultural value of alligators changed once their hides became fashionable. Major international expositions were not the only place for alligator fashion, only
the most visible. Between 1880 and 1894, for instance, Floridians harvested 2.5 million alligator hides. To satisfy the extravagant tastes of both domestic and international consumers, hunters pillaged alligator nests and destroyed millions of eggs for market gain. In simpler terms, most casual observers still understood the alligator as a dangerous predator, but they also saw a commodity. By turning a culturally defined ferocious animal into handbags and belts, humans not only crystallized their own image of alligators, but also demonstrated their power to manipulate what animals mean in an era of capitalism. A consequence of the violence were the initial whispers of conservation. Fear pivoted on conservation, as it was at once the impetus both to kill alligators and to advocate for their survival. Without alligators, hunters would find less recreation and, equally important, visitors from the Great Lakes and Midwest would no longer travel to the South in search of an outdoor adventure. Much of the popular appeal of the American Alligator was that people feared it. From this pivot emerged a rudimentary but continuously evolving effort to save the species near the turn of the century.

Changes in perceptions of alligators did not develop from a vague, nebulous, or indistinguishable phenomenon; advancements in science and technology, to a large degree, enabled humans to re-imagine and redefine alligators according to a new epistemological context. In William Bartram’s context, stories of male heroism against nature provided increased sociopolitical influence. Few, if any, of Bartram’s readers had ever seen an alligator and, as such, relied on the embellished drawings and wild narratives of early American nature writers for the perception of alligators. The nineteenth century witnessed a litany of transformations in how humans interpreted and manipulated both the physical alligator and the idea (or fear) of alligators. Much of the misunderstanding from the eighteenth century remained well into the nineteenth century. Indeed, not until the last few decades did professional biologists and
herpetologists conduct serious academic and biological research. This period, complete with rapid changes in the environment and how humans thought about the species therein, unfolded as two rather distinct stories.

The first was marked with the rhetorical lineage of the eighteenth century. In the wake of the Civil War, however, the demand for alligator hides and by-products drove a sharp increase of alligator hunting and trapping to meet market demand. As increasing number of individuals began to lament those loss of alligators—for a variety of reasons—alligators began to receive more attention from those who wished to better understand the species and those who sounded nascent whispers of conserving (or managing) alligators. Fear, too, operated in diffuse ways. The early half of the century was one that remained marked by literal and traditional fear inspired by the sensationalized accounts of prior centuries. The roughly second half of the century required Americans develop strategies for manipulating or managing their fear of alligators through killing, purchasing, researching, or saving the species. In short, the first half of the nineteenth century was an afterword for conceptions of alligators during the previous century. The second half was a preface to the cultural and rhetorical battles waged in the twentieth century where humans not only competed with alligators for habitat, but where humans waged cultural, environmental, and rhetorical wars against each other over the future of the species.

By the late nineteenth century, railways and improvements in photographic technology brought alligators into the homes of large portions of the population. At the turn of the century, Europeans and Americans worked to refine and correct much of the early classification systems initiated by Carl Linnaeus and Comte de Buffon, among others. Modest improvements in transportation allowed humans easier passage into the dense river and swampland ecosystems, thus shifting interest in alligators from frontier narratives and chronicles of survival to scientific
specimens for use in museums and universities. With the debate over alligator versus crocodile classification at least partially decided, the behavior of alligators loosely established, and with much of the nation connected through a network of railways and roads, humans envisioned a new future for alligators: the commercial viability of alligators supported by the developed technological means to ship alligator hides and eggs to affluent consumers both at home and abroad.

In the decades following the Civil War, southern farmers were attempting to revitalize the region’s agricultural production. Much of the South’s infrastructure, however, still lagged behind other regions of the country and the wide production of land intensive crops—cotton and tobacco, namely—taxed the nutrient rich southern soils. The entirety of southern agricultural and industrial output in 1890 was less than half of the output from New York state. Consequently, southern farmers, hunters, and boosters turned to another extractive industry to increase both visitors to the region and, ultimately, supplement the sugar and timber industries. Hunting and killing animals, primarily wading birds and alligators, served that purpose. Gilded Age fashion trends in the northeast and Europe, from which many consumers displayed their social status through extravagant and luxurious apparel, fueled the market for expensive (and inexpensive) hides, feathers, and furs from southern wetlands. The slaughter that followed ultimately produced state and federal regulations for many species of wading birds, but little to no protections for alligators. Not until the turn of the century did humans begin to develop notions of how to both live alongside and profit from harvesting alligators. The federal government, for its part, would not become involved until nearly a century later. A surge in market demand coupled with an indifferent local and federal government provided the sanction needed for

75 Albert Cowdrey, This Land, This South: An Environmental History (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky); 103.
unregulated alligator and bird hunting. While much of the United States Army was occupied in the western theatre, Reconstruction created a monetary vacuum in the South. Throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth century, sports enthusiast traveled from across the continent to the Deep South in hopes of harvesting unregulated animal products and, to be sure, profit from a benighted region. This is not to assert that the post-Reconstruction South was akin to the westward rush of the nineteenth century, but instead to argue that many groups and individual sought to exploit the South’s natural resources.76

Commodification of alligators during the latter-half of the nineteenth century coincided with the exploitation of other wildlife. On the Great Plains hunters, ranchers, and a host of eastern émigrés commenced a full-scale slaughter of the American Bison. In what historian Andrew Isenberg tabbed as an “environmental catastrophe,” the myriad and complex encounters and cultural processes between Euroamericans, Indians, and the grassland environment not only altered the bison population but also transformed gender roles, modified economic (market) conceptions, and redrew the ecological blueprint of the Plains environment.77

For Isenberg, the significant impact of economic exploitation could not fully explain the near extinction of bison. He instead viewed it as only one (albeit essential) component of a larger phenomenon, in which the bison stood as the tipping point for Euroamerican domination of an entire continent and of an entire people. Although the topography of the Plains environment exists in stark contrast to the dense woodlands and humid swamps of the east, the story of wildlife exploitation and the culture of violence remained a central thread in the American vision of the natural world.78 Creating safer places for American exploitation occurred

---

78 Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 1-12.
both in the West and in the South. This is not to suggest that humans viewed alligators as a key component to driving Native Americans from the South, but instead to argue that removing or reducing keystone species in each geographic region opened economic, civil, and cultural opportunities both to current residents and as a medium through which to attract emigrants. The trajectory and tone of the interaction between humans, alligators, and wetland birds of the South followed a similar pattern to the exploitation of wolves and bison in the American West. The lure of monetary gain played a chief role in the exploitation of alligators, and the alligators’ reputation—recalled and fashioned by Goldsmith and others—encouraged humans to associate alligators with uncivilized people and places, which ultimately provided the societal context through which humans could kill alligators with impunity. While the tactics and approaches to removing bison, wolves, and alligators differed, the motivations were largely the same—to impose order not simply on the natural world, but also in the cultural, political, and socioeconomic institutions through which humans exercised their power and ambitions.

Depicting how Native American societies in the last third of the nineteenth century contributed to the culture of alligator violence and exploitation, in an 1892 article for *Cosmopolitan*, popular fiction writer Kirk Munroe accompanied a group of Seminoles on an alligator hunting party. After killing several cormorants and catfish for bait, the hunting party lured its first alligator. One shot from a Remington rifle killed the curious alligator and, moments later, the group was again adrift in the Florida swamp. Munroe neglected to record the size of the first alligator, but unless the victim was a juvenile, the party already possessed an alligator sizeable enough to feed numerous mouths and to procure a modest monetary gain. The hunt, however, was merely beginning. “Within a mile we killed four more of the bewildered monsters,” Munroe claimed, “and then turned our prow upstream.” Munroe himself claimed the
life of a sixth alligator, which he concluded was nearly fourteen feet in length. Muddy, bleeding, and exhausted, the Seminoles returned Munroe to camp and set out—yet again—in search of more alligators. The dark morning hours between midnight and dawn were no less disheartening. “After breakfast we set forth to view by daylight the result of the night’s hunt. To my amazement those two Indians showed me twenty-four dead alligators,” wrote Monroe, “drawn up on the river banks within three miles of our camp.” The Seminoles continued a protracted, intense assault on alligators for more than a week. By the end of the killing spree, Seminole hunting parties had killed, skinned, and wrapped over one hundred alligator hides and prepared them for the thirty-mile trip to the nearest trading post. Munroe then claimed that alligators were scarce in the surrounding swamp. Rather than an onslaught of white Euroamericans flooding to the South kill alligators, Munroe’s account suggests that Native societies participated in harvesting alligators purely for market gain. Though Seminoles had hunted alligators for centuries, their participation in market-driven hunting was a comparatively new development. Because the piece appeared in a popular magazine, readers could impart that both native Americans and white settlers were successfully subduing the wild spaces. These stories were demonstrations to the American public that they could mitigate their fears by subduing dangerous, natural elements.

While Munroe documented the Native American hunt and subsequent abuse of the American Alligator, James Calvert Smith turned his attention to the growing demand for the animal as a commodity of modern and elite society. Smith remarked, “Speaking of alligators, or ‘gators,’ it was about the time of the World’s Fair, Chicago, 1893, that alligator hide bags were quite the style.” While James Calvert Smith noted the ubiquity of alligator handbags, he also described the common method for hunting alligators during the era.

The gators were hunted at nights. Two [hunters] were in a boat, one to paddle, the other in the bow with rifle, where a metal container held "light-ud" knots ablaze to shine in the reptile eyes. You shot him about his only vulnerable spot located between the eyes, grabbed him while in a death struggle, tied him to your boat, and came ashore. The next day they would skin them and prepare the hides for market as the prices then were very good. The buzzards waxed fat that year from alligator carcasses. There was a good story they used to tell of two men out one night "shooting gaitors." The man with the gun couldn't kill any when he shot them between the eyes. Next morning they discovered the gators had paired off when they came to the surface, keeping the outer eye closed.\textsuperscript{80}

Smith’s description is noteworthy, for it represented both the continuation of the cultural ethos of violence and the emergence of a new conception of the toothy reptiles—alligators as worthy adversaries. In typical Euroamerican fashion, Smith and his colleagues skinned alligators and abandoned their bodies as carrion for scavenging wildlife with no indication of empathy, remorse, or compunction. In what was a rather recent phenomenon, Smith noted—and implicitly championed—the potentially lucrative harvest. While William Bartram claimed he killed alligators in self-defense, and John James Audubon claimed he killed alligators in the name of science, John Calvert Smith and his peers killed alligators for profit and as an extension of his (and society’s) fear of alligators. This narrative provides a glimpse into the complex trajectory of continuity and change in the interactions between humans and alligators: from Bartram’s self-defense to Audubon’s curiosity to Smith’s avarice. Succinctly, the reasons and the methods for killing alligators had changed but the culture of violence persisted.

John Calvert Smith not only noticed the abundance of alligator hides and accessories at the World’s Fair but also noted the brilliant plumage of bird feathers attached to the hats and clothing of attendees. “About this period,” Smith claimed, “the shooting of egrets for their plumes to adorn ladies’ hats was at its height. These little cranes at nesting time were killed for their plumes which are beautiful in this period. They were killed by the wagon load.” In conjunction with killing alligators and egrets, nineteenth century Americans cultivated their interest in the hyacinth. “In the ‘Gay Nineties,’ noted Smith, “hyacinth were brought in and many had them in tubs in yards. Now and then someone would take the plant and throw it in a lake or pond.” Perhaps unknowingly, humans altered the swampland environment with the flower. “Today many of the lakes are a mass of hyacinth. The fish and alligators have been killed. What used to be clear water is not much more than mud holes. Occasionally there is a lake or pond they do not thrive in.” Through unmitigated hunting and trapping—combined with habitat destruction—alligators were, by this stage, in a heap of trouble. Because alligators feed primarily on wading birds, turtles, and fish, the transformation of ecologically healthy swamps into oxygen and vegetation deprived mud holes indirectly—and negatively—affected the alligator’s ability to feed both itself and its young. Meanwhile the more direct and forceful action of alligator hunting and harvesting continued unabated.  

Ultimately, while a demand for alligator hides and by-products drove widespread killing, habitat conservation remained decades in the future. Alligators, then, were perishing at the point of gun barrels and suffocating in the traditional habitat. The alarming rate at which alligators were dying sparked the initial conservation ethos in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

---

The act of hunting and harvesting alligators required at least a fundamental knowledge of the animal. The anatomical descriptions, taxonomic classifications, and scientific inquiries of the eighteenth century, while helping to categorize the physical animal within North American wildlife, were not devoid of sensationalized stories and accounts. What human beings knew about the alligator remained murky through the nineteenth century—between not only alligators and crocodiles, but also of alligators and their South American cousins. Simply titled, “Alligator Hunting,” an article appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1875. “Alligator-steak being a choice delicacy in the lean larder of the South American Indian, the hideous saurian is hunted with zest for the pleasure of the sport and the food it will bring.”  

The author’s motivation was twofold. At the surface, the motivation was first to tell a quite simple story of South American natives hunting what was, in all likelihood, a caiman. His second motivation was a more poetic one. Only once more in the entirety of the article did the author use the word “alligator.” Peppered throughout the piece, however, were descriptive phrases meant to ensconce alligators in a culture of fear. Included in those descriptions were: monster, ugly, brute, cruel, hideous, uncouth, offensive, and greasy. The conflation of alligators, crocodiles, and caiman meant that even through the later stages of the nineteenth century, alligators existed in a vacuum where humans could bend, shape, and define their own realities around the species. Chicago readers might also infer that those hunting such a monstrous and uncouth animal were themselves undesirable.

However, others could infer the enticing call of the hunt as hunting alligators was an early tourist attraction, as noted in one West coast newspaper. Following a brief and simplistic

---

82 “Alligator Hunting,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 18, 1875.
83 “Alligator Hunting,” December 18, 1875.
description of alligator behavior, the author commented on the allure of traveling south to hunt alligators. “Crowds of Northern men flock to Enterprise [Florida] during the winter, and many of them employ their time in hunting alligators.” Once harvested, hunters reinforce racial hierarchies when they “hire a negro to cut off his head and skin him.” Though racial hierarchies remained largely intact, African Americans could potentially profit from the venture by not only skinning the animal, but also by “carving flowers and curious figures on the teeth.”

The article hinted at tourism and the economic benefit of hunting alligators, but beneath the easily digested layers was, similar to the call West to hunt bison, a sense of adventure. Articles often depicted a “close encounter” with death and ended with (white) males escaping the alligators’ jaws, killing the animal in triumph. Those articles, akin to the adventures of gold mining in California or hunting bison in Kansas, reached readers throughout the continent. Those articles enticed readers to imagine the South as the next logical step to quick financial returns. Not only could people travel to the South and kill alligators for profit, they could do so with an air of adventure and confidence that pulled countless emigres to the West only a few decades earlier. The appeal of “wild” adventure proved equally powerful in the nineteenth century and, later, would become an ideological cornerstone of twentieth century tourism and conservation.

Apparent in each article, moreover, was the association of hunting and masculinity, about which Catherine Bates argues, “The hunt has been associated with heroic masculinity from very early in the literary tradition of the West.” Hunting could be seen as a symbolic activity, Bates continues by noting, “Men do not hunt because it is in their ‘nature’ to do so. . .Rather, they choose a subsistence strategy that is high-end, risky, and economically disadvantageous because it allows them to demonstrate and display their quality to women and to other male rivals in a

84 “Hunting Alligators,” Petaluma Evening Argus, Petaluma, California, July 29, 1873.
direct and unambiguous way.” The degree of their heroism and masculinity, of course, depended heavy upon the creature they hunted. The fundamental activity of hunting was associated with masculinity, but the hunter’s prowess could grow exponentially if hunting a species that posed a threat to human life. Hunting and killing alligators—because the innate fear responses they generated couple with their ability to kill humans—bestowed upon its practitioners an added degree of heroism and masculinity. That masculinity extended to the world of fashion and tourism. Each act, either traveling to Florida to hunt and kill alligators or wearing their hides as fashion, was connected to hunting, heroism, and fear. Voluntarily seeking and killing a “dangerous” predator was an effort to conquer not simply the animal, but to triumph over individual, and by extension, cultural fear.

One article required nearly the entire first page of a Kansas newspaper. Two imperiled men finally managed to escape and kill an alligator that reportedly measured eighteen feet. Each article insisted that these wild spaces, and the animals within them, required human control. By the final decades of the nineteenth century, hunters had reduced the bison population on the Great Plains to the point of extirpation in some regions and, consequently, reduced and fractured Native American societies beyond recognition. The wetland South, rich with elegant wading birds and “monstrous” alligators, was a comparatively new area in which humans could reap lucrative rewards from the natural world and its native species. Most of the Eastern Tribes, less the eastern band of the Cherokees and a small population of Seminoles, suffered on reservations.

---

by the end of the nineteenth century. The Deep South, then, was a place where humans marketed fear to tourists through alligator hunting.

The marketing of fear and, perhaps more importantly, the inclination to associate alligators with “uncivilized” groups of people did not end with Goldsmith in the eighteenth century. Using racist language in newspapers articles was an attempt by authors and publishers to associate alligators with African Americans. By doing so, newspapers tacitly suggested to northern audiences that traveling to the South and killing alligators was—at least to some degree—reaffirming the paternalism undone by Reconstruction. Through the act of traveling to southern swamps and killing alligators, Northerners sympathetic to Southern efforts towards redemption were performing what they believed to be an important cultural task. Not only were they creating “safer” places by removing alligators, but killing alligators tangentially meant a solidification of antebellum racial hierarchies.

The brutalities of Jim Crow appeared slightly tempered when viewed through the lens of alligators and fear. White tourists and hunters often hired African American or Creole guides for hunting trips, but the language described in those accounts suggests a more cohesive relationship. This sharp twist in race relations of the era was influenced by fear. Alligator hunts, in no small part because they were conducted at night, were more democratic than most political affairs. Each man, in other words, had an equal chance of being dragged to the bottom of a Florida lake. Very little, if any, racial hierarchy existed during the alligator hunt. The events happened too quickly, and the danger was too significant to assign strict rules according to race. In the end, as demonstrated through the accounts, the hunters’ objective was not to enforce a racial system, but instead to subdue the animal and kill it. Following the hunt, dividing profits unevenly reasserted prevailing racial hierarchies. When every hunter—regardless of race—was
faced with the primordial fear of being eaten alive, race for a brief moment became a tertiary concern. The distribution of profits, access to hunting grounds, and host of other human institutions promoted and solidified a racial hierarchy.

The egalitarian power of fear was limited to those few moments when both white and African American hunters killed an alligator. In most instances, however, humans also used their lack of knowledge about alligators to reinforce racial discrimination. The *Weekly Wisconsin* reprinted an article from the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* in 1882. Though largely a collection of anecdotes from Florida and Louisiana, the article cemented in the Great Lakes region racial inaccuracies associated with alligators. “They [alligators] are said to exhibit wonderful alacrity in ‘going for’ a colored person, and dogs are their favorite diet, while they, as a general thing, endeavor to avoid a white man.”  

A short excerpt from the *Detroit Free Press* mirrored the racial sentiment, claiming “The Louisiana negroes have taken to killing alligators for their meat. That’s what alligators have always killed negroes for.” One Pennsylvania newspaper published a particularly horrific letter submitted by one of its readers. “Will you have [Sherriff] Lashley, author of the Florida letter, explain whether they were Negroes or Alligators he found dead along the shore. If they were Negroes,” the author continued, “whose skins he will tan and sell to Mr. When, then I want a pair of boots from some as I presume they will need no blacking.” Racial slurs might have been easily identifiable as just that in most instances, but news articles often blurred the line between fiction and reality. Each article appeared only a few years after the end of Reconstruction—which suggested a conscious attempt by Northern and Midwestern newspapers to create an image of the South as a place full of uncivilized African Americans and

animals. Authors—in a similar rhetorical vein to Goldsmith—ultimately used the fear associated both alligators and African Americans to inform (or remind) their readers that neither of the two groups were welcome in these geographic regions.

An article posted in one West Virginia newspaper projected a sense of observable, scientific data but also reinforced racial stereotypes. “I heard of but few instances where these creatures have attacked grown men; they are fond of children, and show their attachment to the offspring of other people as they do their own. . . ’Gators like dogs, pigs, and young darkies.”90

Again in Kansas, newspapers published the perceived yet erroneous correlation between alligators and African Americans. The author envisioned the article to be part alligator hunting adventure and part informative biology. The former was more apparent than the latter. The scribe first noted that dogs were the most prized morsel for alligators but also included in his report that “young colored children are also said to be rare dainties for alligators.”91 Curiously, the title of the article “Florida Attractions” seemed to represent an early attempt at increasing the state’s population. These attempts were not the calculated and heavily marketed campaigns of the early and mid-twentieth century but instead cloaked in the language of conquering an ecosystem that was then still barely understood.

Articles such as “Florida Attractions,” though varied in style and intent, shared a common characteristic. Imbedded in those articles was the attempt at presenting highly sensationalized events, inaccurate accounts, and blatant racism as scientific and systematic truths. Not all who read these articles believed every piece of “data,” but lacking a genuine, academic, and scientific study of alligators and their behavior, newspaper articles—even the

90 “Peculiarities of Alligators,” The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer, December 1, 1870.
91 “Florida Attractions: The Crop of Alligators—How They Carry Their Open Countenances Around—Their Fondness for Dogs and Small Niggers,” Western Home Journal, Lawrence, Kansas, May 1, 1873.
most heinous—served as reliable information. In some instances, articles depicted how affluent whites relied upon African Americans to catch alligators for transport. “The demand for a[sic] full-grown alligators for northern museums and aquariums begins with the warm days of Spring.” Many northern visitors were not interested in securing the alligators themselves, so “The negroes loop ropes around the big animals and drag them out in triumph.”92 More menacing, and more illuminating of the racial structure, were hunting tales that appeared in widely read publications. Following a dull day hunting, one man introduced a new “coon race” to his hunting companions. “Well, you set an alligator after a nigger and see which one can cover the most ground in the shortest time. And then he proceeded to explain for my benefit that while an alligator will run away from a white man, he will run as fast as he can after a negro or a hog.” The degree of truth was debatable, but more details followed. “We bought a big alligator for $42 and an offer of $10 secured a waiter from our hotel as victim. . .A signal was given and the coon started away with the ‘gator close at his heels.”93

The author could not share with his readers the end result, but “Oh, the darky was white with fright and could be seen against the woods as clearly as the white letters of a patent medicine advertisement on a barn painted black.”94 Racial depictions of the sort did not always appear in southern newspapers, for the “Coon Hunt” article was reprinted from the New York Tribune. The relationship between African Americans and alligators—flawed and inaccurate though it was—reached readers far beyond southern states and reinforced many racial stereotypes in the northern states, as well. Akin to the “blood-thirsty alligator” stories of the

92 “Catching Alligators: They Are Worth from $1 to $3 a Foot, According to Length,” Logan Daily News, May 22, 1890.
94 “Allen’s Coon Hunt, August 22, 1890.
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these too were intended to create a narrative about the alligator that served human cultural institutions of the era.

The killing of alligators in the late nineteenth century was not exclusively reserved for men or its use as a tool of racial discrimination. Though the majority of killings were motivated by a growing market for skins and eggs, the killing of an alligator near the Brazos River in Texas blurred the lines between masculinity and feminine heroism. Lucinda Burns, stranded on her personal island during high water, rowed to town to procure a few provisions until the water receded. Eerily reminiscent of Bartram’s descriptions a century earlier, Ms. Burns’ account, at least as initially reported by the Atlanta Constitution, reported her repeatedly striking an alligator from inside a boat. After her boat accidently disturbed an alligator, the creature immediately attacked, allegedly. “Mrs. Burns struck him with all of her might across the nose with an oar and caused him to fall back for a moment, but he returned to the attack and again came near to turning over the boat.”95 The sequence of charging alligator versus fleeing human persisted until Mrs. Burns was, reportedly, exhausted and ready to submit.

In a moment of apparent dumb luck, Mrs. Burns “ripped open one end of the flour sack, and filling a tin dipper used for bailing the boat with contents, waited until the alligator reached the side of the dugout and flung the flour straight in his gaping throat and before he could dive filled his eyes with it.”96 A Montana newspaper publishing an article about a women fending off an alligator spoke to the frontier mentality of hunting alligators. Big game hunting in the American West contained elements of frontier heroism and wrestling an alligator was akin to Western tales of confrontations with bears. These types of articles could not only encourage

95 “She Mastered the ‘Gator: A Texas Woman’s Plucky Battle With a Saurian in the River, Great Falls Tribune, November 12, 1890.
96 “She Mastered the ‘Gator,” Great Falls Tribune, November 12, 1890.
Westerners to participate in outdoor activities in the surrounding area, but also suggested to those in search of heroic undertakings pitched against the natural world to consider traveling South for a new, equally dangerous campaigns. The event occurred in Texas and was published by a Montana newspaper, demonstrating that fear was universal. Readers in the American West were equally captivated by frightful alligator stores as they were by similar stories that featured bears, wolves, and mountain lions. The actual event, a female fighting off an alligator, was not altogether absent from alligator stories, but the manner—and geography—in which these stories circulated suggested that humans—regardless of race, class, or gender—feared alligators.

Due to the mid-to-late nineteenth century transportation revolution, which not only propelled humans across the interior but commodities as well, consumers no longer needed to live in the South proper to purchase alligator goods from the region’s wetlands and waterways. By the final decades of the nineteenth century, humans had reduced alligators to a variety of fashion accessories, much to the delight of budding entrepreneurs. “From a commercial point of view the alligator is a regular bonanza,” wrote one observer. “There has been within the past three years,” the author continued, “a craze for alligator skin articles of all kinds. The leather is used in making card cases, pocketbooks, gripsacks, shoes, and slippers and belts, and an article made of this material is well-nigh indestructible.”97 If weary of aging footwear, Plains residents could purchase alligator goods at the local store. In Nemaha County, Kansas, Walker’s Store advertised, “Elegant fine boots and shoes made out of the best French calf, Alligator patent leather, kangaroo, Morocco, cloth tops, etc.”98 By pairing alligator products with animals from other continents, clothiers could market their products with the unspoken appeal of domination

98 Advertisement, Nehama County Republican, Sabetha, Kansas, May 11, 1882.
and, in the case of the alligator, exoticism. Alligators, at least in fashion trends, was becoming a highly sought-after consumer item. The volume of newspaper articles citing alligator attacks, moreover, drove the increase efforts at domination through a market economy.

Wearing animals, regardless of species, suggests at least a modicum of power structure. Wearing the hide of fourteen-foot long prehistoric reptile undoubtedly spoke to the relationship between power and fashion. “In short,” wrote Jennifer Craik, “the western fashion system goes hand-in-hand with the exercise of power. But this is also true for other fashion systems. All fashion systems,” she elaborated, “demonstrate the cultural politics of their milieu.”99 The Chicago World’s Fair was perhaps the most visible example of that process. At the most elemental intersection of fashion of power is the continuation of humans imposing order on what they deem to be an unpredictable, foul, and dangerous natural world. The process of turning the alligators into attractive and tidy fashion items was both an effort intertwined with socioeconomic status and a continuation of the eighteenth-century practice of organizing and subduing animals and their habitats.

The more exotic and dangerous the animal, the more powerful both society and the adorned appeared. Craik devoted particular attention to the meanings and symbols of exotic clothing, and argued, “Because fashion systems are built on the interrelationship and tension between exotic and familiar codes, exotic looks are all the more effective as techniques of display.”100 In 1873, in a long expose on the season’s fashion trends at luxury resorts, The Galveston Daily News reported, “Alligator leather is superseding the Russian for ladies’ belts and traveling satchels.”101 Although alligators are native to southwestern Texas, the tension

---

100 Craik, *The Face of Fashion*, 17.
between exotic and familiar fashion codes was visible. Despite alligators’ prevalence of the southwestern Gulf Coast, slight alterations in fashion codes resulted in American abandoning Russian leather goods for “exotic” American wildlife. Alligators were, of course, not “exotic” animals in Texas, but became perceived as such once converted into fashion accessories. The accessories were exotic, even if the species was not. This shift perhaps reflected a growing sense of fashion patriotism, but also demonstrated that American consumers could decide the contours of what was exotic. Defining alligators as exotic, at least in fashion codes, was a societal decision that lasted well into the twentieth century. By defining a species as exotic, transforming that animal from a living being to a handbag, and wearing its hide as an ornament was the eighteenth century’s most common system for managing their fear both of alligators in particular, and the spaces from which they originated.

The Galveston Daily piece on summer fashions also included an important detail: the piece was intended for women readers. Nineteenth century women were permitted, and in some instances, expected to display more extravagant clothing patterns. This phenomenon was no accident, claimed Fred Davis. “On the contrary,” Davis argued, “the restricted code of post-eighteenth century men’s dress and the elaborated code of women’s are of a piece; together they comprise a coherent sign system which seeks to ratify and legitimate. . .the culturally endorsed gender division of labor in society.”102 The clear boundaries that existed between male and female fashion codes—as a result of divisions of labor—coincided with the fear management process of the eighteenth century. With a few notable exceptions, men were charged with hunting, killing, and skinning the animal, while the female responsibility was to showcase the power of killing in a highly public setting. Although men and women participated in the broader

management of fear, their roles in that process mirrored social mores that were ultimately—and most visibly—displayed in the public sphere. In effect, men posing with dead alligators for newspaper articles while women displayed their reptile trappings in mid-town were the highly public bookends of the eighteenth-century fear management process. This is not to suggest that men did not procure alligator belts and boots, they most certainly did. Those clothing items, important and suggestive as they were, did less cultural work than did the photos of men standing next to large, dead alligators.

Though humans were killing alligators in large numbers during the latter-half of the nineteenth century, the marketing of the animal remained equally important. Retailers did not, however, always market alligators as exotic. On North Charles Street in Baltimore, entrepreneurs advertised to women, “Every Lady wants a Belt. Our belts are comfortable to wear, will brace you up, and improve the figure. Our 50-cent Alligator Belts are popular, and our 25-cent Alligator Belt is the best Belt sold for the money.” ¹⁰³ Many northeastern businesses touted the practical and cost-effective qualities of alligator products—even if the product was artificial—rather than marketing them as elegant or exotic. In Wilmington, Delaware, a local newspaper offered “calf and imitation alligator belts, with oxidized buckles, at 25 cents each. Worth 50 cents.” ¹⁰⁴ Because imitation alligator belts could serve the same cultural purpose—whether marketed as exotic or practical—the physiological animal became less important than the cultural ideology associated with its products. Sporting alligator fashion accessories, either authentic or counterfeit, was less important than being seen wearing them. Wearing alligator skin

¹⁰³ “10,000 Leather Belts,” The Baltimore Sun, June 27, 1885.
was a powerful image, one not only of social status, but also suggested that humans had mastered, conquered, and reduced a “fearsome” reptile to everyday items.

Nineteenth century western conceptions of fashion, however, were not yet intertwined with the conservation movement as they were in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rapidly declining alligator populations prompted some initial conservation chatter, but that rhetoric was too young and unorganized in the late nineteenth century to curtail the harvest of alligator hides for clothing and fashion accessories. Rather, fewer alligators only meant higher prices. “A paradoxical consequence of the effort to preserve species that become rarer and are classified as endangered,” wrote John Sorenson, “is that they are considered even more valuable and desirable, which puts them at greater risk.”

During the early republic and late eighteenth century, writers used the alligator to differentiate between North America and Europe. Rather than representing a physical, financial, and epistemological distance between North America and Europe, the alligator instead fiscally united the two continents. As a commodity then, the alligator was an environmental and commercial connection to the international market economy and, in a similar vein to the eighteenth century, showcased Americans’ ability to subjugate nature, create safe spaces, and produced commodities aimed at discerning Europeans. This led to the progression from domestic consumers demanding more alligator skins to consumers abroad seeking other parts of the animal. “In Paris and London this novelty is increasing steadily in popular favor and one firm in Florida is now engaged in filling a large English order for jewelry made from alligators’ teeth, which resemble the most beautiful ivory.”

domination over not only a potentially dangerous animal but over their own fears as well. Since alligators could be killed, skinned, and reduced to *en vogue* pocketbooks and shoes, humans could essentially purchase away their fears.

Rather than visit a taxidermist, humans in the late nineteenth century could display, sell, and purchase their alligator trophies on Times Square or Piccadilly Square. Consumers in London and New York were not connected to the animal; they were, in effect, removed from the killing and more engaged in the product obtained from the animal. Wearing an alligator was a symbol of status and power, but unlike animal skins in previous centuries, the shoes, handbags, hats, and coats of nineteenth century city-dwellers were highly processed material goods. From a context of fear, this process undoubtedly ameliorated humans’ anxiety of the species. If consumers intended to convey elegance and beauty by adorning colorful feathers, carrying a highly visible accessories of alligator hide signaled at least some control over a powerful human emotion. The alligator was conquered physically, and the fear it represented gave fashion accessories increased cultural value. The rise in demand for alligator hides, observed Julia Long, occurred as the “natural world” and its commodities became more accessible to the public. “Over the course of the nineteenth century,” she argued, “the general populace supported a trend toward a greater understanding of the natural world... travel to diverse and mysterious corners of the earth was encouraged, and numerous books were published that explored the flora and fauna from all over.” Western females’ choice to drape themselves in animal hides, she concluded, “illustrate two significant influences endemic to this time period: sentimental affection and interest in the natural world.”107 Humans displayed little sentimental affection for alligators in

---

the nineteenth century. Wearing the skin of an alligator did not signal sentimental affection, but instead a nineteenth century fascination with commodification of animals. Humans did not wear alligator hides because they admired alligators. They did so to demonstrate their ecological power of the species and to mitigate their fear. They were, however, interested in the natural world and how perceptions of the natural world could translate to cultural currency. In that sense, the decision about what animal to wear was an important one. Wearing a mink coat, for instance, did not produce the same cultural effect as wearing an ancient reptile that humans have feared for millennia.

The purses, belts, and curios, before they arrived on British and North American vessels, required a method of extraction by human hands. One particular demographic, according to one nineteenth century article, carved out a suitable existence harvesting alligators. “To gain one’s daily bread by means of alligators must be at all times a fairly precarious method of existence, and yet, says Harper’s Weekly, the colored man in Florida does manage to pick up many an honest penny by means of the American saurian.” Of note was the correlation between alligators and the racial politics of the era. During the same decade, southern newspapers seemed to support at least limiting alligator hunting in certain parishes while, simultaneously, northern articles suggested that African Americans could make a modest living through the trade in alligator hides and by-products.

Because many people could supplement their income through killing alligators, humans realized the material value of alligators. The cultural, ecological, and agricultural benefits were becoming clearer, but a concerted effort at using them to ignite calls for conservation were not fully developed until the final decades of the nineteenth century. Although alligators would not

---
receive state and federal protections for nearly six decades, a *Times-Picayune* article, which touted the economic benefits of hunting and killing alligators, hinted at potential alligator conservation. “There is some talk of passing a law restricting the killing of small alligators, as it is believed the creatures are being disposed of too rapidly; but as yet the movement has not taken any shape. Wouldn’t it be funny,” the author questioned readers, “to read of a ‘Society to Prevent the Extermination of Alligators’?”109 Six years later, the *News Herald* echoed that sentiment, noting, “The business of collecting the skins of alligators has already somewhat diminished the quantity of these saurians in certain parts of Florida, but they are still to be found in large numbers further inland. It is barely supposeable,” the author concluded, “that alligators ever will become extinct in Florida while those interior lakes and swamps exist.”110 The *Pittsburgh Daily Post* reprinted an article that first appeared in the Galveston News, noting the plight of alligators in Louisiana. In a strange twist, saving alligators meant saving local farms. “So marked has been the destruction,” the author described, “that the police jury of Plaquemines Parish, La., have been compelled to prohibit further hunting. It seems that alligators feed largely on muskrats, and since the lessening of the number of the former the rats have increased enormously and have seriously damaged crops.”111 A similar agricultural report from Florida reached Kansas when the *Ashland Weekly Journal* reported that killing alligators in Florida was hurting the cattle industry. The water supply on cattle farms was disturbed because, “When alligators took possession of a water hole they always kept the mud pushed up on the banks,” which created a pool for cattle. “Now [with fewer alligators] the cattle stand around these holes, which are filled with mud and almost

110 “Trade in Alligators,” *News-Herald*, October 10, 1890.
111 “Protection for Alligators,” *Pittsburgh Daily Post*, May 13, 1890.
entirely dried up, and wait for rain; the only water they get meantime being from the dew-covered grass which they eat at night.”¹¹²

Occasional lament over the sustained killing of alligators was not limited to practical, agricultural motivations. A short, fictional story from the Mississippi River traveled all the way to southern California, appearing in the *Los Angeles Herald*. A ship pilot expressed regret regarding the once plentiful alligators of the Mississippi River, even describing the region as a “paradise” for alligators. “And the alligators got to know Nancy Jane, and to know Captain Tom, and they’d swim out and rub their tails agin the boat an’ purr like cats, an’ look up and try to smile.” More fictitious accounts followed, “most notably alligators displaying superhuman strength and a humanistic sense of compassion. “Our ingines gin out once, and a crowd of alligators took a bow line and hauled us forty-five miles up stream to Vicksburg.” Upon hearing of Captain Tom’s death, moreover, all Mississippi River alligators “daubed [their] left ear with mud as a badge of mourning, and lots of ’em pined and died.”¹¹³

Less colloquial were some of the reports emerging in the Great Lakes and Midwest. A few years earlier, few had imagined that laws preventing the killing of alligators would ever exist, but an 1894 article from Illinois suggested otherwise. “Not till after the wholesale destruction of the alligator has rendered them almost extinct did it dawn on man’s intelligence that this uncouth saurian has been of material assistance to him by destroying large numbers of the smaller animals which prey upon field and garden crops.” The proliferation of rabbits, mice, and raccoons, southern farmers complained, was a direct result of the market economy and the North’s nearly insatiable appetite for alligator satchels, belts, and shoes. One parish in Louisiana

reportedly “passed an ordinance forbidding the killing of the alligator, and with their increase came a corresponding decrease in the number of destructive vermin.” The ordinance proved to be only a provisional one, as “the law has since been repealed. For what reason we do not know.”\footnote{“The Alligator’s Usefulness,” \textit{Alton Evening Telegraph}, March 31, 1894.} This was not, to be sure, the formal conservation rhetoric that emerged in the first third of the twentieth century. It was, however, indicative of the growing sentiment among many native southerners and northeastern tourists that the large, curious, and sometimes dangerous species that initially drew them to the South was becoming less visible. Their tropical wildlife playground was becoming devoid of amusements.

Still decades in advance of the state and federal protection for the American Alligator, turn-of-the-century scientists, writers, and researchers began to view the animal not as a commodity or ruthless predator but instead as a vanishing icon of the southern wetland and began to view alligator hunting as the mindless pursuit of vagrants. The Louisiana parishes convened on the matter in 1898. “There is a set of men too lazy to cultivate the soil or to make a living by an honest trade, but like to roam through the country with a gun.” Allegedly not from the parish, “these are the ones who set fire in pursuit of game and for killing alligators.”\footnote{“In St. Bernard: The Police Jury Passes on a Number of Measures,” \textit{The Times-Picayune}, June 7, 1898.} Though not voiced specifically, the language of the Louisiana leaders echoed the racial sentiments of former Confederates. In the late nineteenth century, alligator hunting was in the midst of a transition from dutiful employment to weekend hobby. Who hunted alligators, and their motivations for doing so, came under scrutiny. Though the parish declined to take legal action, humans were beginning to use the alligator for another purpose: conservation.
Albert M. Reese, professor at Syracuse University, devoted much of his academic life to observation, research, and analyzing the alligators’ physiology, behavior, and habitat. Though Reese was a scientist, naturalist, and wildlife enthusiast, he too exhibited both in action and speech the cultural milieu regarding swamps and reptiles. During his second trip to the Okfenokee, Reese remarked that his traveling companions had killed nearly one hundred alligators. Reese noted his displeasure, “It seems a very wanton destruction of life to kill so many of these large animals, especially when it is remembered that a large alligator hide is worth to the hunter only about $1.50.” Reese also described both Okefenokee and the Everglades as “swampy wastes,” and, as a measure of cursory predictions, opined that alligators would never be exterminated as long as both swamps “remain undrained.”

Appearing to lament the loss of so many alligators while tacitly endorsing such behavior on his expedition situated Reese in a peculiar environmental and epistemological space. Reese’s adolescence was spent in an era in which the fear of nature and alligators lacked academic, scientific reasoning or data. Presumably, those shortcomings are what pushed him to the “wasteland” swamps. His remorse at the killing of alligators was fitting to the era which he conducted scientific study, an era when the fear of alligators complimented fierce capitalism.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century then, advances in field methodologies and technologies—in concert with direct experience—drove the creation of new knowledge about the American Alligator. Intellectually and academically, Reese straddled eras. The bulk of his writing in “The Breeding Habits of the Florida Alligator” are explanatory and occasionally didactic. For the breeding and subsequent embryonic season of alligators, Reese

---

displaces the notions of “native hunters,” whose lengthy and imprecise timetable for breeding and hatching Reese found highly unsatisfactory. Reese placed an emphasis on personal observation, deduction, and the works of other scientists. He rarely, however, observed an entire breeding season or witnessed an alligator building a nest. Reese occupied a scientific, cultural, and intellectual space that stood between the entrenched folklore and mythology of Buffon and Goldsmith and the emerging scientific fields that would later dominate the mid-to-late twentieth century. Though much of the public in North America were familiar with alligators, its taxonomic classification remained a central focus into the early decades of the twentieth century. Reese, himself a professional zoologist, admitted in 1915, “As in most groups of animals, there is considerable difference of opinion as to the proper classification of the Crocodilia.” Reese published a large work in which he devoted deep attention to the behavior and physiology of crocodiles and alligators.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a debate remained regarding the behavioral and biological differences between alligators and crocodiles. The effort to better understand the differences between alligators and crocodiles was the most recent non-violent attempt for human to mitigate their fears. By placing alligators (or crocodiles) in an order taxonomic language, humans could more easily do the same task psychologically. General observers recognized that the two reptilian cousins inhabited central and south Florida, yet biologists, herpetologists, and zoologists, remained divided on the degree of ancestral and chromatic lineage between the species. In July 1875, a New York periodical announced that, “Prof. Ward of Syracuse University has come into possession of what is pronounced a veritable

American Crocodile, an animal whose existence in this country has long been in dispute.”

Only a few years later, the American Crocodile made its way to the Great Plains, as documented by *The Kansas Farmer*. Fixed between articles on canning vegetables and a history of the Suez Canal, “American Crocodiles” attempted to update Plains farmers on scientific advancements in hepatology. “Recent investigations have shown that the crocodile is to be found in the less frequented parts of Florida, where it has long been confounded with the alligator, and a single specimen”, the article continued, “is now among the collection of reptiles at the Smithsonian Institution.” Approximately the same length as an article on canning vegetables, the crocodile piece noted many of the obvious differences between alligators and crocodiles. It did, however, closely resemble early articles on the alligator, remarking, “The American crocodile is not so savage as those of the Old World, yet numbers of instances are known where their attacks have resulted in the loss of life.”

Despite the physiological and habitat differences, fear remained at the core of both discussions on the alligator and the crocodile. After all, displaying a fourteen-foot-long reptile in the Smithsonian suggests that the species was worthy of fright. The distinction between crocodiles and alligators was largely irrelevant to a public who rather than seeing two distinct species, saw aesthetically similar creatures that posed an imminent threat. Equally important, the article was representative of the diffusion of scientific findings and literature to the broader American public. This is not to suggest that American were wholly oblivious to scientific and technical publications, but rather to note the nascent stages of rural America beginning to rely more heavily upon academic contributions. Scientific writing was

---

119 *The Sun*, New York, New York, July 5, 1875.
intended to demystify a species or behavior. In the case of alligators and crocodiles, the purpose was to both inform and warn.

Equally important as his scientific contributions, Reese also discussed the harvest of alligator hides for clothing and fashion accessories for tourists. Antebellum North American witnessed a brief rise in demand for alligator hides, but demand remained comparatively weak, “until the demand for shoe-leather during the war between the States revived the business. At the close of the war business again failed, but about 1869 the demand became greater than ever and has continued unabated to the present time.”121 By the first two decades of the twentieth century, Florida’s environmental wonders drew tourists from colder regions. Part of the Florida allure, to be sure, was the prospect of acquiring alligator souvenirs. “While the manufacture of leather gives the chief value to the alligator,” Reese argued, “there are other ways in which it has some economic importance. Chief of these is probably the sale of alligator goods to tourists.”122 Reese, then, appeared to share the widely held view of his era—that alligators were primarily a commodity.

Perhaps more widely circulated and easily accessible was E.A. McIlhenny’s *The Alligator’s Life History*. A member of a prominent and wealthy Louisiana family—known primary for Tabasco sauce—McIlhenny differed from Reese in that he voiced his love and appreciation of alligators. From his life-long home in Avery Island, McIlhenny authored several works designed to inform and instruct hunters and outdoor enthusiasts on the Deep South’s wild game. Whether intentional or not, his work on alligators was both a call to arms for conservation and a pseudo-scientific effort to alleviate the level fear associated with alligators. “The American

122 Reese, *The Alligator and Its Allies*, 34.
Alligator, although very well known throughout the territory it inhabits, is a maligned and much misunderstood reptile, and but little accurate data has been recorded concerning its life history.” Though McIlhenny did not espouse a traditional fear of alligators, his work occurred within a context of fear. The methodology conflicted with that of Reese’s, in that McIlhenny relied primarily on direct experience—as did Bartram and Barton. McIlhenny’s work on alligators could be trusted—at least according to him—because he had cohabited the alligator’s native range and engaged in lifelong interaction with the species. In his mind, it seemed, direct experience was direct science. McIlhenny wasted little time in confronting the established views of academics.

A report by Dr. Hugh Smith of the United States Fish Commission caught McIlhenny’s ire, as he even listed the page numbers of what he recognized as serious errors—nearly five pages worth—and he was correct in his edits. Ever a proponent of alligators, McIlhenny spent considerable time attempting to convince his readers that alligators were not altogether dangerous creatures. “Alligators rarely attack human beings, and during my long life among them, I have only twice suffered unprovoked attacks. . .” Similar to news articles of the era, McIlhenny’s account of those instances is a highly entertaining read, filled with split second decisions and dumb luck that ultimately saved his life. By composing stories of this type, McIlhenny undoubtedly (and inadvertently) highlighted the degree to which fear remained a central component of human psychology. Fear remained the unspoken locus of his account, as he told readers that the attacks he suffered, twice, were unprovoked. He did not, however, view alligators as simple commodities, and decried the speed at which hunters and trappers decimated

the population in Louisiana. “In the old days no small alligators were taken,” he lamented, “but now anything that can be skinned is killed.”

Though published in 1935, McIlhenny’s *Life History* recounted his experiences during the final three decades of the nineteenth century. Alligator farms were well established by the time of its publication, but McIlhenny made little mention of those operations. Rather than save alligators for research or entertainment, he was one of the first advocates of saving alligators as iconic southern species. For McIlhenny, alligators were an irreplaceable component of the southern landscape, claiming, “They were looked upon as part of our natural surroundings, and we paid no more attention to them than we did to the flocks of birds about the place.” A sympathetic work such as his—in the midst of mass killings for sport, fashion, and fear—undoubtedly caught the attention of other influential southern naturalists and, as with several popular and iconic species, gave considerable weight to the initial conservation ethos.

Once Americans began to notice the absence of large mammals on the Plains and migratory birds in the South, advocacy groups began to emerge and shape a nascent conservation ethos. Members of the American Bison Society and the National Audubon Society (most of whom lived in the urban Northeast) developed campaigns to save the animals from over-hunting and perhaps extinction. Although the desire to save bison and birds was designed more for tourism and hunting than for benign preservation, the inclination of many nineteenth-century Americans to join social and conservation advocacy groups stemmed from the tide of carcasses flowing into trading depots and filling the coffers of aspiring entrepreneurs. Much like alligators, bison and wading birds were symbolic. The latter species represented a pristine wilderness,

---

indelible images of American natural splendor coupled with humans’ perceived ability to impose order on a supposedly chaotic and dangerous natural world. Initially placed on small refuges and protected areas, bison became federally protected in 1894.\textsuperscript{126} The Lacey Act of 1901 and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 protected egrets, herons, and a host of other threatened avian species. Unlike the bison and wading birds representation of a fundamental component of American wilderness, the alligator—scaly, ugly, predatory—for centuries had provoked images of dragons, serpents, and hellish creatures. Although the Florida legislature provided limited protection in 1943 and Louisiana in 1963, alligators did not gain federal protection until the first Endangered Species Act of 1966, in no small part because of the cultural symbolism and fear it provoked in humans.\textsuperscript{127}

Nascent conversations about how to sustain alligators began during the final two decades of the nineteenth century. A Port Huron newspaper—by way of a southern publication, reported in 1881 that, “The rapid increase in the demand for alligator leather in Europe makes it possible that alligator farming may become an important industry in our southern swamps.” The idea of utilizing farms to conserve alligators emerged after “The general slaughter of alligators soon made them scarce in that state [Louisiana] and now Florida is the chief source of supply.”\textsuperscript{128} Early calls to save or, perhaps more accurately, conserve alligators did not wholly arise from a genuine concern for either the alligators themselves or concerns for the future of the wetland environment. Provided that a market still existed for alligator by-products, and if alligator populations in Florida remained steady, sustained conservation measures were not to be undertaken nor realized. At the intersection of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the

\textsuperscript{126} Bison protection from Isenberg, \textit{Destruction}, 179.

\textsuperscript{127} Alligator protection from Barrow, “Dragons,” 278-279.

\textsuperscript{128} “Facts and Figures,” \textit{The Times Herald}, Port Huron, Michigan, August 18, 1881.
alligator primarily remained a commodity in the minds of humans. The cultural and intellectual transition that occurred during the first few decades of the twentieth century arrived slowly and with heightened debate about what the animal meant to humans and their cultural institutions.
CHAPTER IV
GATOR AID: FROM SWAMP TO FARM

Traveling on Interstate 75 through central Florida, motorists can expect to see many familiar characteristics of a modern American interstate. Hundreds of miles of loblolly pines, billboards, and palmettos line the corridor. Exits leading to rest stops and petroleum stations provide necessities of comfort and fossil fuels to weary travelers and, ever on the horizon, the lofty and colorful signs for McDonald’s, Applebee’s and—for some “authentic” home cooking—the quiet front porches of Cracker Barrel. This highway, along with myriad other state highways and county roads, offers windshield weekenders a rather unique roadside attraction. After children scurry to the restroom and adults recharge on aged coffee, the entire ensemble can devote a few moments to interacting with prehistoric reptiles. Tourists can purchase alligator trinkets, marvel at large alligator taxidermy and, in a few instances, even procure a family photo holding a juvenile ‘gator. Though the alligator attractions on I-75 lack the spectacle of Devil’s Peak or Mount Hood, they too provide “windshield wilderness” at its most discernable.\(^{129}\)

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, humans had largely reduced the alligator to a commodity. By the turn of the century, however, many hunters, farmers, journalists, and interested citizens began to decry the large-scale slaughter of alligators and some even wondered if measures ought to be enacted to ensure its survival. The motivations to “save” alligators were

not limited to a benign, altruistic sentimentality regarding the animal or its habitat. The human inclination to save a predatory species was usually, if not universally, designed to benefit humans more than the creature itself. The most easily visible form of mitigating fear in the story was that of domination. Killing alligators, thereby removing the fear altogether, was the first lesson. Not satisfied with killing, the second form of domination was to capture and tame a live alligator—a method in which the result was arguably more domination than killing. Finally, the story suggested that alligator could be tamed and, in addition, prove wise and fiscally beneficial to humans. The story might initially appear as an anecdotal tale from a publication aimed at entertaining rather than informing. The motivations of the author, however, were clear: killing alligators was boring while saving them as pets and live souvenirs was potentially profitable. Keeping live alligators meant that humans could indulge their fears at leisure. They would not, for instance, be required to traipse through the muddy swampland—risking life and limb—to encounter their fears. A live alligator allowed humans to entertain and test the limits of their fear in an otherwise comfortable setting of their own choosing, and elements of this endeavor became increasingly common in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Alligator farms were one of the earliest experiments at protecting alligators for human manipulation. The physiology of the material animal—hide, teeth, claws, and bones—allowed hunters, trappers, and entrepreneurs an opportunity to make more of the animal than most traditional livestock. The physical species, coupled with its iconography and mysticism, enabled those involved in alligator enterprises to exist somewhere between serious agriculturalist and circus promoter, marginal environmental roles in marginal environmental spaces. Under the landschaft model, alligators had inhabited dangerous wilderness, but alligator farms offered an adjustment to that model to suit modern needs.
Alligator farms, both at their inception and through the twentieth century, did not quite fit the traditional definition of a farm. By the middle third of the twentieth century—and certainly beyond—alligator farms were hubs. The alligator farm itself is the center of the hub with fear driving the hub and, more specifically, serving as the central locus for captivity. Approaching alligator farm hubs illustrates the variety of ways in which humans attempted to mitigate or negotiate their fear of alligators. If zoos are institutions of control and managed exposure, as Irus Braverman contends, then alligator farms fit that model. The observer(s) here vary widely, professional scientists, alligator ranchers, tourists, and adolescent children on a field trip. Each observer has a different role to fill and, consequently, understands and encounters the alligator at a different cultural junction. For some, the alligator was a science experiment, for some a novelty, and for others, a captive prisoner—they are all, however, bound by fear. In previous decades, fear drove the interaction between humans and alligators. Those behaviors, however, were largely separated from each other spatially and temporally. The alligator farms brought all of those mechanisms together under a single enterprise. Alligator farms were visible and working examples of numerous reactions to the alligator. Humans established alligator farms to study, breed, confine, kill, and save, and display alligators. All of those efforts were driven by a hub of fear. The emotion of fear, more or less, operated slightly differently in each of those enterprises—with more or less overlap between each endeavor.

In the eighteenth century, humans expressed their fear through intimidating accounts and visual representation of the species. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, humans embarked on a campaign to physically organize the natural world that resulted in the killing of millions of alligators. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, humans were involved in a number of attempts to rationalize or manage their fear. Most of those
exercises occurred within the multiple stages of alligator farms. Changes in the ways in which humans feared alligators was evident on the various stages of alligator farms. As a purely physical pace, most alligator farms were located on the fringes of society—literally and figuratively. The landschaft ideology demanded that spooky creatures—and the equally spooky humans who interacted intimately with those animals—situate themselves beyond town and city limits. Photos of several dozen alligators ravenously feeding at a farm became commonplace during the early twentieth century. Those images not only further cemented the culture of fear, but also demonstrated that humans could control the species without exterminating it. Several images created during that era, paradoxically, suggest that alligators could almost appear “tamed,” yet the effort to confine alligators and separate them from the public behind fences demonstrated that humans still felt alligators needed to be confined. Alligator ranches and zoos were not only selling fear and creating an ideological “safe” space between humans and alligators but also garnering a profit from the manipulation or management of that fear. In the same way circus performers insert their skull into the mouth of a tiger, alligator ranchers performed, sometimes quite literally, the identical activity aimed at producing the same financial and psychological result. The physical and psychological boundaries established in late twentieth century suburbia, moreover, took their spatial and temporal cues from these types of practices.

Humans harnessed the cultural and physical strength of alligators for three primary goals. First and perhaps most obvious, alligator farmers and ranchers utilized the psychological power of alligator to meet their own financial ends. A secondary motivation was to reinforce those long-standing cultural notions that alligators are dangerous and should be, at least in some way, confined and managed. Finally, human demonstrations were intended as a display of power over
nature. Similar to alligator hunting in the late nineteenth century, humans could reduce a culturally fearsome “man-eater” to simple livestock.

The activities that occurred on alligator farms—in addition to their physical location—demonstrated the close relationship between *landschaft* and fear. Alligator wrestling and feeding demonstrations drew paying customers to most alligator farms. Alligator farmers and ranchers understood the emotions of fear alligators produce in humans and used that emotion to a financial end. Fear was constant, but the observation(s) and configurations of alligator farms changed according to humans’ tinkering with their impulses of fear. Perhaps the most important and easily identifiable of those extensions was tourism and the financial benefits of alligator farming. Beginning the first third of the twentieth century, most alligator farms relied upon an influx of tourism to generate enough capital to remain financially solvent enterprises. The alligators’ role in the process was crucial. Alligator farmers, in cooperation with tourism promoters, used the alligator’s cultural and ecological power—its reputation as dangerous but alluring species coupled with the crucial role alligators have in wetland ecology—to attract visitors to their sites.

Another extension were the efforts at alligator conservation. Initial attempts at alligator farms lacked this component and operated almost solely for profit. Modern alligator farms, however, employed conservationist language at their facilities and some alligator farms actively contribute to the health of the species by rearing eggs in spaces devoid of natural predators and creating media to support public education about the species. That media, moreover, was often manipulated according to the desires of the marketers. Tracing how that literature evolved over time reveals not only revisions of alligator conservation, but of twentieth century conservation rhetoric broadly.
Science and technology formed another spoke. Most modern alligator farms served as laboratories for wildlife officials and for academics. Post-war researchers traveled to alligator farms to study the effects of captive breeding practices and measure the scope or presence of West Nile Virus in alligators. Alligator farms also served as suppliers for meat laboratories. Although researchers did not conduct the meat quality examinations on-site, their work reached the public as alligator farms often sold meat to visitors with assurances that the product had undergone the necessary health and safety protocol for an American public increasingly concerned with comparatively healthy or organic food products.

The earliest alligator farms were not hubs, but they were foundational in the decades-long evolution of the alligator farming enterprise. Not only did early proprietors and writers employ the term “farm,” the financial motivations for creating—or at least maintaining—a space devoted to alligator reproduction remained fundamental throughout their physical and institutional growth. Though early alligator farms lacked the entertainment, research, entertainment, and oversight of modern alligator farms, they were beneficial to the species and functioned as a loose model for their early-and-mid twentieth century predecessors. Most early alligator farmers set a precedent by prohibiting hunting alligators on their property and allowing suitable acreage for reproduction and nesting, all of which were characteristics of alligator farms throughout their existence.

The harvest of alligators continued throughout much of the nineteenth century, and the nascent conservation ethos emerged matured alongside the killing. One of the first alligator farms emerged in 1882 and was intended to protect local alligators, albeit for the eventual purpose of harvesting a portion for market value. Although the alligators were not contained in an enclosure, the landowner identified his property as an alligator farm and devoted large tracts
of land to aid their growth and survival. A newspaper writer was motivated to “see the alligator as he is. . . and [I] rode across the country and got down in front of an old-time, old-fashioned Southern residence, with its long verandas and beautiful shade.” Coupled with a conscious effort to create an idealized version of the antebellum South was the author’s description of alligators who “spent [their] years in basking and eating and keeping one eye out for the flash of a shot-gun.” Judge Speed, the patriarch of the residence boasted, “I was figuring up the other day and I calculated that I was the owner of at least 1,000 alligators,” most of whom were “regular tenants.”

Following a rudimentary discussion of alligator behavior and eating habits, the Judge revealed his ultimate goal. When asked if he wanted the alligators to find another bayou, he responded, “Good lands, but I don’t want [them] to! I want’ [them] to thrive and increase and multiply until the bayou won’t hold [them].” Judge Speed was not particularly concerned with saving the species, as he explained, “Ten, fifteen or twenty years hence the price of alligator hides will be four times what it is now, and I’ll turn in on [them] and make some money. That bayou is my alligator farm. The seeds are there and the plants are growing. . . I shall let cotton go for one season and send alligator hides to market.” Judge Speed’s alligator farm possessed many of the characteristics of a traditional farm, in effect, holding live animals until they were ready for market. Although the farm was becoming something of a tourist curiosity, Judge Speed did not interact with the animals as did later farmers and entrepreneurs. Long before concerted efforts at conservation, Judge Speed’s plantation was an alligator farm, but he did not intend for his farm to promote conservation or to entertain large groups of visitors and tourists. It was

---

131 “An Alligator Farm,” July 12, 1882.
merely a single individual with suitable acreage to provide suitable living conditions for enough alligators from which he could profit. Though the site lacked many of the features of its successors, it was the first version of alligator farms in the southern United States. As the alligator trade continued and market demand for their hides and by-products increased, a second version of alligator farms appeared the following decade.

Those alarmed at the alligators’ disappearance from southern swamps initiated a more formal effort at alligator farming a decade after the widely circulated piece on Judge Speed’s alligator enterprise. The sharp decline in alligator populations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the impetus for a second model of alligator farms. Several northern newspapers reprinted a piece from Louisiana that detailed both motivation for the undertaking and its mission. “Within the past ten years the alligators in Louisiana have been nearly exterminated. The demand for alligator leather and oil and the sport in shooting ‘gaters’ have killed off this saurian in all except the lakes and bayous of Southern Plaquemines, Lafourche, and Terrebonne.”

The seasonal influx of individual hunters—southerners and northerners alike—had largely disappeared following the rapid decline in harvestable animals. Consequently, “An attempt is now being made on Bayou Morris, in this state, to supply the deficiency by artificially hatching and raising alligators for the northern market. The animal is easily reared and domesticated, although treacherous and liable to prove ugly when made angry, at which time its bite seems to be poisonous.”

The Bayou Morris endeavor was a more mature representative of what alligator farms would become than Judge Speed’s plantation. To be sure, the proprietors of the earliest alligator

---

133 “Alligator Farms,” August 28, 1891.
farms had little to no inclination for using alligators as amusement, but that addition would soon follow. Each operation—both the Speed plantation and the Bayou Morris farm—imagined that they would benefit financially from their efforts. In Bayou Morris, the prospects appeared promising, for “The experiment is too young yet to pronounce it a success or a failure, but those who have embarked in it and who have studied the question say that there is money to be made in the business.”134 Though individuals could potentially profit from alligator farming, it remained unclear where exactly the profit would be realized. Alligator farming was an extractive industry and, as those industries often demonstrated, the bulk of the windfall was not felt within the region. The garment and retail industries of the northeast, who purchased the hides from southern farms, would ultimately benefit the most turning the skins into fashion accessories and selling them at a significant mark-up. Shipping goods away from the region would not prove profitable. Instead, southern alligator farmers needed to draw large numbers of tourists to the South to enjoy the financial benefits of their labor.

Tourists did eventually flood into Florida, though by the first two decades of the twentieth century, their purpose was not to exclusively hunt alligators. Newspapers and periodicals began to shift public sentiment regarding the alligator during the first decade of the twentieth century. No longer, they argued, should the public ruthlessly exploit the animal for its physical anatomy. This is not to suggest that alligator hunting disappeared altogether, but rather to note a pivot in how humans exploited the alligator. In this third manifestation of alligator farms, promoters and entrepreneurs exploited the animal’s entertainment value. Deep in south Florida, at least one intrepid soul began to recognize the benefits of protecting alligators both for amusement and for a potential economic windfall prior to the problem of attracting national

---

134 “Alligator Farms,” August 28, 1891.
attention. Early accounts cite Warren Frazee, more affectionately called “Alligator Joe” as the farmer / entrepreneur to utilize alligator farms as a magnet for tourism. In September 1905, the Ocala Banner reported that Frazee “started an alligator farm near Miami and has already hatched out over five thousand of the little saurians. It is quite a unique venture,” the newspaper opined, “and he thinks [it] will prove to be a very profitable business.”¹³⁵

Frazee’s establishment, which he had operated in some capacity since 1895, was another antecedent of modern alligator farms. The primary difference between this operation and its predecessors was that Frazee intended his alligator farms to draw northern tourists and, to that end, conducted extravagant shows through direct contact and interaction with captive alligators. The Tampa Tribune reprinted an article from the Washington Times, disseminating the work of Alligator Joe. “Alligators are not supposed to be particularly intellectual,” the author began, “but they have been trained to do some interesting things. For years, at St. Augustine, Fla., there was a great character known as ‘Alligator Joe’”. Regarding the largest alligator in Joe’s collection, the article noted, “At certain hours every day Joe would climb on this big alligator’s back and ride him all around the tank, for the benefit of those who paid 25 cents to see the performance.”¹³⁶ Not limited to whimsical charades and performances, Frazee also bore striking resemblance to modern hunting guides. When not raiding alligator nests in search of eggs, Frazee “will carry out probably twenty parties of sportsmen to kill ‘gators in the South Florida haunts of the saurian, at $25 a party . . .”¹³⁷ An effort at entertainment and sportsmanship was a new

¹³⁵ Ocala Banner, September 15, 1905.
¹³⁶ “Take Care of the Alligator: We May Soon See His Finish: Extinction Threatens the Alligator, and Uncle Sam is Preparing to Preserve Him Like the Buffalo—Slaughter of Saurians Already Being Reduced,” The Tampa Tribune, December 30, 1906.
characteristic of early twentieth century alligator farms that earlier versions lacked. Private hunting parties would not continue to be a feature of post-war alligator farms, but Frazee’s operation—the marriage of entertainment and hunting—was representative of the third movement of alligator farms.

The piece on Alligator Joe appeared in a larger article urging for alligator protection and drew a direct connection between another iconic animal of the Great Plains and Western United States. Although Florida officials had “proved themselves competent” at slowing the slaughter, the author warned, “The day may come, however, when [alligators] will be as scarce as the bison, only a few of which are now living in America.” This type of language typified Progressive-era conservation rhetoric. Though encouraged at the state and national level to continue hunting and trapping as a masculine—and patriotic—activity, outdoor enthusiasts should do so with a dose of environmental conscientiousness. The rudimentary arguments for conservation in the late nineteenth century—those that focused on the alligators’ role in rodent reduction—had by the first decades of the twentieth century evolved into more detailed and nuanced ideas about conserving wetland ecosystems. “But in addition to the marketable fish the [Atchafalaya] basin abounds in gar and sharks. These devour the smaller fish and cut down the profits of the fishermen. The alligator… [feeds] almost entirely upon gar and sharks and thus protected the smaller fish.”138 In this sense, alligators were saving themselves through their natural behavior.

While Frazee’s operation focused more on tourism than meat production, his method of obtaining young alligators form the wild—coupled with a desire for showmanship—nonetheless

benefitted alligator populations in south Florida. This unintended advantage to the American Alligator populations influenced the perception of alligator farms as well as their impact on the economy, environment, and ultimately, the animal’s survival.

The first decade of the century brought further adaptation of alligator farms. Those farms were intended not only for extravagant sideshows or hunting trips but were also secured, fenced, and tightly managed. Because these farms were managed, and in many ways artificial environments, they were also the earliest version of alligator farms that could be replicated in other geographic regions. “The first alligator farm thus far known has been established near the town of Seven Bridges in Georgia,” reported the *Daily Signal*, “with a stock of thirty-seven breeding saurians.” This new Georgian experiment—though bearing a general resemblance to earlier versions—was more structured both in design and implementation. “Three hundred acres of swamp land have been secured and are being fenced in by the owner, who expects to make a quick fortune by the enterprise owing to the growing scarcity of these reptiles and the steady market demand for them.” Coupled with securing the alligators in an enclosure, the owner sought to limit the number of predators that often pose the greatest risk to young alligators, most especially, large turtles and predatory fish. Rather than let hatchlings mature in the swampland habitat, as did Judge Speed and Warren Frazee, the Seven Bridges farmer, “will find no difficulty in hatching his eggs by a simple incubator process, exposing them to the sun in boxes of sand.”

---

The rapid increase of alligator farms was remarkable and defied climatic regions. Just as the fever to kill alligators and sell their hides and teeth raged for decades, the effort to contain them in all areas of the nation ignited with equal fervor. At Lincoln Park in Chicago, “Fifteen wheelbarrow loads of alligators of various sizes and degrees of ugliness were yesterday trundled from the animal house in Lincoln Park to the large pen which the sea lions used to inhabit before they escaped to Lake Michigan and were changed into sea serpents.” Aside from the editorial humor, “There has never been a place in the city where alligator eggs or spring alligators could be purchased in boarding house quantities, and if there are no snow-storms between now and next August the members of the Park Board hope to be able to supply the demand.”141 Humans had shipped alligator hatchlings across the continental United States for decades, but with the rapid decline of alligators in the wetland South, other regions of the country sought to create artificial habitats for alligators—a practice that would continue to mature over the coming decades of the early twentieth century.

Indeed, as alligators represented a larger national movement to create farms for a host of species. The New York Tribune cited one southern state invested heavily in the idea of captivity. “Arkansas has never been in a position to boast of diversified farms, but one locality of the state . . . is entitled to place its claim before the world as having remarkable diversification in farm products.” An alligator farm, an ostrich farm, and a dog farm all existed within close proximity to each other. “The last two named are not without interest,” the report clarified, “but the first takes precedence over them in the mind of every man that visits there.”142 The Arkansas farm also foreshadowed future alligator operation in that the dog farm that existed next to the alligator

---

141 “Alligator Farm in Lincoln Park: Twenty-Two of the Ugly Saurians and a Colony of Turtles Placed in the Sea Lions’ Pen,” Chicago Tribune, June 5, 1896.
enclosure served a steady meals for alligators. Once the local animal control officials held the
dogs for the required amount of time, they simply opened the canine cages into the alligator
enclosure, prompting the author to exclaim, “Big Joe has been known to devour seven large dogs
in one afternoon.”

By the 1930s, owners of alligator farms continued to direct most of their efforts toward
amusement and amazement. Private hunting parties and tentative efforts at conservation had—at
least for the moment—become less popular. The facilities and shows, moreover, were not limited
to white Americans. Near Miami, Florida, the Musa Isle Indian Village drew tourists from across
the continent to behold the spectacle. “The Indians at Musa Isle have established a complete
native village,” reported the Miami News, “where the visitor may see them living in exactly the
same manner as they have for many years in the American tropics.” The degree to which the
article’s suggestions were accurate was, of course, highly questionable. In addition to the
advertisement of an authentic Seminole village, Musa Isle also contained a small zoo—complete
with alligator shows. “One of the many unusual attractions at Musa Isle is the daily wrestling
match between a native Seminole and a full-grown alligator. This never fails to thrill the crowds
and it is a feat that not many would care to attempt.” The visual observation, the act of
watching these events in this particular setting carved a cultural ethos both for alligators and
Euroamerican sentimentality for Native Americans. The Musa Isle site, though cloaked in
references to an ancient Native American past, still operated in the same manner as other
alligator farms of the era. Educating tourists about Seminoles was a small facet of the operation,
but the primary goal was to generate tourist dollars and use the alligator for that purpose.

144 “Tourists Here Find Musa Isle Big Attraction: Seminole Wrestling With Alligator Always Thrills Crowd,” The
Miami News, January 15, 1929.
Alligator farms also drew the interest of women in the twentieth century. In Daytona Beach, Sadie Godfrey operated what one article tabbed as the “largest alligator farm in the world.” Citing another wildlife icon, Godfrey revealed her motivation for establishing the farm. “Like the American buffalo, the alligator is fast becoming extinct. With Florida becoming settled and the swamps drained, the alligators have been captured and slaughtered in wholesale fashion for their valuable skins.” In concert with a distinct inclination for conservation, Godfrey also provided (somewhat dangerous) entertainment. Godfrey’s first husband, “Alligator Joe Campbell,” taught alligators to perform tricks. “He began by teaching Bessie and Beauty, two of our ten-footers, to draw a little cart to give children a slow but exciting ride.”

Her operation was also one of earliest versions of alligator farms as hubs. Though it lacked scientific trials and research, the farm was an attempt at conservation, a tourist attraction, a breeding center, and legitimate business enterprise. As with most alligator farms, humans were not uniformly engaged in controlling the physical animal at every measure, but instead manipulated the board cultural and environmental appeal of the animal itself to suit contemporary human needs. Humans in other words, controlled the production of the animal without universally controlling the physiological animal.

Not only did alligator farms and ranches exalt visual stimulation through interactive wrestling demonstrations, they also sought to dazzle tourists through sheer volume. In 1937, the newly established Daytona Beach alligator farm required “the movement of 6,000 alligators, ranging from one to 800 years in age. . . .The oldest reptile in the group is ‘Old Ocklawaha,’ [a] huge, lazy, creature whose age is estimated at 800 years. There are many over a century old and

---

145 “Florida Woman Earns Living Operating Alligator Farm,” The Circleville Herald, Circleville, Ohio, October 18, 1937.
the breeding pen is well filled with bright-eyed, evil-tempered youngsters ranging from 35 to 70.”\textsuperscript{146} Even into the first third of the twentieth century, it appeared that alligator lore and mythology still trumped the academic and scientific work of Audubon and Reese. Whether or not the article’s author knew that alligators did not live to 800 years was not important, however, for the appeal of alligator farms was the continuation of the cultural ethos surrounding the reptile.

The final version of alligator farms appeared in the middle of the twentieth century and contained most of the characteristics of the earlier versions. Organizers controlled and managed these model farms to produce entertainment, financial profit, alligator souvenirs and meat, and to promote conservation of the species. Post-war alligator farms continued, and in one case, increased the interactive extravagance at alligator farms. Russell Kay, a journalist for \textit{The Orlando Sentinel}, authored a piece on one of his visits to the St. Augustine Alligator Farm. Much to his surprise and delight, Kay was selected as a member of the Alligator Club and Saurian Club. Kay’s privileges were three-fold. He was allowed to, “wrestle a live alligator at regular wrestling times, chute the chute into the breeding pool with the live alligators, and feed by hand any of the 6,000 live alligators at the farm at regular feeding times.”\textsuperscript{147} Kay’s piece appeared during the initial era of post-war expansion. Millions of Americans migrated to the newly established suburbs and residential neighborhoods. Relocating from urban areas, however, meant that families required safety from large carnivores. Humans had already reduced the populations of bears, wolves, and mountain lions to near extirpation in native regions, though after collecting a few specimens for zoos and museums under the guise of education. As Kay’s article suggested,

\textsuperscript{146} “6,000 Gators Soon to Move Into New Zoo: Jax Alligator Farm Will become Attraction of Daytona Beach,” \textit{Tallahassee Democrat}, June 1, 1937.

\textsuperscript{147} Russell Kay, “Alligator Farm Is Good Show, Well Worth Visit,” \textit{The Orlando Sentinel}, April 29, 1954.
a similar transition occurred for alligators in the middle of the twentieth century. As Americans increasingly demanded “safe” backyards, they concurrently reshaped the cultural ethos surrounding the alligator. Russel Kay’s version of alligators was one of general interest and largely benign whimsy. Although alligators were commonplace in zoos, their reputation as blood-thirsty man-eaters, remained intact. Feeding, wrestling, dodging, and even confining alligators was a spectacle. That alligator handlers and zoo professionals were the only humans allowed within a certain distance of the reptile performers clearly suggested to observers that their activities were dangerous.

An article from a Pennsylvania newspaper confirmed demonstrated the language and culture surrounding alligator had undergone a transformation by the middle of the twentieth century. Upon her visit to a Florida alligator farm, journalist Tamara Andreeva remarked, “At these farms, when the alligators are sluggish, people can even sit on their backs and they won’t move. As you can see... nothing seems to bother them. They just want to snooze!”148 Articles of this sort served two purposes. First, they continued the cultural strain that alligators are scary and dangerous. Most importantly, it established that alligators are not dangerous—when they are sluggish. In that moment and under those manufactured circumstances, the alligator appeared docile. Audiences, of course, knew that alligators could also not be sluggish. So began the human psychological experiment (which would increase in the coming decades) of viewing alligators in controlled environments—all while under the façade of an “authentic” encounter. Sitting on the back of a live alligator—sluggish or not—was also a daunting proposition regardless of circumstance, and one certainly not lost on participants. Second, it was an attempt to (slightly) redefine the alligator for later decades. Alligators still retained their fearsome

reputation, but when controlled, managed, and supervised, could offer more to humans than monetary gain through trinkets and souvenirs. Alligators could, as occurred in the later decades of the twentieth century, provide a degree of—both safe and ‘wild’—entertainment for vacationing families or suburbanites retirees though guided swamp tours. Alligator farmers, promoters, and journalists rewrote the cultural rhetoric, a process that situated the alligator as suitable for a petting zoo. The new rhetoric that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century—that alligators are largely harmless and lazy—began to ease a fraction of the lingering fears regarding alligator behavior. The language did not, however, convince the public that alligators were universally benign. The transition in language was important in that it introduced the notion that humans could interact with alligators without fear of immediate harm. That idea eventually would eventually materialize into the physical and psychological boundaries that erupted in the later decades of the twentieth century. From the post-war forward, alligators were not typically meant to be seen, but rather to be visited.

The success of alligator farms precipitated an inclusion into academia and research universities. At the University of Florida, one of two land-grant institutions in the Sunshine State, extension pamphlets began to urge state and regional farmers to create alligator farms. First printed in 1987, Thomas Lane and Kathleen Ruppert authored a brief overview of the environmental and financial potentials of farming alligators. The professors wasted little time making bold claims, arguing, “Alligator farming does not have adverse effects on the environment, does not require large quantities of land or water.”149 Lane and Ruppert add that alligator farming, “also offers a potential income to farmers for a product that has not been

exploited, and allows the use of land that in the past has been a nonproductive or marginal wetlands.” The authors’ timing is noteworthy, as it appeared on the heels of a major farm crisis during the 1970s and 1980s. Reagan-era overproduction had caused a sharp decline in crop and livestock prices, thereby forcing millions of farmers searching for financial alternatives. Those who lacked the desire to abandon the family farm, coupled with those who lacked the necessary technical skills to attain employment in a quickly changing labor market, looked to state agencies and university extension services for an agricultural lifeline. Newspapers and periodicals promoted alligator farming as a means to quick profits. The realities of establishing a successful alligator farm, however, resulted in hundreds of fledgling attempts, but very few profitable or sustainable models.

While the alligator pit-stops along Florida’s highways did not, by any reasonable definition, operate as alligator farms or ranches but existed as popular culture oases—something akin to the world’s largest ball of yarn, they did, however, function in concert with alligator farms throughout the Gulf Coast region. Roadside alligator attractions stocked, utilized, and profited from the by-products of farming and ranching operations. Most—if not all—tourists who traveled to Florida to see alligators, did not traverse the remote corners of the Everglades but instead viewed and interacted with alligators on farms and within enclosed settings. Indeed, the intellectual and material lines that supposedly separate functional ranches from whimsical tourist attractions were quite blurry in the southern states. As alligator farms matured and become more specialized for tourism, during the middle of the twentieth century, so too did human conceptions both of alligators and of their “natural” habitats.

Lane and Ruppert, “Alternative Opportunities”
Snuggled in the southeastern corner of the Magnolia State, Moss Point, Mississippi is home to Gulf Coast Gator Ranch. For a nominal fee, visitors can watch alligator “wrestling” demonstrations, take photographs with juvenile alligators, and survey the crowded, cement holding pens of captive alligators. More daring tourists can, for an increased price, tour the grounds via airboat to observe alligators in a more “natural” habitat. Airboat tours occur every thirty minutes, thus ensuring visitors do not grow even slightly impatient and, in addition, that alligators do not become too comfortable basking in the midday sun. “Board one of our high-speed airboats,” encourage the proprietors, “and take a unique journey through the surrounding wilderness.”

While many post-war alligator farms claimed, and occasionally even resembled wilderness areas, they were instead constructions of wilderness—both in the intellectual sense and in their material configuration. On their aesthetic surface, moreover, alligator ranches possessed all the characteristics of the natural wetland environment: egrets, herons, turtles, snakes, and cypress trees both dot the landscape and fill the tourists’ psyche. Beneath that environmental façade, however, was a highly managed and well-ordered system of maintenance and scheduling. Employees adhered to a rather rigorous feeding schedule, maintain temperatures and growth rates for juvenile specimens, and to prevent cannibalism, group alligators according to sex and size. The advertisement and promotion of these spaces as wilderness was crucial, as it convinced a rapidly growing national population—who simultaneously noticed a rapid depletion of what they deemed as wilderness—that some of the ‘wild’ allure could still be found

through this animal and under these circumstances. In this sense, the idea of wilderness was undergoing change alongside the alligator. As the needs of society changed, humans rewrote their definitions of alligators, which in turn required an adjustment to conceptions of wilderness that, ultimately, were part of the larger historical process of humans rethinking their relationship with the natural world and their human ecological identity.

A more fitting description of alligator operations is that of “wildness.” As used for twentieth century alligator farms, wildness is the intentional effort by alligator farm entrepreneurs and owners to create the idea of wilderness and “untrammeled” nature for their visitors. The appeal of modern alligator farms, at least since the first few decades of the twentieth century, was the sense of danger associated with alligators. Although generally confined, alligators still elicited a strong sense of danger and adventure in humans. Themed alligator parks and ranches owed at least a modicum of their financial success to reminding visitors that alligators are dangerous and unpredictable. The most visible avenues to convey that message were posted signs detailing alligator safety and, perhaps most importantly, constructing barriers between patrons and the reptiles. The urban parks that arose in the later decades of the twentieth century utilized some of the aesthetic and environmental features the early alligator farms and wildness. The habitats and landscapes bore a small amount resemblance to the earliest alligator farms, but by the latter third of the twentieth century were in large measure constructions of wilderness packaged for adventurous tourists.

Most alligator farms relied on alligators and their role in performances to generate revenue. Many facilities, however, did not offer the amusement and extravaganza of tourist sites. Floridians who lacked either the financial capability or the business savvy to operate an alligator tourist park have alternative opportunities to participate in the alligator trade. A violent twist on
the typical farm or ranch, the Private Lands Alligator Management Program “allows the harvest of non-hatchling alligators on private landholdings and government owned or leased lands that harbor a documented, harvestable alligator population.” The program is not limited to hunting, however, as it also permits “collection of eggs and/or hatchlings with a documented minimum number of alligator nests or hatchling pods.”¹⁵³ Large alligator operations are subject to state and federal guidelines, and the Private Lands Program is no exception. Participants must document and verify harvest and collection rates with the state and do so under the direction of a certified ecologist or biologist. Since 1985, the program has resulted on the harvest of nearly 84,000 alligator hides.¹⁵⁴

Although the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission defined alligators harvested under this program as “wild,” the collection of eggs and hatchlings mirrored the operations of more typical alligator farms and ranches. Individuals who collected eggs and hatchlings, moreover, sold them to larger facilities for hatching demonstrations or interactive expositions. Hunting adult alligators and collecting eggs from the same property suggests that, at least since the last third of the twentieth century, what constitutes an alligator farm has proved remarkably unclear. What appears as a de facto hunting preserve also operates as a conservation effort. In this sense, then, alligator facilities—airboat tours or not—fit the mold of modern zoos as the primary purpose is one of highly managed control coupled with responsible stewardship. At the very least, the interdependence and reciprocity of capturing, hatching, displaying, or

killing alligators challenged modern (and generally accepted) definitions not simply of “farms” but of agriculture itself.

Intellectual conceptions of alligator farms—and indeed the physical presence of those operations—is not a singular entity. The modern alligator farm that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century is instead a varied collection of cites that utilize alligators for different purposes and at varying intervals in the production process. The most common representation of an alligator farm is the comparatively large-scale operations which feature alligator wrestling shows, breeding initiatives, wetland tours, and souvenirs. In Covington, Louisiana, Insta-Gator Ranch & Hatchery offers year-round guided tours, educational programs for adolescents and young adults, and even hosts birthday parties. For a measly $220.00 per hour, guests can annoy and enrage juvenile alligators at the touch pool. One of the largest operations in Florida, Gatorama Alligator Farm and Family Attraction opened in 1957 and has since, “worked very hard to build a reputation as an upright, hard-working, law abiding farm and family attraction.”

The green movement had not yet reached maturity, allowing many alligator facilities to abandon the “natural” packaging and marketing of their farms. Rather than promote and market their operation as wilderness or “natural,” one facility openly embraced the mantle of zoo and highlights its place in research and conservation. Founded in 1893, the St. Augustine Alligator Farm and Zoological Park, “functions as a modern zoo serving the public and the scientific community with educational shows and exhibits, important research, and worldwide

---

conservation efforts.” Complete with wading birds, pythons, rattlesnakes, and lemurs, the park is a nexus of observation, science, ecotourism, and conservation. Unlike most alligator sites, St. Augustine Alligator Park (SAAF) houses every crocodilian species on the planet. The taxonomical debate to define and classify alligators and crocodiles largely occurred during the eighteenth century, the results of which rocketed the American Alligator to the mythological fore, while the less abundant and less understood American Crocodile, intellectually and physically, remained in small enclaves deep in the Florida swamp and the recesses of American conservation.

St. Augustine Alligator Farm represented the pinnacle of captivity and control in modern society. While some alligator farms rely on conceptions of wildness to attract consumers, the SAAF exists on the opposite side of the marketing pendulum. In simpler terms, human power, control, and regimentation were the draw. The site promised no backcountry or swampland tours but instead emphasized its participation in the Species Survival Plan—a global conservation initiative launched in 1981 to monitor the health of endangered or threatened species. While operations like Insta-gator and Gatorama appeared to provide responsible stewardship for alligators (and perhaps some do just that), attracting humans and charging an entrance fee was the primary motivation. Aspiring entrepreneurs could, moreover, replicate that process of placing alligators in captivity and attracting consumers to their facilities throughout most of the United States in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Alligator farms and ranches complicated notions of regionalism in environmental and agricultural history. The American Alligator is native to the southeastern United States, but

human tinkering and intervention blurred the lines that separate arbitrarily defined regions. Mart Stewart argued that what differentiated environmental history of the American South from other regions was its agrarian legacy. Geography, climate, and soil fertility often influence what type of agriculture is most profitable in a particular region, but an increasingly narrow focus on local environs and landscapes distorts—and perhaps even ignores—the web of connections that unite wildlife, agriculture, domestication, and economy. Although the American West was not a plantation society exactly, to passively assert that conceptions of wilderness were its environmental legacy is troubling. The American West has, in fact, existed as an agricultural empire from its outset and, much like the antebellum South, operated as “a coercive, monolithic, and hierarchical system, ruled by a power elite based on the ownership of capital and expertise.” Entrepreneurs, farmers, and ranchers began to experiment with captive alligators only a few decades after the first accounts of alligator sites in Florida. A significant shift in geography, however, did not produce fundamental alterations in purpose. Western alligator farms operated under most of the same principles and practices as alligator farms in the Southern United States. In short, they were typical alligator farms situated in a different region of the continent. The similarities between them suggest that most of the American public shared a general understanding of the alligator. While farming crops—and a few species of livestock—in the American West demanded sometimes radically different techniques and equipment, farming alligators was replicated without significant alterations. The West, indeed, is devoid of

---

traditional swampland, but alligator farms in the West demonstrated that traditional swampland habitats were not universally required for alligator survival.

The presence of large alligator farms in the American West speaks to a number of false assumptions regarding alligator behavior and, equally important, demonstrated that fear of alligators was not geographically confined to the southern United States. First and foremost, the headline reflected the enduring and culturally entrenched mythology that alligators are unusually aggressive with, moreover, a particular taste for human flesh. In addition, the large-scale and fully functional alligator farms challenge the notion that healthy alligators can only thrive in the American South. The practice of hosting ‘gator shows and demonstrations on farms, moreover, places alligators in a historically and ecologically murky space. They are at once domestic and wild.

Alligator farms have attracted the attention of western journalists since the first two decades of the twentieth century—or since the fourth version of alligator farms. S.V. Ernest, according to The Lafayette Advertiser, owned one of the largest alligator farms in the United States—a presumably trendy and fashionable farm in sunny Los Angeles, California. Mervyn Conner, a journalist at the San Francisco Call, traveled to the Los Angeles alligator farm in May of 1912. Conner’s piece demonstrated, quite tellingly, that many of his readers—presumably the influential and highly affluent individuals of northern California—possessed a limited understanding not only of alligator farms but of alligators themselves. Indeed, Conner devoted a sizeable portion of his work to simply describing the physical appearance and behavior of the captive reptiles. “The alligator, a peculiar creature of the swamp,” Conner claimed, “is a very interesting creature. Its head is long and flat with holes in the sides for ears and two more holes on the top for nostrils. These holes close while the animal is in the water and he uses his gills to
breathe with.” Describing the alligator as a nearly alien-like creature presumably aroused the curiosity of the reader. Though the descriptions were anatomically incorrect, promoting the alligator as a curiosity was part and parcel of most alligator farms during the first third of the twentieth century. Whether in Los Angeles or Jacksonville, manipulating the alligator’s image through print media—presenting the species as a curiosity, or dangerous, or harmless—was a nearly universal facet of alligator farming. Alligator farms produced much in the same way that traditional farms produced commodities. While Alligator Joe staged wrestling events, his ideological descendants (even in the American West) further blurred the lines between agriculture, conservation, and entertainment. “When the guide told us that we would next see the alligators chute the chutes,” observed Conner, “we looked at each other rather doubtfully, wondering how these big, slow, unsightly animals could be made to do such a thing as that.” The commodity produced both in southern and western alligator farms was entertainment.

California was not the only western state where farmers tried their hand at alligator farming. On August 29, 1914 the Ogden Standard reported that “700 Farm-Raised Man-Eaters” had escaped an enclosure and were terrorizing the beaches of a nearby summer resort. After a large, adult alligator had “tired of the life in confinement and admiring stares of hundreds of tourists,” the brutish male burrowed under a fence and escaped to freedom, only to be caught a short time later. To the dismay of many local tourists, however, several hundred young alligators followed suit and quickly dispersed amongst the shallow creeks, ponds, and waterways beyond the rickety confines of the farm. Locals and tourists snatched up the young and sent them—via courier or mail—to friends and relatives throughout the country. “Without any instructions as to

---

159 Mervyn Conner, “A Visit to the Los Angeles Alligator Farm,” San Francisco Call, June 1, 1912, 6.
what they should be fed,” decried the magazine reporter, “the alligators nearly all perished.\textsuperscript{160} By the first decades of the twentieth century, the age of discovery and exploration spurred by Bartram, Audubon, Wilson, and Catesby had seemingly passed. The events in California and Utah, however, clearly illustrate that much of the populace—even those who maintained alligator farms—possessed only a rudimentary understanding of these creatures, which ultimately served as a continuation of the same principles—fear and order—that resulted in a sharp decline in alligator populations in the late nineteenth century.

The entire process of alligator production—from state-licensed trappers capturing live alligators in the wild to Indiana tourists purchasing a ‘gator keychain at Jungle Adventures—began with notions of captivity. “Exotic” animals have attracted the most attention of humans since the early modern era. In eighteenth century Western Europe, menageries reflected not only the epistemological curiosity in exotic species but also the human inclination to barricade and placate wildlife. The ability to procure, maintain, and display exotic animals, however, was not simply an emerging hobby. Particular species carried with them significant and detectable cultural and social currency. In some sense, then, the more dangerous or dynamic the animal, the more triumphant the keeper.\textsuperscript{161}

At the most elemental tier, argued Kay Anderson, “The western world’s zoos evolved historically out of a much older and more general logic and desire for classification and control of the non-human world.” For Anderson, prevailing thought and logic from the ancient and classical eras drew a sharp distinction between humans and animals. Not until the proliferation of Christianity, however, did humans begin to place hierarchies on their relationship with the non-

\textsuperscript{160} Ogden Standard, “Escaped: 700 Hand-Raised Man Eaters,” August 29, 1914
human world. Not only were animals separate from humans but also beneath them. The practice of capturing animals for public display has created a space, Anderson ultimately concludes, “where humans engage in cultural self-definition against a variably constructed and opposed nature. With animals as the medium, they inscribe a cultural sense of distance from that loosely defined realm which has come to be called ‘nature’.”\(^{162}\)

Although control over nature is a constant, modern western society has reshaped or reimagined its variable purpose. What was previously domination and control for the purposes of distance, safety, and hierarchy has become a more endemic power. Zoos, and their emphasis on observation and surveillance, reflect not only human desires to control nature but also provide a framework for understanding the various classifications humans place on the nonhuman world. Capturing, confining, and placing animals on display is both a human attempt to place order on the natural world and, in addition, to reinforce cultural and socioeconomic hierarchies within human society.

The degree of control zoos demonstrate, however, is less insidious than other institutions of power. “Moreover,” continued Braverman, “the human stance of domination and control over animals has been redefined as one of care and stewardship.” Any modern zoo, and alligator farms being no exception, create circumstances of control because they ultimately care not only about the individual animal but also the species at large.\(^{163}\) With care closely follows education. Zoos create species-specific artificial environments within each enclosure, an attempt to mimic the animal’s natural habitat, and to impart what humans “know” about an animal or a species. Although zoo animals are living creatures, the effort to control how humans understand animals

\(^{162}\) Kay Anderson, “Culture and nature at the Adelaide Zoo: at the frontiers of ‘human’ geography,” Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers Vol 20, No. 31995); 277.

\(^{163}\) Braverman, Zooland, 5, 20-23.
has intellectual relatives. Natural history dioramas exist only in part to inform the observer about the animal, but more so to create a modicum of knowledge or an acceptable idea of the animal. In other words, the observer “knows” the animal only to the extent the curator or zookeeper grants.

Although none of the active alligator facilities in the United States deem their operations as “zoos,” each entity possesses the characteristics and operational procedures as modern zoos. The primary purpose of a zoo—the act of capturing an animal, enclosing that animal, and charging a fee to observe it—is common practice. Little variation occurs throughout western zoos, in effect, animals are placed in (largely) plain view and, if threatened or uncomfortable, lack suitable refuge. Alligator eco-farms, though not universally or precisely, often follow suit. Alligators, selected either for wrestling exhibits or for breeding, are often contained in crowded enclosures, most often constructed of cement and a shallow pool of stagnant water. That portion of an alligator farm is—for all intent and purpose—a zoo, as tourists and local visitors have purchased the ability to observe captive animals.

Akin to zoos were the wetland spaces where eco-farms construct walking paths and conduct airboat tours. Although the wetland spaces on alligator eco-farms vary in acreage, and unlike breeding pens and holding areas, they afford disturbed or uncomfortable alligators an opportunity to distance themselves from humans. What might appear as a “natural” setting is instead a slight variation of captivity. In simpler terms, alligators might have an opportunity to hide but lack the ability to escape. In this sense, then, alligator eco-farms are zoos. Since the turn of the twentieth century, eco-farms have been places where humans can observe captive wildlife and, in doing so, participate in the crystallization of human/nature boundaries and ecological hierarchies. Zoos have often represented how humans view their relationship with nature and
with specific species. During the last third of the twentieth century, and indeed into the twenty-first, human understanding and relationship with alligators is one of observation, entertainment, and occasional fear. Ranchers and farmers have rarely marketed their operations as zoos. They have instead utilized the idea and concept of wilderness to attract consumers—a practice that has generated billions of tourist dollars in San Diego and Orlando. Zoos, and the species within their enclosures, represent humans’ effort to created and maintain a well-ordered society in which affluent individuals and families can pay for the privilege of drinking a Coca-Cola and marveling at how humankind has conquered a host of “dangerous” and “exotic” species.

Although care, stewardship, and conservation appear, and occasionally are benign, research on the effects of captivity suggest negative physical and psychological effects on wildlife. In his examination of the emergence of the modern zoo, Nigel Rothfels cited the work of German zoologist Alexander Sokolowsky. The primary purpose of Sokolowsky’s work was to understand why a significant number of primates died within a short time of arriving in European zoos. Sokolowsky argued that a “deep sadness” was the ultimate contributor to captive gorilla deaths. Sokolowsky’s work indicates the actual and serious psychological effects of captivity for wild animals. Those manifestations, moreover, are not limited to advanced primates. In recent years, Sea World has undergone intense scrutiny and criticism for ignoring the aggressive behaviors and signals of Tilikum, a large male Orca who in 2010 killed Dawn Bracheau—a seasoned and experienced trainer.

The most noticeable—and perhaps most troubling—facet of holding captive alligators is the reluctance or inability of female alligators to breed successfully. Although their survey

---

occurred several decades ago, Ted Joanen and Larry McNease observed, “Many of the alligators in captivity today in Louisiana (10 licensed alligator farms) originated from either of these two methods [as pets or poached from the wild] and rarely if ever produce any offspring. The majority of the captive alligators,” they continued, “were held in very unnatural conditions which were not conducive to reproduction.” Joanen and McNease illustrate the need for egg hatcheries, facilities that do not operate as breeding locations or as cites aimed at ranching or alligator “destinations.” Notwithstanding the behavioral alterations in captive alligators, and although some evidence exists that alligators raised in captivity possess the ability to successfully prey and feed in the wild, researchers have noted physical discrepancies between captive and wild alligators. A team of zoologists and biological scientists found, “Captive individuals are invariably heavier than their wild counterparts and often exhibit relatively shorter jaws and broader heads.” In addition, noted the researchers, “in extreme cases (typically geriatric individuals) the alveoli and teeth may show buccal rotation and face outward from the jaws.”

The diet of captive alligators also leads to long-term health concerns. Valentine Lance and four colleagues, writing for *Comparative Biochemistry and Physiology*, noted, “Alligators and crocodiles maintained in captivity are generally fed diets high in saturated fats. As a result of this overly rich diet, steatitis, vitamin E deficiency, and gross obesity are common in captive crocodilians.”

---


166 Gregory M. Erickson, et al., "Comparison of bite-force performance between long-term captive and wild American alligators (Alligator mississippiensis)." *Journal of Zoology* 262, no. 01 (2004); 21.

less healthy than their wild counterparts suggested to the public that—with the backing of scientific research—alligator farms were “safe” spaces. Rather than universally controlling the narrative and culture of fear that surrounds alligators, humans can—to a small degree—change the physiology of the species and, in doing so, appear to possess complete control over the species both rhetorically and physically. Humans could then draw a more concrete line between “wild” and captive alligators. In the coming decades, that distinction would prove crucial as suburbanites sought more “authentic” interactions with alligators. The alligator farm, a magnet for early interaction and manipulation of fear, would become less popular in the later twentieth century as middle-class Americans—while watching “wilderness” die—began to seek interior excursions where alligators were still alligators and not the subjects of orchestrated demonstrations or studies on reptile obesity.

In addition to the nearly universal inability of alligators to breed in captivity, disease has wreaked havoc on alligator eco-farms. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, researchers investigated the presence of West Nile Virus (WNV) among captive alligators. “In the years 2001 to 2003,” wrote Kaci Klenk, “U.S. alligator farms reported substantial economic losses and at least one human case of fever due to WNV outbreaks in juvenile American alligators.” After transporting a collection of alligators to Colorado, researchers intentionally infected juveniles to map the progression of WNV and where alligators stored the virus in the bodies. Results of the examination were two dead alligators and a conclusion that, “juvenile alligators may be competent hosts for WNV.” Because of the overcrowded holding pens in many eco-farms, moreover, alligators were increasingly susceptible. Klenk and her colleagues
ultimately concluded, “Coupled with multiple routes of infection, alligators may play a role in
WNV ecology, especially in areas where the density of young alligators is high.”\textsuperscript{168}

Despite the negative effects on individual alligators, farming does benefit the species in various ways. While cattle, swine, and poultry farming have each been subject to increased scrutiny during the past half century, alligator farming offers an alternative method of farming which, rather than promoting the destruction of local environments, can supplement wild populations and alleviate habitat destruction. Opponents of captivity have argued that animals born in captivity lose the ability to thrive in the wild. Researchers at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), however, conducted a study to determine the eating habits of farm-raised versus native alligators. LDWF biologists examined that stomach contents of seventy-eight farmed alligators versus those of thirty native alligators, the results of which, “suggest that alligators raised entirely in captivity (and provided food ad libitum), then released into the wild, are able to forage for food and hunt as successfully as native alligators.”\textsuperscript{169}

Alligator farming also has a direct and mutually beneficial relationship with other meat processing industries. Consequently, alligator farming is perhaps one of the more environmentally friendly options in the meat processing industry. The discarded, excess, unwanted, or rancid meat product from the livestock and fishing industry provides the animal protein necessary for producing a harvestable alligator.\textsuperscript{170} American meat producers, over the

\textsuperscript{168} Kaci Klenk, et al., "Alligators as West Nile virus amplifiers," \textit{Emerging infectious diseases} Vol. 10, no. 12 (2004); 2150, 2154.


\textsuperscript{170} “Alligator Production in Florida,” Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences, College of Veterinary Medicine, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, 1989. \url{http://myfwc.com/media/310212/Alligator_IFASvm52.pdf}. Accessed February 16, 2015
past several decades, saved maintenance costs by sending their unwanted or unused meat to be
devoured by a large, toothy, reptilian garbage disposal.

Unlike many of the more traditional species of livestock, alligator farms are connected to
wild populations. “The wild population,” argue Jerry Heykoop and Darren Frechette, “provides
an important source of young stock for alligator producers. Predation and weather-related
mortality are eliminated on farms, and in Louisiana, a portion of the hatchlings is returned to the
wild.”171 The growth of alligator farming since the early 1970s coincided with a sharp decline in
poaching. In addition, the harvest of eggs from wild populations has placed an emphasis on the
protection of alligator habitats.172 The rebound in alligator numbers during the middle of the
twentieth century hastened the distribution of another alligator by-product: meat. The most
significant humans have of alligators is their ability not simply to take human life, but to
consume humans as prey. The obverse side to that fear is the psychological effects of eating an
alligator.

Converting alligators to meat and souvenirs gave rise to “celebrations” of the animal. In
1979, Archie Mallere and Bob Becker—both of whom were residents of St. Charles Parish,
Louisiana—imagined a community project that would “reflect the ideals and goals of Rotary
International.”173 The result was the first annual Alligator Festival, held—as one might
imagine—in the middle of a local driving range. Mallere and Becker’s timing was impeccable, as
the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had recently removed the American Alligator from the

171 Jerry Heykoop and Darren Frachette, “Gatornomics: Profitable and Sustainable Use of Alligators in the
Southeastern United States” Marine Resource Economics Vol. 16, No. 2 (2001); 129.
172 Brendan Moyle, “Conservation that’s More than Skin-Deep: Alligator Farming,” Biodiversity and Conservation
Vol. 22, Issue 8 (July 2013); 1673-1675
2015.
Endangered Species List in St. Charles Parish. Whether the festival was to celebrate the
presumed and arguably arbitrary return of perhaps the South’s most iconic reptile or the
resumption of hunting seasons, the festival remained the primary fundraiser for the Rotary Club
for nearly forty years. What began as a showcase of local personalities preparing alligator recipes
is now a family festival complete with amusement rides, live music, and overpriced souvenirs.
Modern festival goers rarely—if ever—trade traditional and creative alligator recipes but instead
aim for nearly everyone’s favorite form of meat delivery—‘gator on a stick.

The language used to market alligator meat mirrors that of other meat-producing
industries. Gatorama Alligator Park, one of Florida’s leading producers of alligator meat, touts
its product as one hundred percent farm raised. Much like catfish, alligators inhabit the
backwaters and swamps of the South and, consequently, become associated with muddy and
brackish water. At least one major producer of alligator meat has attempted to alleviate consumer
concerns. At Gatorama Alligator Park, Patty, the resident alligator culinary expert, offers a
variety of alligator dishes. Patty reassures her customers regarding the quality of her products,
noting “Our Gatorama farm-raised meat is always consistent in flavor and texture since it is
harvested from young farm gators, never trapped or wild alligator.” Gatorama has also
apparently adopted the recent trend in “pure” foods, promising, “We do not add hormones,
preservatives, or fillers. It really is perfect tail every time!” Strikeing familiar to many food
marketing and advertising campaigns, Patty’s statement suggested that alligators were no longer
a delicacy or abstraction, but instead part of an authentic regional meal devoid of any potential—
or swampy—health concerns.

---

While modern alligator farms have attempted to make alligator meat uniform in taste and systematic in production, consumers have expressed a variety of reactions upon tasting alligator meat. In the humor section of Louisiana’s *Donaldsonville Chief* in 1910, a contributor noted, “Boiled alligator meat, according to those who have tried it, tastes like veal. But this only shows that veal tastes like boiled alligator meat.”\textsuperscript{175} In 1918, moreover, Albert Reese conducted surveys on the taste of alligator meat. Reese published his findings in *Science* and reported, “Some thought it tasted like pork; some thought it like fish; one person said it suggested lobster; but all declared it to be most agreeable.”\textsuperscript{176}

Alligator meat is not simply a domestic product. Indeed, residents in one of Europe’s most dynamic and populous cities have consumed farmed alligator meat and commented on its flavor. “There is reason to believe that the flesh of a young boiled alligator is barely distinguishable from veal. It is probably cleaner and more tender than much of the meat of the animals that are usually consumed as food on the continent or in the east end of London.”\textsuperscript{177} Because of the availability of its flesh and by-products, the alligator is not merely a regional or even continental animal but instead an international animal—one whose notoriety and products permeated environmentally arbitrary political boundaries.

The scientific endeavors on alligator farms were another avenue for humans to manage their fear of alligators. Humans studied alligators because they were afraid of alligators. A deeper understanding of the physical species—it’s susceptibility to disease coupled with humans’ ability to reduce it to a food product—helped humans grapple with their fear. “Knowing” the species—which could only occur under confinement and microscopes—demonstrated a highly level of

\textsuperscript{175} *The Donaldsonville Chief* May 14, 1910
\textsuperscript{177} “Alligator Meat: The Consumption of its flesh by the casteless Indians,” *The Lafayette Examiner* July 28, 1894.
control. In the eighteenth century, ordering the alligators’ habitat and taxonomic status was an effort at domination. Alligator farms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were of a similar ilk. Each enterprise was a fear-driven, era-specific human effort to control and dominate the species. As with the other aspects—confining, wrestling, breeding—experiments on alligator diseases and the potential for alligator meat were designed to remove elements of mystery from the animal. Reducing alligators to food is notable, but the circumstances surrounding that food speak more deeply to control. Alligator meat serves a different psychological purpose than beef or chicken, for instance. Alligator meat is not simply food, it’s *festival* food. It is not commonly found on restaurant menus, which gives the impression of scarcity and desirability. Consuming an alligator, then, was a human celebration of domination. It was an event. Eating an animal that could potentially *eat you*, suggested to humans had conquered the species. The whimsical venues and circumstances in which most humans consumed alligator meat moreover, was representative of their fear of the species.

Humans did not intend to remove all mystery surrounding alligators but did attempt to further the notion that humans could dominate the animal by knowing—and adorning—the animal. Confining alligators and conducting wrestling matches and scientific experiments also helped create the idea of two alligators: the confined alligator and the wild. As humans sought “wilderness” activities in the latter half of the twentieth century, the cultural worth of those excursions could be measured by which alligator humans encountered. Finally, the scientific experiments on alligator farms foreshadowed the coming conservation movement, in which science played an increasingly important role in the rhetorical battles between wildlife officials, the public, and government entities.
CHAPTER V

REPTILE RESURRECTION: THE REEMERGENCE OF A SOUTHERN ICON

In Port Charlotte, Florida, Joanne and Cliff McMahon own and operate Tropical Paradise Bed and Breakfast. Their guests can enjoy a traditional southern breakfast, lounge by the spa, or feed the colorful koi—all while basking in the temperate Florida sun. In the spring of 2011, however, a different guest visited the McMahons and their coastal paradise: a six-foot long alligator jostling at the back door. After the reptile remained a full day at the residence, licensed alligator trappers eventually removed the unwelcome guest, though not quickly enough to save a few of the McMahon’s exotic fish and plumbing fixtures.\(^\text{178}\)

By 2011, over one million alligators lived in Florida, an increasingly large number of whom, faced with increasing encroachment, ventured into subtropical suburbia. Reporting for the New York Times, Lizette Alvarez commented, “They luxuriate in swimming pools. They wander down suburban streets. They move into neighborhood lakes. They stand on roadways and refuse to move. They sunbathe on lanais.” While the McMahons, and certainly a host of other concerned Floridians, prefer that alligators remain at a comfortable distance, still others—at least tacitly—accept the animal on its own territorial terms. After watching an alligator stalk, kill, and devour a cat, for instance, Robert Geraci, Sr., appeared to accept the reptile’s new urban oasis. “Hey,” Geraci emphatically stated, “go back up north if you don’t like alligators.”\(^\text{179}\) In the wake


of increased human-alligator incidents, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission developed the Statewide Nuisance Alligator Program (SNAP). The Commission classified nuisance alligators as “at least four feet in length and is believed to pose a threat to people, pets or property.”¹⁸⁰

Alligator conservation, at least understood by modern wildlife agencies, includes killing “rouge” individuals. In this sense, conservation required death, and various state wildlife officials, political leaders, and conservation advocates spent the middle third of the twentieth century establishing criteria to determine which individual alligators to eliminate. Wrapped in the cultural institutions of conservation, tourism, agriculture, and technology, the methodology for selecting which alligators to save—and under what circumstances—established a conceptual, intellectual, and material framework for the species and its relationship with humans. When alligators began to appear in suburban backyards and swimming pools, humans began to make a distinction between “good” alligators and “bad” alligators.

A clamoring to save alligators by regional—and occasionally national—media outlets unfolded across much of the twentieth century. The legacy of fear associated with alligators, however, meant that much of the public was hesitant to save a species they believed—and had been taught—posed a serious and imminent threat to human safety. The effort to save—or at least conserve—the American Alligator was a rhetorical battle where humans manipulated ideas about alligators to fit the era in which they appeared. Alligators oscillated from imperiled species, to agricultural commodity, to tourist attraction, to savoir of the Florida wetland. Naturalists and conservation advocates recognized the need for altering the language of conservation. If alligators were not to be saved for their iconic or aesthetic value, their pivotal

place in wetland ecology—as keystone species and caretakers of regional environs—could potentially shift public sentiment. In short, humans needed to again redefine the American Alligator. Sinking into the past was the bloodthirsty, devilish menace of the swamp, to be gradually reoriented as a responsible, and occasionally, charming steward of ecological symbiosis. Alligator conservation was also unique in that it was not static. Unlike many protected species, the alligator’s protection depended on local authority. While alligator hunting might have been banned in several parishes, it was not banned in others. Consequently, the road to alligator conservation—rather than a linear progression to universal protection—was arduous and largely dependent on local observations and circumstances.

The fear of losing the alligator and the “wild” elements it represented—at least during the latter half of the twentieth century—exceeded the fear of the physical animal. Though humans were not spending a great deal of time speaking and writing about alligators, they were, however, creating images. The emergence of the environmental movement required a fundamental shift in psychology. The change in psychology, then, produced a change in the cultural production of alligators—to the tune of being placed on the federally mandated Endangered Species Act. Saving the alligators, in a sense, was saving the fear of alligators.

A psychological and aesthetic change occurred as well. In the century-long rush to create safer spaces—and improve upon earlier versions of the landschaft model—humans had seemingly exceeded their landschaft visions. This signaled a change in how humans defined safety. In the earliest landschaft models, humans lacked the technological and scientific resources to institute vast, sweeping environmental changes, thus initial efforts at creating safer spaces occurred incrementally. In popular culture, human-produced images of the American Alligator presented less the fearsome beast of Bartram’s depiction and more the lumbering,
sunbathing icon of the southern swamp. Positive images of the alligator, as opposed to fearsome depictions, also created impulses in the human brain but produced a different, more sympathetic outcome. Although humans still feared alligators, the new depictions demonstrated that humans were still engaged in controlling not only what the alligator meant, but also how to manipulate those images and depictions to suit their own ends. The comparatively softer images of alligators still, however, represented a landschaft ideology of a dangerous wilderness. The suburban lawn—manicured, flowered, and fenced, was the curbside barrier between humans and nature. When alligators meandered their way into patios and pools, humans perceived those intrusions as chaos.

In the wake of the industrial revolution, coupled with a growing scientific literature, humans could—and did—with increasing ease and efficiency, dominate the species and ultimately remove all danger. Mid-twentieth century Americans imagined and promoted an updated version of their landschaft model. This new model was not devoid of danger altogether, but instead a carefully balanced enterprise in which alligators were a central component of the natural world. Alligators could be managed and—in certain instances—removed from daily human contact. This shift was the blueprint for the late twentieth century mentality that created clear physical and psychological boundaries between humans and alligators—where humans enjoyed suburbs and shopping malls and interacted with (still) dangerous alligators on airboat tours. The conservation rhetoric of the mid-twentieth century, then, laid the ideological groundwork for the human-alligator relationship for the next four decades.

Calls to save the American Alligator emerged long before the “green movement” of the late twentieth century. Alligator farmers and ranchers sought to preserve alligators largely for financial profit. Though not inherently uneducated, those individuals lacked a nuanced
understanding of alligator behavior and physiology and were perhaps even less sympathetic to preserving the alligators’ natural habitat. The emergence of alligator farms coincided with the earliest rhetoric of saving the species from perceived extermination. At the earliest stages of alligator farming, and through the middle of the twentieth century, the motivation for saving the species was almost universally derived from either the alligators’ physical anatomy or, less so, its cultural reputation as fearsome and destructive to humankind.

By the last half of the twentieth century, however, conservation rhetoric revolved less around exploitation and quick profits and was more closely focused upon saving the species for its ecological benefits. Those ecological benefits ultimately benefitted not only alligators, but humans as well. To be sure, be it in the late nineteenth century or the late twentieth century, few (if any) humans ever lobbied for alligator protection from an altruistic perspective. Indeed, most conservation rhetoric—whether for alligators, bison, or wolves—was ultimately the language of human selfishness and the desire to manipulate and control animals and spaces. As humans increasingly sought safer homes and communities, they simultaneously still yearned for the physiological impulses—adrenaline, fear, and dopamine—produced through a wilderness excursion. Twentieth century suburbanites needed to be afraid of something and, equally important, possess the ability to experience and, at some point, eschew that fear firsthand at their personal and monetary leisure. At this juncture, fear manifested as a zealous urge to create order and distance.

However, the rhetoric itself changed. Pleas for alligator conservation in the late nineteenth century were focused on crude financial gains. That rhetoric evolved into a seemingly more sympathetic concern for alligators and their habitat, but that pivot was only a rhetorical one. The language changed, and the motivations for saving alligators changed, but only on the
surface. As the twentieth century matured, the desire to save alligators transitioned from financial gain to provide orderly, distant, and safe spaces where humans could indulge their need for “wild” experiences. Humans wanted to save alligators not because the animal was cute or friendly, but because humans wanted to create boundaries, gaze upon the animal, and gain a sense of environmental morality—a sense that by the late twentieth century was in many social strata—massaged, loved, and required. Less emphasis on alligator products meant, at least theoretically, less killing. More importantly, perhaps, the transition allowed more formal conservation rhetoric to reach a wider and more receptive audience. The process that followed, though by no means rapid or easy, was the first glimpse of the alligator’s future in modern society. The story of alligator conservation, then, is one of rhetorical and cultural transition. As American society slowly became more enamored with “wildness” and increasingly sought to create or construct “wild” areas based upon what they knew about iconic species and their habitats, the language of conservation changed. Language was a characteristic of culture, or representative of culture.

The path to state and federal protection for alligators began during the first decade of the twentieth century and would take more than half of a century for Congress to enact. Surrounded by the social and cultural unrest of the 1960s, observers likely saw the measure to protect alligators as a comparatively recent social and environmental cause. Instead, the passing of the Endangered Species Act—of which alligators were only one of many beneficial species—was the culmination of roughly seventy years of changing ideas about the relationship between humans and the American Alligator. The trajectory of that movement, and the varied lenses through which humans voiced their concerns about alligator conservation, represented shifts in
how Americans understood and confronted capitalism, feminism, race, and the future health of the planet.

From the early nineteenth century through the first few decades of the twentieth, hunter and trappers throughout the North American continent waged an environmental war against a handful of indelible creatures. The motivations for that war ranged widely—from simple disgust, to serving the market economy or, in the case of the American Bison, the extermination of Native American societies and culture. For the American Alligator, a lucrative market for hides, by-products, and souvenirs encouraged poachers to trample through southern swamps in search of monetary gain. In the first third of the twentieth century, the difference between hunting and poaching was murky at best. Several local agencies—at the county level, for instance—enacted protective measures for alligators. Alligator poaching in one county or local municipality was legal harvest in another. The Endangered Species Act clarified the indistinct line between hunting and poaching. Though humans continued to kill alligators after the Endangered Species Act, doing so was no longer “hunting,” but instead legally prohibited poaching. Though poaching was certainly not the primary cause for significant decline in alligator populations, local, state, and even federal officials returned fire using a curious combination of rhetoric, fear, and compassion. From that process emerged a redefined alligator, whose salvation was—at least in part—delivered through the humans’ inclination to fear the animal.

Looking comparatively at another large, iconic species at the center of a conservation battle in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides context for the shift in attitudes surrounding the alligator. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, as increasing numbers of Euroamerican settlers, ranchers, and hunters penetrated the interior of the American West, the Plains environment—and perhaps its most iconic creature—underwent rapid and
significant environmental change. Aided by agricultural displacement, dramatic shifts in weather patterns, and habitat loss, Euroamerican and Native American hunters and ranchers destroyed millions of American Bison. Native American societies had for centuries depended on bison both for sustenance and cultural symbolism. “Buffaloes provided a considerable part of their subsistence,” wrote Elliott West, “not only food but shelter, clothing, saddles, and other equestrian equipment, weapons, religious objects, toys, and many of their life’s details.”

Although Plains societies were involved in the bison trade prior to European arrival, their participation increased in order to supplement (or replace) those goods they were unable to produce.

Throughout the nineteenth century, bison represented a close relationship to Native American societies and Euroamericans associated the species with Native American autonomy. If federal agencies intended to remove Native societies from the West and confine them to reservations, removal of the bison was instrumental in that process. After the Nez Perce War and Wounded Knee, the Indian Wars had essentially concluded. Only then could humans gradually begin to redefine bison into the iconic, beloved animal of the western frontier.

Only a few decades passed before calls for preservation emerged on behalf of bison. While formally established in 1872, Yellowstone National Park served as a refuge both for the physical bison and to preserve the romantic notion of a “wild” west. Ranchers in the west and wildlife advocates in the east—both of whom longed for preserving an idealized western

---

184 Isenberg, *Destruction*, 123-163, 2-5.
landscape—lobbied and subsequently witnessed the federal government create at least four bison preserves between 1905 and 1914.\textsuperscript{185}

While the preservation of bison was rooted primarily in a longing for an imagined West, wolves benefitted from seismic shifts in American society, primarily the transition from a rural nation to an urban one.\textsuperscript{186} At the turn of the twentieth century, Americans altered their opinions on this symbolic creature, which for centuries had elicited fear, anxiety, and an unwelcome intruder in forests and fields. Last-wolf legends reached a growing number of Americans who—less connected to the animals they both admired and consumed—cared about animal stories and, to an increasing degree, the welfare of those creatures. Wolves, aided by economic transitions and heroic narratives, transformed from the evil predator and livestock killer of the eighteenth and nineteenth century to a maligned, enigmatic and, indeed, cute and fuzzy representation of America’s environmental past, though these other views remain in the American West.\textsuperscript{187}

While bison, wolves, and alligators, to be sure, are biologically and physiologically different animals, they do share, however, broad similarities in cultural representation: human violence, cultural redefinition, and regulatory protection. While the bison was awarded federal protection in the late nineteenth century, wolves (those not confined to Alaska) and alligators would not gain federal protection until the late twentieth century under the Endangered Species Act but had by then came to represent something other than themselves. For wolves, Jon Coleman argues, wolf sympathy and protection emerged from a growing sense of alienation from nature. Protecting wolves was a nuanced enterprise. Although wolves sport a comparatively handsome physical appearance, their social representation and cultural production was that of a

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid, 164-5
\textsuperscript{187} Coleman, \textit{Vicious}, 207-224
cunning, bloodthirsty killer of livestock—and remains so in some geographic areas. Alligators were quite different in at least aspect. Though they were fear as man-eaters for much of their natural history, few people have ever considered alligators to be aesthetically pleasing. Despite their sometimes gruesome unseemly appearance, conservation advocates portrayed them as ecologically valuable species. Saving the alligator was, eventually, a way to save some of the more attractive wetland species. The shift in attitudes regarding wolf and bison mirrored the changes in alligator conservation. Humans recognized that an iconic species was in peril and, wanting to preserve the animal as part of a nostalgic “wilderness,” utilized the specie’s reputation to suit modern desires and sensibilities.

The practice of modern conservation, most especially in the twentieth century, was more than adopting legislative measures and enforcing those provisions. Conservation, in other words, required a narrative. While saving or protecting imperiled species was typically the primary directive, conservationists wove their rhetorical tapestries around a secondary or tertiary concept. Less charismatic species, lacking either aesthetic appeal or market value, required that wildlife advocates appeal to humans’ fascination with landscape. “Endangered species,” argued Peter Alagona, “have become surrogates for environmentalists who use them to pursue broader political agendas—such as preventing development, establishing nature reserves, or reducing carbon emissions—and scapegoats for those who oppose further regulation or stand from changes in government policies.”¹⁸⁸ The effort to save a desert fox or tortoise was as much about saving the Mojave as the animal itself. Saving the alligator, in similar fashion, was the rhetorical tool of preserving the wetland environment. Advocates cited not only the iconic Florida reptile as

worth saving but also its impact on the wetland environment. The alligator was beneficial to a host of species.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, advocates for alligator conservation were motivated by profit. Simultaneously, a handful of concerned citizens and wildlife officials noted the alligator’s contrition to rodent control on farms, but the impetus to use the alligator for its byproducts muted much of that language. As locals, amateur zoologists, and legislators sounded the initial alarm for alligator conservation, they were busy converting south Florida from a web of swamplands and estuaries to an agricultural powerhouse and leisure themed oasis. Saving the alligator enhanced agricultural production—as alligators routinely preyed upon species most destructive to crop yields—but substantial profits lay just beneath the façade of conservation language. Efforts to conserve the American Alligator coincided with the explosion of tourism in the Sun Belt, most especially in the Sunshine State. The real estate explosion in Miami and south Florida during the first three decades of the twentieth century—in concert with increased agricultural production in the Everglades—created a setting in which large portions of the wetland environment, including some of its most charismatic and ecologically valuable species, became increasingly vulnerable. The automobile, which provided a faster mode of transportation, carried an exponential number of tourists and aspiring entrepreneurs to Florida’s dwindling swamps and rising cities.189

Although alligators would not gain federal attention and protection until the middle of the twentieth century, journalists in Florida sounded the alarm much earlier. Their urgent pleas to save the species were, however, more focused on the animal itself than saving its habitat. Those

---

189 Albert Cowdrey, This Land, This South: An Environmental History (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 141-42.
later calls to action—though not absent from the early twentieth century increased in volume and number as the primeval swamps of Florida increasingly transitioned to highways and manicured agricultural fields during the middle and late twentieth century. Many journalists and citizens during the early twentieth century, however, sought to utilize a beleaguered race in their efforts to conserve alligators. In April 1907, the Sunday edition of the *Pensacola Journal* reprinted an article from a southern Florida newspaper, the *Tampa Times*. “Following on the heels of the Indian and the bison,” readers learned, “the alligator, one of America’s most valuable native sons, is fast disappearing from the face of the earth, means may soon be given by the government to preserve him in reservations.”

In language uncomfortably similar to the Native American past, alligators were quickly becoming threatened, while simultaneously growing in cultural status and iconography.

Once again linking alligators to Native Americans, the report continued, “Until a comparatively short time ago dwellers in alligator-infested localities were prone to think of the alligator what the early settler in the west thought of the Indian—that there was no good alligator except a dead alligator.” The author of the piece ultimately concluded that alligators should be saved not for their aesthetic appearance or even for the health of the wetland ecosystem but primarily for the various by-products and fashion accessories.

Some advocates did, though in small numbers, cite the alligator’s importance to protecting the wetland. The story of alligator conservation continued to coalesce during these years. Though rhetoric surrounding conserving the animal itself was the primary narrative of the early decades of the twentieth century, a handful of concerned citizens, wildlife officials, and

---

190 “Slaughter of Saurians Should be Stopped By Law,” *The Pensacola Journal*, Sunday April 7, 1907.
Journalists began to note the alligator’s role as a steward of the wetland environment. The story of alligator conservation unfolded in small increments across the twentieth century, with each era espousing some of the ideas of previous eras. A piece which initially appeared in the *Punta Gorda Herald* gained traction along the Gulf Coast in Pensacola, reaffirming the alligator’s role as overseer of Florida bayous. “As a watchdog, the alligator is unsurpassed. His honest bark is enough to put the fear of God into the hearts of all midnight prowlers,” the trumpet sounded, “and his affection for superfluous dogs is only equaled by his capacity for benevolently assimilating them.” Perhaps more impressively, the author indicated that alligators did not harm humans but instead could protect them, noting, “It is due, perhaps, to the vigilance of this honored servant that there never has been a case of hydrophobia to be found among the official records of the town.”

By the first decade of the twentieth century, then, the American Alligator underwent a remarkable transformation. The material animal remained, though a renewed human appreciation of the animal oscillated between noble beast and father of the wetland.

Altering the rhetoric to present alligators as beneficial to humans continued, and included an unlikely scenario where alligators were, rather than a threat to livestock, but could aid in the survival during dry summer nights. In 1909, the *Gainesville Daily Sun* echoed a call for alligator conservation put forth earlier in the *Tampa Times*. Touting the environmental benefits of alligators, the article noted, “He destroyed the gar fish, which if left undisturbed destroyed the young of all kinds of game fishes, he maintained water holes in the interior where drouth [sic] sometimes shrunk the ponds out of existence and thus afforded range cattle with places to quench their thirst, and performed sundry other services for the human family.” A mutually beneficial relationship between alligators and livestock during the progressive era contradicted

---

eighteenth century accounts, when hunters cited lost livestock to justify killing alligators. “The stories about his eating pigs and picaninnies were and are baseless slanders,” decried the article, “merely invented as an excuse for his ruthless slaughter for the sake of his hide.”\textsuperscript{193} Perhaps the author was correct, but those articles highlighted human fear of alligators and proved to be highly influential.

News of a sharp decline in alligator populations was not confined to the South, however. In New York, \textit{The Sun} reported, “Most of the Louisiana alligators having been converted into hand satchels, valises, and trunks, the minks and muskrats, having no enemy to hold them in check, soon increased to alarming proportions and began riddling and eating up the levees to an extent they had never done before.”\textsuperscript{194} The same year that Arizona achieved statehood, moreover, newspapers there mirrored reports from New England and the Southeast. “Down in Louisiana for example,” observed the \textit{Arizona Republican}, “the slaughter of alligators has caused all kinds of trouble. The bayous of the state were formerly infested with large numbers of those interesting beasts.” A demand for alligator hides in northern states had produced disastrous effects for alligators, as “they have been almost exterminated.”\textsuperscript{195} Because Louisiana alligators, or the troubling lack of them, appeared not only in southern newspapers, but sources from New York to Arizona demonstrates that conservation—at least for the American Alligator—was hardly a local effort. Alligators, and indeed their plight, elicited national appeal.

Not limited to Florida, calls for alligator protection encompassed the Gulf South. In Texas, Captain M.B. Davis sounded the call for alligator conservation as early as 1907, arguing, “The professional alligator hunters have operated in all the southern states, and these animals

\begin{footnotes}
\item[193] “Save the Alligators,” \textit{Gainesville Daily Sun}, April 6, 1909.
\item[195] “Fly-swatting,” \textit{Arizona Republican}, August 6, 1912.
\end{footnotes}
have gone the way of the buffalo.”\textsuperscript{196} While the Secretary of the Texas Audubon Society’s call for preservation began in 1907, it was not until June 1920, when the \textit{El Paso Herald} published a report from Louisiana, echoing those ideas. “Because everyone wants to make a suitcase of him, the alligator is becoming comparatively scarce in Louisiana and protective measures are being framed by the conservation commission.”\textsuperscript{197} The following month, the unabated killing of alligators, at least in Louisiana, faced new regulations in 1920. Hunters were now required to at least acquire a license to kill alligators. “It is the only reptile,” reported \textit{The Donaldsonville Chief}, “to be given official protection in this country.”\textsuperscript{198}

The author also opened that daily contribution with a rudimentary comparative analysis. “The day is coming,” words cautioned, “when the alligator will be as scarce in the state of Florida as the once plentiful buffalo on the western prairies.”\textsuperscript{199} Drawing a direct connection between alligators and bison, the latter of which elicited positive images in the early decades of the twentieth century, demonstrated the capacity and influence of conservation rhetoric. In that sense, the stories humans tell about conservation was the story of saving physical species. The article appeared in 1920 and marked nearly two decades of using the rhetoric and language of fear as motivational tool to save alligators. Presenting the alligator as a fearsome predator, no longer benefitted its observers. In order to keep the “wildness” of Florida intact—along with the monetary benefits of tourism—humans refashioned their fears of alligators and, in doing so, created a new future for the alligator. Fear remained entrenched in the alligator’s public and cultural identity, but that sense of danger and wildness would be fused with respect and adoration.

\textsuperscript{196} “Aims to Save Alligators: Texas Man Says Big Reptile Threatened With Extinction,” \textit{The Inter Ocean}, Chicago, Illinois, August 25, 1907.
\textsuperscript{198} “Must Have License to Kill Alligators,” \textit{The Donaldsonville Chief}, July 31, 1920, 3.
\textsuperscript{199} “Must have License,” 3.
during the later decades of the twentieth century. Though many humans might not have been chiefly concerned with the alligator proper, their ideas expressed an desire to preserve, “wildness,” which allowed native Floridians and tourists alike to participate “wild” experiences, but do so with from safe distance.

While the alligator did not receive federal or local protection by the turn of the twentieth century, some Floridians were still lobbying for its future a few decades later. An article titled, “The Vanishing Alligator” appeared in the May 19, 1936 issue of the *Palm Beach Post*, claiming, “Unsuspected by the average citizen, the slimy denizen of the Florida swamps is the basis of a sizeable industry and, in addition to this, is an invaluable tourist attraction.” Despite the increased attention to dwindling alligator populations, few conservation efforts materialized. Nearly three decades after *The Gainesville Daily Sun* article, Florida conservationists continued to worry about the alligator’s future. “Alligators will be extinct in Florida within a very few years,” remarked David Newell, “unless measures to protect the saurians are adopted immediately.” Newell, the chairman of the executive committee of the Florida Conservation Council, not only called for immediate action, but also identified—at least in his mind—the culprits. “Commercial alligator hunters, Indians, and tourists are responsible for the alligators’ disappearance in Florida,” and he continued, “Today it is difficult to find a wild alligator in this state.”

The Florida State College for Women was the venue for Newell’s remarks, an indication that conversation officials recognized not only the growing power of the female vote but also that women—particularly the more affluent and educated, stirred conservation movements in the...

---

American West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Alligator farms, which had been crucial for early conservation efforts, Newell argued, should release their captive alligators into their natural surroundings. Missing from Newell’s list of alligator killers were the agricultural and residential entities draining Florida swamps and leveling its forests. Approaching the middle of the twentieth century, then, poaching remained—at least in the public sphere—the primary cause for alligator deaths.

In 1937, Orlando resident Delmar Nicholson—despite a legislative bill’s failure to garner adequate support—continued to convert journalists to alligator conservation. “The American alligator,” wrote one contributor, “is not dangerous to man, will [obey] the law of Old Mother Nature to the last degree, [and] destroys predators chiefly because nature provides this diet for the alligator.” If the market for alligator hides and eggs was eliminated, the “alligators will immediately become an asset to our woods, [and] there will be no selfish mercenary objective.” A few years later, in 1944, the new director of the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission announced a closed alligator season in eighteen counties. The new director, I.N. Kennedy reportedly felt, “the restrictions are necessary because the number of alligators in south Florida is rapidly being diminished.” Kennedy also placed restrictions on alligator harvests throughout the state when he instituted a no kill policy for all alligators under four feet in length. Nearly five years later, Kennedy’s legislation was not only enforced but expanded to include additional months. Ben Morgan, director of the commission in 1948, asked newspapers to remind hunters that the annual alligator hunting ban included June, whereas in years prior the

---

202 Isenberg, *Destruction*, 5.
203 “Protect Alligators,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, July 26, 1937
204 “Ban on Alligator Hunting Announced by Kennedy,” *Tampa Bay Times*, June 21, 1944.
measure only included March, April, and May.\textsuperscript{205} Both Kennedy and Morgan recognized the power of the media in controlling conservation rhetoric. Kennedy gave direct quotes and pragmatic warnings about the decline in alligator populations to the prominent newspaper of a central Florida metropolis. Morgan, for his part, used the media as direct line of communication between the state wildlife commission and alligator hunters. Not only had the changing narrative convinced political and wildlife officials to take action on behalf of the species, those entities and individuals contributed to the new narrative via print media.

Farming as a conservation measure continued this era, though state agencies and media outlets began to tighten their grip on farming operations and, perhaps more importantly, began to control the cultural rhetoric surrounding alligators. Though not affiliated with a state-sponsored wildlife agency, Rube Allyn authored a lengthy piece in the \textit{Tampa Bay Times} to alter public perception of the species. Allyn wasted little time in assessing blame, claiming, “It looks like no matter how hard we try to be kind to wildlife there is always just enough adverse humanity to make it difficult. Take for instance the wonderful crop of alligators St. Petersburg has developed right in the city limits—now being decimated by overzealous housewives and policemen.”\textsuperscript{206} Allyn continued his plea, also noting that he had personally rescued several small alligators when the population was at serious risk. Though he risked an apparent dispute with his wife over the status of alligators, Allyn spoke directly to his female friends and neighbors, exclaiming, “I am saying all this to plead with St. Petersburg housewives to please leave the harmless alligators be—and not to worry about them. They will not harm people or children, unless very hungry and very large.”\textsuperscript{207} Allyn held a minority opinion, but he personified the changing cultural rhetoric

\textsuperscript{205} “Alligator Hunting Ban Includes June,” \textit{Tallahassee Democrat}, May 19, 1948.
\textsuperscript{206} Rube Allyn, “Alligators Are Nice Animals—Be Kind To Them,” \textit{Tampa Bay Times}, October 31, 1951.
\textsuperscript{207} Allyn, “Alligators Are Nice Animals,” \textit{Tampa Bay Times}, October 31, 1951.
surrounding alligators. He recognized that the public and, in most cases, state law enforcement understood alligators through a lens of fear. That fear resulted in their attempts to control the species by separating it from an affluent public. Though Allyn was attempting to alter the rhetoric of fear surrounding alligators, his comments, like most others, were accompanied by a caveat. Alligators would not, at least as Allyn explained, pose any real threat unless large and hungry. The accuracy of Allyn’s claim was highly problematic, but more important was his effort to reposition the alligator as an animal worthy of human sympathy, but also a species which, under certain circumstances, was a serious threat to human life.

In 1951, Florida opened a brief, restricted hunting season on alligators. In the eighteenth century, the motivation for an alligator hunt was not state regulated and, moreover, was typically from a fewer of alligators. In 1951, however, the fear was that alligators might be extirpated in regions of Florida—a remarkable shift in public sentiment—and a transformation noted by assistant director Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Speaking to members of the alligator committee, O. Earl Frye remarked that “Florida sportsmen have spent years in building up a favorable public sentiment toward alligators and crocodiles. One major fear that resulted in the new regulation was that recent sensational reports of alligators attacking humans, dogs, and livestock might eventually counteract the years of effort spent in attempting to build up public opinion in favor of the ‘gators.’”  

The middle of the twentieth century was perhaps the most visible example of fear working in two related, yet distinctly different ways. The prevailing and entrenched fear of alligators produced the sensational reports to which Frye alluded, but wildlife officials wondered if much of their work on creating a new cultural narrative for the species might be undone by the fear that produced the hysteria of previous years. Humans were not

---

physically fighting alligators, but instead two threads of cultural narrative collided through human voices and motivations via widely read media outlets. The narrative moving forward was one that presented the alligator—though worthy of human fear—as also beneficial both to humans and to Florida’s ecology.

While the two initiatives shared a similar goal—conserving and protecting the species—state wildlife officials and wildlife advocates altered the cultural rhetoric. A slight yet elemental distinction occurred during this transition. Alligator farms and ranches in the early twentieth century centered largely upon sensationalism and folly to promote alligator protection. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, humans had shifted the alligators’ cultural identity from sideshow attraction more towards a representation of responsible ecological stewardship with, of course, an eye for tourism. The type of tourism would also be slightly modified in the immediate post-war years.

A pivotal moment in alligator conservation occurred in the middle of the twentieth century. Although small alligators were to remain protected, the American Alligator Council published a report in which the committee members suggested a four-month open hunting season on alligators over eight feet in length. Consideration of the report was on the agenda of the State Game and Freshwater Fish Commission in Tallahassee in August 1950. Coupled with the proposed hunting season, the Game Commission also assessed the possibility of, “Set[ting] aside areas of suitable habitat for alligators and that hunters be charged a license fee.”209 Hunting preserves had existed in the South for several decades, but the middle of the twentieth century marked the initial stages of state sponsored hunting areas devoted solely to alligator hunting. Alligator hunting in the preceding decades was largely an unorganized enterprise in which those

engaged in the activity were subject to very few rules or regulations. As the state government became increasingly involved, the practice not only of alligator hunting changed, but so too the broader practice of hunting for recreation. Sites dedicated solely to alligator hunting became increasingly familiar and important in the later decades of the twentieth century: the cultural and intellectual fusion of conservation, killing, and tourism. Equally important, these measures marked the opening stages of creating distinct boundaries between humans and alligators in the South. The tour boat rides and trophy hunting escapades popularized in the 1970s and 1980s owed their success to the immediate postwar years and burgeoning ideas about how humans should both think about and interact with alligators.

Conserving alligators meant not only establishing reserves for hunting but also using alligators as weapons in the fight against other native and non-native species. “Fifteen alligators measuring from two to seven feet long were released in the Escambia River last week as part of a program to bring game fish predators under control. The alligator,” the author noted, “is a traditional enemy of fish, destroying turtles and garfish.” In instances where humans utilized alligators for seemingly benign purposes, they also rearranged the cultural rhetoric surrounding the species. Outdoor enthusiasts were, “being urged by anglers club officials and game agency officers not to harm the ‘gators, which for all practical purposes are completely harmless in their natural state.” Thus began the distinction between good alligators and bad alligators—definitions which humans both created and manipulated as circumstances changes. The entrenched notion that all alligators were inherently bad suffered a few hemorrhages in the previous half decade, but by the middle of the twentieth century, those ideas largely crumbled.

---

under the weight of the careful management of not only the species itself, but also of its cultural rhetoric.

Controlling the cultural rhetoric at the local and state level did not, however, immediately draw the attention of the federal government. Despite more than four decades of warnings about a decline in alligator populations, the animal had not received federal protection. The demand for alligator hides, souvenirs, and by-products remained strong until the latter half of the twentieth century, which suggested that the conservation rhetoric still operated against an entrenched cultural legacy of fear. The rhetoric and narrative surrounding alligator conservation, though usually present, emerged over the course of the entire twentieth century. The primary causes for eventual federal protection were both a decline in market demand for alligator products and a rhetoric that convinced enough concerned citizens that the species was in peril. The fear of alligators had not declined, but instead was used as potential ammunition for saving the species, if only as an effort to save humans’ ability to be afraid of it. Wildlife officials did not begin conducting population counts until a few decades later, meaning that the public was placing an increasing amount of trust in the published accounts of government employees, or ‘experts.’

An entrenched cultural legacy of fear, moreover, rendered many general observers reluctant to save what they believed was a species inherently dangerous to man. Alligator aesthetics also contributed to a lack of serious national and federal concern. While many southerners and Floridians championed the species for a variety of reasons, the alligator’s physical appearance existed in sharp contrast to the elegant wading birds that enjoyed early protection under the Lacey Act. A handful of counties and parishes along the Gulf Coast enacted limited forms of hunting regulations, but not until the middle of the twentieth century did the plight of the alligator appeared on the national radar. In 1967, Archie Carr, a University of
Florida faculty member, published a piece in *National Geographic* titled “Alligators: Dragons in Distress,” that called for increased protection of the American Alligator.\(^{211}\) Carr’s article reached a comparatively wide audience, and the tenor of newspaper articles pouring out of Florida, even those not reprinted by the Associated Press, resonated beyond the alligator’s historic range.

Carr’s article appeared to catch the attention of a powerful Florida legislator. George Smathers, Democratic Senator from Florida, sought further protection for the American Alligator in 1967. In advance of his “alligator bill,” Smathers drafted a memorandum on the plight of the alligator in the Florida Everglades. “The fact that American consumers will pay fantastic prices for items manufactured from gator hides has turned poaching into a lucrative business,” he noted. Smathers later drew a direct connection between a perceived loss of morality and vanishing wildlife, arguing, “Once again, American vanity is endangering the survival of a particularly distinctive species of wildlife. In the case of the alligator,” Smathers continued, “we are dealing with one of the few living links to the pre-historic world.”\(^{212}\) Linking alligators to the much older and broader natural histories of mammals and reptiles was yet another rhetorical tool utilized for amassing support for alligator conservation.

On February 1, 1967, Smathers introduced to the 1st session of the 90th Congress S. 785, known as the Smathers alligator bill. More specifically, the bill sought “To amend title 18 of the United States code so as to prohibit the transportation and shipment in interstate or foreign commerce of alligators and alligator hides taken in violation of Federal or State laws.”\(^{213}\) Despite wide support from a number of his colleagues, both in the halls of the Senate and the state of

---

\(^{211}\) Mark Barrow, “Dragons in Distress: Naturalists as Bioactivists in the Campaign to Save the American Alligator,” *Journal of the History of Biology* Vol. 42, No. 2 (Spring 2009); 14.


\(^{213}\) HR 6138, S. 785.
Florida, W.T. McBroom, Chairman of the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, complicated the bill’s logistics. McBroom, like most Florida residents, “believe[d] that the alligator is an important part of Florida’s natural scene and every effort should be made to guarantee that he remains as such.”\(^{214}\) For McBroom, “differences of opinion as to how this is to be accomplished,” and if the bill lacked any fundamental control of the alligator population, “we would soon have a very serious problem insofar as so-called nuisance alligators are concerned.”\(^{215}\) Nuisance in these instances did not simply mean “pesky,” but instead something to be feared. Humans had spent the better part of three centuries attempting to both control the natural world and, in so doing, organize their thoughts regarding that world. By the 1960s and 1970s, their efforts had culminated in the emergence of clearly defined spaces for humans and alligators. Nuisance alligators were individual animals who violated those terms. Those rogue alligators were, in a manner of speaking, escaped convicts. Their presence on sidewalks and church driveways was both visually appalling and indicated a threat to the carefully crafted \textit{landschaft} model of separation. Aggressive nuisance alligators—at least in the early stages of the definition—were immediately killed. Therein lied the ethos of the twentieth century effort to conserve a species in which humans reserved tremendous fear. Killing an alligator in an Orlando parking lot was not only warranted, but also entirely necessary. Traveling into the swamp and killing an alligator was, by the last third of the twentieth century, punishable by imprisonment.

McBroom’s “natural scene” terminology hinted that alligators—even if occasionally dangerous to humans—belonged in the kaleidoscope of Florida’s environment. McBroom was seemingly interested in how Florida’s physical environment \textit{should} appear both to permanent


\(^{215}\) McBroom to Smathers, February 3, 1967.
residents and to Midwestern tourists. McBroom essentially argued for tighter control of the species. McBroom and his colleagues might not have feared alligators generally, but his comments suggested a fear of what many alligators could become without systematic governmental oversight.

McBroom further noted the influence of popular culture and the prevalence of misconception and fear associated with alligators and remarked, “It is unfortunate that Tarzan movies, etc., have painted the alligator as a dangerous reptile, lurking in the marshes, ready to pounce upon every innocent person that comes along. . .but if you try to convince [people] living on the bank of a South Florida canal that a two foot alligator was harmless, I think you could understand to what extent this concept, foolish as it may seem, prevails.”\(^{216}\) The “foolish” fear to which McBroom eluded was the sustained cultural impact from over two centuries of alligator representation. The psychological, societal, and cultural impact of humans presenting alligators as wildly aggressive man-eaters persisted well into the latter half of the twentieth century. McBroom and other alligator advocates were fought against these notions and representations. The last third of the twentieth century, then, was a cultural, rhetorical, intellectual battleground where two strains of alligator representation were contested. Rather than a sharp break between the two ideologies, in the late 1960s and 1970s, these ideas coalesced and took on an updated, modern representation: the alligator as a renewable resource. Alligator conservation would rely less upon the images and associations of the past and more upon a new approach, which was gaining momentum in the American West—conservation through science, technology, and management.

\(^{216}\) McBroom to Smathers, February 3, 1967.
McBroom offered that the best future for the Florida alligator was a future in which humans defined it not only as an iconic symbol of the Sunshine State but also a renewable natural resource. To his question of how best to protect the alligator, McBroom argued, “it can best be done by private industry given responsibility by a good stuff license, a reasonable harvesting regulation, and the realization that if the alligator is to survive the resource must be protected.”\textsuperscript{217} McBroom’s strategy foreshadowed the status of the alligator in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Though arguing to save alligators, McBroom was also arguing for their management, which throughout centuries had been the cultural project of humans addressing their fears.

Though loosely configured in 1968, the council adopted an official name, the American Alligator Council (AAC), and tabbed three areas—research, education, and legislation—as its core values and mission. Divided over a preservation versus management approach to saving the alligator, the AAC still managed to successfully lobby for alligator protection, with most notably the Mason Act of 1970. Limited to New York, the Mason Act prohibited the sale of endangered species, including reptiles, within the Empire State. Several northeastern states adopted similar legislation, including Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{218} Though touted as perhaps the first step in alligator protection, the Mason Act only applied to local and state jurisdiction.

The Mason Act did not directly protect alligator from poachers, but instead was a measure aimed at eliminating the interstate trade in alligator products. By suspending—or at least regulating—the interstate trade in reptiles and reptile products, the Mason Act would, in

\textsuperscript{217} McBroom to Smathers, February 3, 1967. \textsuperscript{218} Barrow, “Dragons,” 280-81.
theory, significantly reduce the demand for alligator products in the nation’s largest textile consuming city. Failing that goal, the Act could create a radical increase in the price of those goods which, although might create an increase in poaching, could potentially significantly reduce the availability of alligator products in the northeast. Deterring poaching, it appeared, would be left to wildlife officials, legislators, and media outlets in Florida, Louisiana, and throughout the southern region. Toward the early 1970s, the Florida legislature cemented further alligator conservation into state law. House Bills (HB) 833 through 837 detailed the latest regulations in alligator hunting and the sale of alligator by-products. HB 833 also provided state dollars for tips and information “leading to the arrest and conviction of poachers of alligators and other crocodilia.”

Although alligator hunting and trapping was limited in some areas of Florida, the reptile faced perhaps an even more significant threat: habitat loss from agricultural production. Drained swamplands and the ribbons of asphalt which had expanded across Florida since the first decades of the twentieth century contributed as much, if not more, to the decline in alligator populations as poaching. Though clamping down on poachers remained the top priority of alligator protection, at least one prominent Florida conservationist fought to mitigate the most long-standing threat to alligators—decades of residential and agricultural production. While the AAC largely placed the alligator at the center of its campaign, other conservationists were working to protect the wetland environment. Marjorie Stoneman Douglas waged a nearly life-long campaign to preserve and expand the Florida Everglades. In the face of rapid development both for tourism and for agriculture, Douglas waged a local (and eventually national) campaign for Florida’s

219 House Bills, Tampa Tribune, April 24, 1969 9-A

“river of grass.” 220 The fight Douglas waged during the middle of the twentieth century, sought to reverse legislative measures that began during the first decade of the twentieth century when, in 1910, Florida legislators approved a contract for nearly two hundred miles of canals through the Florida Everglades. A Baltimore construction company intended to begin work immediately, while at least one local newspaper touted the project. “No greater work was ever attempted in the entire south,” reported the Palatka News and Advertiser, “and the contract in its entirety is one of the greatest reclamation feats ever begun.” The author of the article also provided a succinct result for readers, “In a few words, the letting of the contract means that nearly the entire Everglades section of Florida will be drained and ready for the plow within three years’ time.” 221 Habitat fragmentation and reduced water levels meant fewer alligators at which to marvel, fear, and poach.

By the latter half of the twentieth century, at perhaps the height of alligator conservation, public perception of the animal shifted. In September 1969, Brantley Goodson, Chief of the Law Enforcement Division of the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission (FGFFC), forwarded an official proposal for a licensed alligator farm to the commission staff. Ross Allen, a local “expert” and alligator advocate, was the primary architect of the proposal and intended to obtain 1,000 alligators as breeding stock for his farm. Although protection of alligators appeared to be the primary motivation for Ross, Goodson’s suggestions indicated that conservation was perhaps unnecessary by the late twentieth century. “It is recognized,” commented Chief Goodson, “that in some instances the aid of Mr. Ross Allen or his associates in capturing nuisance alligators would be of some minor relief to Commission operations.” Goodson also

221 Palatka News and Advertiser, June 24, 1910.
remarked that humans were at least partially responsible for nuisance complaints and noted that, “A majority of our nuisance alligator cases have been successfully handled by educating the complaintant [sic] about the misconceptions he may have regarding alligators.” As with farms, educating the public, or knowing the animal, was an effort at reducing the fearful connotations associated with “nuisance.” Chief Goodson continued and illustrated the changing relationship between humans and alligators. “Many of these same people,” he wrote, “who were once fearful of the alligator in their pond would fight us today if we tried to remove their ‘pet’.”222 Removing one individual’s pet was not the most secure path to alligator conservation. Curiously, however, in the early twentieth century, the federal government enacted federal protection for southern wading birds amidst a sharp rise in market demand for feathers and fashion accessories.

In the American South, heavy hunting and trafficking of wetland birds coincided with a sharp decline in alligator populations. By the final years of the nineteenth century, Iowa Congressman James Lacey was busy drafting a piece of legislature that would eventually become the Lacey Act. First introduced to the United States House of Representatives in 1900, the Lacey Act was originally intended to curtail the unmitigated harvest of wetland birds and, in addition, limit or prevent introduction of “foreign” avian species and mammals.223 However, the market economy, at least for Congressman Lacey, was largely responsible for the destruction of many species of North American birds, most especially wading birds. “Lacey listed the primary threats to bird populations” Robert Anderson explains, “as excessive hunting of game birds by

market hunters, the introduction of harmful exotic species that displaced native populations, and the millinery industry, which at that time consumed millions of birds each year for the production of ladies’ hats.”\textsuperscript{224} The Lacey Act, as most legislation, ignited a debate regarding federal authority to supersede state hunting and trafficking laws. More broadly, however, the Act was one of the earliest forays by the federal government into developing a comprehensive wildlife conservation and preservation. For all its intended (and measurable) amelioration, however, the Lacey Act provided little protection for alligators—in part because of the alligators’ aesthetics, but more so because the market for its skin and by-products remained vogue through the middle of the twentieth century. By the latter half of the twentieth century, however, alligator conservation was gaining national momentum and the Lacey Act—aimed at protecting iconic wetland wildlife—was its genesis.

Protection efforts increased at the federal level during the late 1960s. From Hot Springs, Arkansas, Florida governor Claude Kirk challenged other republican governors to support a ban on alligator hides and by-products. “The only way to save the alligators is to cut off the dollars flowing to the poachers.”\textsuperscript{225} Kirk cited the Lacey Act as a successful example, arguing that in order to save egrets, “We just banned the sale of egret feathers and the bird was saved.”\textsuperscript{226} Kirk’s comments were “heartily endorsed” by then California governor Ronald Reagan, who praised Kirk for adhering to a request by prominent scientists for a “strong conservationist stand.”\textsuperscript{227} Poaching was, at the local and national level, the primary cause of concern. Habitat loss and

\textsuperscript{224} Anderson, “The Lacey Act,” 37.
\textsuperscript{226} Kirk, in “Gov. Kirk Makes Plea.”
\textsuperscript{227} “Gov. Kirk Makes Plea.”
residual agricultural practices were absent from the discussions. It was easy to hate poachers in 1969—and in any era—but it was quite difficult to hate farmers and retail outlets.

Interest in saving alligators and eliminating the market for poachers were, once again, not relegated to the geopolitical southeast. Interior Secretary Walter Hinkle, in advance of touring the Everglades in 1969 noted, “A million alligators once abounded in the park, and now only about 20,000 remain. Because of limited manpower and equipment available to the National Park Service, poachers have been able to butcher the alligators by the thousands and sell the illicit hides at fancy prices.” Hinkle’s primary interest was alligator poaching, a sentiment shared by the broader public. That killing alligators constituted poaching also marks an important shift in their reputation. For humans to describe the act of killing an animal as “poaching,” the species must possess something inherently valuable to human beings—or at least concerned individuals had convinced both the public and state legislators that the species was valuable.

Writing for *Florida Today* in 1969, Kent Freeland, reported that the Florida Turnpike Authority had discontinued selling alligator products in its gift shops. With tongue-in-cheek, Freeland noted the increased attention officials devoted to saving alligators, “but somehow the starving citrus workers haven’t attracted as much attention in Tallahassee.” The alligator had become the darling of Florida’s mid-century conservation battle, though mostly as a tourist attraction. Recognizing the financial impact of Florida tourism, Freeland wondered, “Whoever heard of driving the family down from Omaha to watch a guy pick oranges? Especially if he’s starving.” Though Freedland’s tone might have appeared whimsical on the surface, his comments hinted at a more serious and thoughtful social commentary. Florida’s wildlife, most

---

especially the alligator, became the showcase of Florida tourism while public officials minimized the socioeconomic plight of many of its most vulnerable citizens. Tourism officials needed the alligator to appear “wild.” Otherwise, tourists would come to Florida and be disappointed to see little more than caged alligators and exploited immigrants. If humans could find in Florida a way to engage with “wild” and dangerous animals in a safe and adventurous setting, the human travesties of its infrastructure could more easily be ignored.

The initiative to eliminate the market for alligator products ascended to the United States Congress in 1969. Though initially passed in 1968, the “save the alligator bill” appeared before the House the following year. Sponsored by Edward Garmatz, a Democratic representative from Maryland, the bill was scheduled for a hearing on February 19 and 20, 1969. Garmatz also served as chairman of the House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, and commented, “The American alligator, which is a priceless national heritage, will soon disappear forever unless rapid action is taken.”

The narrative of conservation during the 1960s and 1970s transitioned from saving an iconic Floridian species and promoting the state’s tourism industry to direct calls for action, less the alligator faced certain annihilation. Espousing rhetoric not widely heard until the late twentieth century, Garmatz continued, “Ironically, man is the most dangerous game. He is the predator and the animal is the victim. This ruthless destruction of the world’s wildlife must be stopped.” Fear in this era meant not only the potential loss of alligators and losing the conservation battle but fear also drove humans to save an animal of which they were afraid. In other words, humans did not desire an absence of fear. Humans need(ed) things of which to be afraid in order to manage their fear. If human beings aspired to a complete absence

---

231 Garmatz, “Remove the Market.”
of fear, they would have long since destroyed every large predator with which they came into contact. Conservation movements—especially those that involved potentially dangerous animals—revealed that humans are not simply caring and altruistic, but instead that humans require things (or animals) around which they could situate their lives and their thoughts.

To lose the narrative war was to lose the conservation war and, in addition, the loss of humans’ ability to decide the physical and intellectual configurations of their homes and activities. The alligator, then, helped humans understand the degree to which they wanted to fear something and, in the end, how to manage that fear over time. Other Florida wildlife—wading birds and panthers, most notably—relied upon the power of this narrative for their own futures. If attempts failed at saving the alligator via narrative, other iconic Florida species might suffer a similar fate. Garmatz, in accordance with the contemporary conservation ideology, placed the onus on poaching and its continued impact on the market for hides and skins. The produced alligator, then, during the height of the campaign to save it, was a vulnerable, hapless trophy animal. Rather than a fearsome predator bent on taking human lives, the alligator needed humans to save it—and a handful of humans manipulated the imagery and rhetoric of fear to foster that campaign. Because a number of politicians and legislators clamored for conservation, the alligator became a surprising vehicle for political ascension.

The halls of the Florida statehouse were one venue in the broader effort to save alligators. Amidst increased concern over poaching, a consortium of wildlife officials, academics, and federal agents organized a symposium to discuss the circumstances surrounding the alligators’ plight. Attendees numerated three perceived problems facing the state’s iconic reptile. “The first is poaching, the second is the alligator’s disappearing habitat, and the third is the fear many citizens have of the alligator and the indifference toward what happens to him,” which suggested
a continuation of the older expressions of fear remaining in the psyche of modern Americans.\textsuperscript{232} Though the narrative has clearly shifted by the middle of the twentieth century, many citizens retained the primal fear of alligators as inherently dangerous to humans, especially children. The last third of the twentieth century reflected this phenomenon, as humans worked diligently to create both physical and psychological boundaries between themselves and the species. In addition to more stringent legal penalties for poachers, director O.E. Frye, Jr. championed education and a “wide spread public information program” to alleviate the concerns of fearful citizens.\textsuperscript{233} Ross Allen, director of a reptile institute of the same name, added an intriguing comparison and a dash of American exceptionalism when he argued, “The alligator is to Florida what the lion is to Africa.” Allen was speaking to the iconic status of lions, but that lofty position in American (and African) cultural is reserved for species that pose a potential threat to human life. The problems of protecting large, iconic species were not limited to the United States, he argued, noting that India, Africa, and South America faced similar obstacles. For Allen, Americans were to be the shining example of conservation and exclaimed, “Around the world, people are waiting for us to set a good example.”\textsuperscript{234} The American Alligator, then, would play at least a small role in the ethnocentrism and patriotic rhetoric during the Cold War. In short, American officials could use alligators in the fight against communism.

In 1969, the AAC presented its first award to George Laycock for his “Gator Killers” article in \textit{Audubon} magazine. Laycock’s, piece, which contained interviews with poachers and game officials, “shows that the fashion trade has created an illegal and gory multimillion dollar

\textsuperscript{233} Frye, Jr. in Ryan, “Poaching Crackdown Urged,” September 7, 1968.  
\textsuperscript{234} Allen in Ryan, “Poaching Crackdown Urged,” September 7, 1968.
However, the early 1970s witnessed a peculiar turn in alligator conservation. The American Alligator Council, the vanguard of early alligator protection, considered calling for the species to be removed from the Endangered Species List. Originally composed of scientists and ecologists, the council’s members included the “well heeled hide industry and those unique individuals, commercial gator farmers.” The impetus for the Council’s declaration derived from a 1971 meeting in North Augusta, South Carolina, where wildlife officials and legislators from several southeastern states convened for “A Symposium on the Status of the American Alligator.” Representing the Louisiana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, Robert Chabreck argued that alligator populations in most southeastern states had “changed from declining abundance to increased abundance.” Chabreck added nuance to his appraisal and added, “There are conflicting opinions about the present status of the American Alligator, some people feel that the animal nearing extinction…[and] others feel that the alligator is recovering from its low-point and can no longer be considered as endangered.” The American Alligator Council did not issue a formal declaration immediately following the meeting, but only a few years after being placed on the federal list, key figures in its protection were conserving advocating for its removal. Alligators were still dying in comparatively large numbers, however, from not only loss of habitat, but also a new threat—biological and agricultural contamination.

Recreational visitors and outdoor enthusiasts noticed a handful of dead alligators at a popular lake in central Florida. Dr. Charles Andrews was responsible for creating an ecological and geological history of Lake Apopka. The history he composed, however, was omitted from the piece. Readers do know, however, that Andrews was, “a quiet man, built like a professional

football lineman,” and was able to complete an assumedly thorough history of Lake Apopka in two days. By late June 1971, investigators had reached a conclusion in the mysterious deaths. “This and previous studies,” outlined the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission (FGFFC), “have shown that lake Apopka is a highly eutrophic lake, with effluence from municipal sewage, muck farming operations, citrus groves, and citrus processing industries.”

By the final tally, and in addition to the significant numbers of gar and shad deaths, officials tabbed nine dead alligators. Larry Martin, in a report to Director Frye, examined each carcass thoroughly and, bearing no easily visible signs of gunshot wounds, Martin and two colleagues requested an analysis for the presence of pesticides. Nine dead alligators, perhaps not surprisingly, did not accelerate the public’s pulse toward conservation. The deaths were, after all, not a result of poaching.

Where saving either an endangered species or the physical environment failed to draw adequate public support, media outlets profiled humans doing the work of conservation. In June 1971, the FGFFC received reports that significant numbers of white-tailed deer, alligators, and a host of freshwater fish were dying at Lake Apopka, northwest of Orlando. A multi-page spread in the Orlando Sentinel devoted much of its story not to the dying animals but instead to the collection of scientists tasked with uncovering the cause. Leading the study, Dr. Frank Hayes, professor at the University of Georgia’s School of Veterinary Medicine was, according to the newspaper, “a 49-year-old bachelor who has dedicated his existence to preserving wildlife. As a youngster,” the report continued, “he harbored a number of pets which included a pony and a three-legged dog.” Personal profiles on the individuals signaled a slight shift in modern

---

238 Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, 1971. Tallahassee, FL.
conservation. If alligators were not to be fully embraced, those who attempted to save them, or at least determine the cause of their death, served as relatable and noble proxies for the species. If wildlife officials could not save the alligator through narrative description of its beneficial characteristics, then perhaps giving a sympathetic and likable human face (and voice) to the conservation movement could potentially shift the perceptions of those who wandered the middle of the fear spectrum—somewhere between outright fear, but openness toward a newer, less violent future for the species.

Tommy Hines, a research biologist in the Wildlife Management Division of FGFFC, began a ‘state of alligator’ survey in 1975. Collecting data from nearly 300 miles of transects, researchers calculated approximate size, habitat types, and the general health of observed specimens. What appeared as an impromptu, ramshackle collection resulted—in what Hines himself admitted—was “extremely variable and extreme highs, lows and averages can be misleading if applied to a statewide basis”241 Hines’ study points to the emergence of statistical analysis of American wildlife in the latter half of the twentieth century. Wildlife officials throughout the southeastern United States had for decades conducted rudimentary surveys of game animals and a handful of threatened or endangered species, but the increasing emphasis and reliance upon scientific principles and statistical data analysis complicated yet again the definition of the American Alligator.

Tracking large animals became commonplace—at least to the American public in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Researchers and conservationists, however, were tracking alligators several decades prior to the practice gaining national attention and speaking not

---

specifically to the American public, but rather to their colleagues in academia and the technology industry. Their findings would eventually leak into the public sphere through traditional print media, but conducting, presenting, and publishing research within academia and the technology sector meant that the narrative of alligator conservation in the last few decades of the twentieth century would be rooted in the increasingly persuasive and influential language of science and technology. Using telemetry to track large carnivores developed in the Northern Rockies near the middle of the twentieth century, as scientists and researchers sought to gather population data on Grizzly Bears. Innovations in tracking birds emerged a few years prior but tracking large species of the West accelerated the biological and scientific effort to utilize radio telemetry.\textsuperscript{242} Using those tools—both physical and linguistic—was a fresh avenue for humans to manipulate their fear. Through science and technology, humans bequeathed their demand for safety and distance to those individuals and groups whom society collectively defined as professionals. Humans could devote less energy to managing their own fears, and instead ask (or require) others to manage that fear on their behalf using advanced techniques, tools, and language.

In 1968 South Carolina, researchers tracked alligators around the Atomic Energy Commission plant near Aiken. A surreal assumption, the Atomic Energy Commission took the lion’s share of credit for granting alligators a “new lease on life.” The Commission did so by drawing water from the Savannah River, using it to cool nuclear reactors, and returning it to the waterway a few degrees warmer, which “the scientists say, seems to have a beneficial effect on alligators.” Led by Dr. John Legler, and supported by the University of Georgia, the small sonar transmitters attached to the alligators would provide, “the information gained from these

studies,” noted a participant, “could lead to knowledge that would allow wildlife specialists to build simulated alligator preserves, with conditions similar to AEC plant area.”

Technology continued to play a role in alligator conservation, but now made its way into American homes via a large broadcast network—though this latest version would be a hybrid of technology and cinematic drama. The narrative, in short, became visual. In 1970, Grits Fresham, a contributor to The Daily World and apparent author of the magnum opus, Complete Book of Bass Fishing, previewed an ABC television special that shone a light on the alligator population in a Louisiana refuge. Fresham argued that while the American Alligator should have never been listed as an endangered species, the ABC documentary told “a most interesting story.” The real excitement of the show, Fresham continued, “comes from the catching of alligators for tagging and telemetry—the placing on the ‘gators of small radio transmitters through which their movement can be tracked.” The new, more “exciting” narrative—at times spoken and other times displayed—was the danger to human life as individuals grappled with live alligators in an effort to secure the transmitters. On the heels of personal profiles of those who investigated alligator deaths at Lake Apopka, scientists working in the field with live alligators became part of the modern narrative. The images were not alike, but akin to, the showman aspect of early alligator farms. Part of the public’s motivation to save alligators was to also save the entertainment value associated with the alligator’s cultural legacy of fear. This type of alligator entertainment only surfaced on the final decades of the twentieth century. To be sure, alligators had always entertained crowds at festivals, farms, and zoos. The location of that entertainment, however, was quite different. No longer did humans need to travel to farms or zoos to see

alligators. Those alligators were, moreover, confined and sluggish. As humans traveled into the wetlands to electronically tag alligators, the entertainment value rose exponentially. Those were alligators outside of the *landschaft*, in the “wild” places humans expected to see them. The airboat tours and “wild” experiences humans craved during the final decades of the twentieth century became more culturally valuable and increasingly marketed to affluent and middle-class Americans. The process was a precursor to the connection between alligator hunting and the mass media that would unfold in the final decades of the twentieth century. Humans could now see—from the comfort of their living rooms—what excitement and danger awaited them in the new Florida “wilderness.” The alligator was thus part and parcel to the intellectual (and actual) fusion of technology and conservation. The ABC news special represented an amalgam of emerging science, charismatic species, technology, and popular culture—all vitally important components of twentieth century conservation initiatives. The story of alligator conservation, then, was not a singular, benevolent, and heroic mission by a handful of dedicated wildlife activists, but instead a convergence of powerful societal institutions and cultural currents—at times working in cooperation, at times not—that shaped not only the biophysical future of the alligator, but also how the public perceived its status as Florida’s population and tourism revenues continued to increase in the last quarter of the twentieth century.
By nearly every measure, the collective effort to save the American Alligator was a success. Their tenure on the Endangered Species List was comparatively brief. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service declared the American Alligator as fully recovered by 1987. Though unorganized and underfunded, the American Alligator Council (AAC) and its supporters witnessed a steady increase in total population. Indeed, alligator numbers had rebounded enough that a number of southern states lifted hunting restrictions during the final decade of the twentieth century. The work of Aldo Leopold and Eugene Odum in altering public perceptions of swamps and wetlands coincided with increased alligator populations—setting the stage for a renewed battle.

Nearly all of the people who traveled to Florida during the mid-twentieth century, did not travel to remote corners of the Everglades, but instead viewed and interacted with alligators on farms and within urban or suburban settings. During the mid-to-late twentieth century, humans managed their fear of alligators by creating distinct boundaries. The responsibility of protecting families from potentially dangerous wildlife, at least during the latter portions of the twentieth century, fell to local officials and state agencies rather than individual families. Alligators were, at that juncture, wards of the state. The wetlands alligators inhabited, moreover, were

---

instruments of control designed not to preserve native species, but instead as an attempt to construct arbitrary physical and psychological borders for an American middle class obsessed with safety and bent on environmental vigilantism. To that end, Floridians constructed miles of fences, designed to both achieve a degree of privacy in densely populated neighborhoods, but especially to prevent the family pet from becoming an opportunistic alligator’s next meal. In other words, suburban Floridians of the late twentieth century did not erect fences to keep themselves in, but rather to keep alligators out.

At that juncture, at least by the 1970s, alligators become yet another thing: a nuisance. Captivity and control remain a backdrop in this section because alligators were at once a cultural attraction and a dangerous pest. While celebrated in state parks and “wildlife” centers, alligators were (and still are) loathed when they appeared in a suburban swimming pool. Only when encountered under a controlled environment did the alligator appear as a positive cultural symbol of the South and its environment. As noted in interviews conducted by University of Connecticut geographer Adam Keul, “[Tourists] want to know that an alligator can kill them, but they want to know that they are safe too.” What began in the late colonial and early national periods as a linguistic and epistemological attempt to order and classify alligators had by the middle of the twentieth century become physical domination and widespread separation. Alligators were “wild,” but not free. “Fear,” Keul surmised, “paradoxically draws and repels human-alligator contacts.”²⁴⁶ That paradox was perhaps most visible during the final two decades of the twentieth century.

By the close of 1999, after three decades of sporadic protection, alligator populations had rebounded to approximately 1 million animals. Included in the 2000 census were 15 million Floridians, with another 5 million expected by 2010. The physical environment was a notable component of Florida’s allure, and alligators represented an attractive component of Florida wildlife—danger and exoticism. Fear of the natural world and a desire to create order (and their environs) drove real estate brokers, developers, and construction companies to feverishly transform the swamps of Florida into commercial and residential bliss. In doing so they created hybrid spaces that further defined the persistence of fear toward alligators. By the last third of the twentieth century, wildlife officials and the public had, more or less, reached an agreement about what was a good alligator versus a bad alligator. In a few instances, an individual alligator’s aggressive behavior determined its definition. More often, however, bad alligators simply appeared in populated areas. The middle of the twentieth century produced both a marked change in alligators’ public persona and a significant rise in the alligator population. Alligator conservation was by most measures a resounding success, so successful that wildlife officials, real estate developers, and the public began to create both psychological and physical boundaries between themselves, their families, and alligators.

Three conflicts emerged in the last third of the twentieth century. The first of which was a general conflict between Florida civilians and alligators. As the alligator population in Florida continued to rise, individual alligators began to appear in environmental middle spaces—suburban backyards, waterfront coves, playgrounds, and golf courses. Those increasingly common occurrences precipitated the second conflict between wildlife officials and the public.

---

247 Jack Temple Kirby, Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 22.
Florida wildlife officials engaged with the public not only about how to remove individual animals from middle spaces, but also attempted to measure, temper, and control the public’s expectations and reactions when alligators appeared within these contested spaces. The final conflict occurred as humans debated the advantages—or disadvantages—of reopening hunting seasons on alligators. In order to determine if hunters could once again harvest alligators, state officials, hunters, and the public needed to reach a consensus regarding the nuances of that process. This rhetorical and physical process was a negotiation of boundaries between, citizens, wildlife officials, and alligators. The reptiles, for their part, did not do much debating, but their physical presence and behavior drove human narrative, action, and reaction.

Middle spaces—areas that contained large elements both of nature and of cultural institutions—redefined the human conception of modern nature, but also of urban spaces generally. Middle spaces, moreover, were not the result of an overbearing state bureaucracy bent on environmental equity. These spaces existed in most modern cities because residents demanded them.248 City residents—pleased and comfortable with concrete, shopping, and modern convenience often needed to escape the bustle and noise of the urban setting. The most popular amongst these escapes were urban parks, golf courses, and easily accessible wildlife refuges.

The middle spaces in which humans encountered alligators did not determine human fear, but instead revealed human fear. This is not to suggest that alligators did not pose a potential threat to Floridians during the late twentieth century, but instead argues that human cultural institutions—suburbs, golf courses, and urban nature parks were created, despite national rhetoric to the contrary—to compartmentalize fear into a culturally acceptable and aesthetically

pleasing venue. The success of alligator farms and conservation measures in the early and middle twentieth century ensured that once removed from the Endangered Species List, alligators would begin to appear in places which humans had claimed as their own—often inciting fear and apprehension. To ameliorate that fear, suburban residents built fences, barricades, and called for “rogue” alligators to be destroyed. Tourists, meanwhile, resumed their practice of purchasing dehydrated skins at boutiques and posing for pictures with severed alligator heads on a family trip to central Florida.

Before humans constructed massive suburbs during the last half of the twentieth century, they needed a ribbon of interstates to facilitate large-scale relocation. Short-lived and riddled with bureaucratic obstacles, the proposed construction of the Dixie Highway was an effort to facilitate interstate travel and commerce between the industrial north and vacation destinations in south Florida. Traditional “farm-to market” roads provided a network of routes that not only constituted the nation’s first interstate highway system, but also, for historian Tammy Ingram, “galvanized broad public support for modern state and federally funded roads and highways in the twentieth century.” The Dixie Highway, concluded Ingram, was a genesis for Dwight Eisenhower’s massive, federally-funded interstate highway system.\textsuperscript{249} In the wake of its completion—and the subsequent rush to the Deep South—the Eisenhower interstate system not only resulted in increased human interactions with alligators, but also redefined that relationship through increased institutionalization of nature and further carved the contours of the alligator as a cultural animal. Lured by abundant sunshine, swimming pools, year-round golf, and no state income tax, a steady succession of individuals and families from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and

Indiana spent the last third of the twentieth century traveling southward and trading their rusty belts for sunscreen and flip-flops.

Florida promoters, whether in the eighteenth or twentieth century, utilized a very real sense of environmental and wildlife danger to attract weekend tourists and permanent transplants. Manipulating the human fear of alligators, be it for hunting and killing the species or for saving it, often fell to journalists, wildlife officials, and legislators. The last third of the twentieth century was largely a continuation of that practice, with one important nuance. The flood of permanent residents to Florida in concert with a sharp increase in the alligator population resulted in a spike of often negative human-alligator interactions. Those interactions, and the public’s response to them, demanded that the group of governmental entities and concerned wildlife advocates created and massaged a narrative not of outright killing or saving, but instead of protection—both for humans and for alligators. Sometimes protection meant saving humans by killing alligators, though in other instances protection meant removing humans to save alligators. The circumstances surrounding each event allowed each party—fearful citizens or wildlife experts—to feud over the narrative. Whichever group was the most rhetorically successful, determined the resolution.

The responsibility of protecting families from potentially dangerous wildlife, at least during the latter potions of the twentieth century, fell to local officials and state agencies. The success of alligator conservation drove state wildlife agencies to enact several measures intended to control the animal. In short, by the final third of the twentieth century, alligators were wards of the state. The wetlands alligators inhabited, moreover, were instruments of control designed not to preserve native species, but to construct arbitrary physical and psychological borders for an American middle class obsessed with safety and bent on environmental vigilantism. As
increasing numbers of people visited protected areas, those spaces—peppered with boat ramps, interpretive museums, observation decks, and highways—became middle spaces. Licensed trappers and for-hire alligator wranglers consistently removed alligators from swimming pools, residential lakes, and golf courses, making the line between suburb and wetland increasingly clear during the late twentieth century. Alligators were supposed to be out there, not right here.

Efforts to wrestle Florida away from native wildlife in favor of aging Midwesterners was, of course, only marginally successful. The spaces created by rapid development were neither fully urban nor entirely wild, but instead hybrid environments where humans and wildlife shared daily, if often unwanted, interactions. Alligators, for their part, were a highly visible, iconic feature of Florida wildlife and, as evidenced by the number of highway and interstate attractions, played a role in attracting newcomers to the subtropical South. Alligators represented danger and exoticism. They filled the human desire to be close enough to nature to feel fear, but far enough removed to retain their lives and limbs. To that end, Floridians constructed miles of fences, designed to both achieve a degree of privacy in densely populated neighborhoods, but especially to prevent the family pet from becoming an opportunistic alligator’s next meal. In other words, suburban Floridians of the late twentieth century did not erect fences to keep themselves in, but rather to keep alligators out.

Suburbia carried with it an expectation of privacy and safety. The highly manicured lawns, detailed landscaping, and abundance of stop signs provided an illusion of safety. Meanwhile, alligators in Florida (and beyond) bathe in residential swimming pools, run ramshackle at local eateries, claw through screen doors, and dine on family pets—all the while surrounded by a host of other exotic species just beyond city limits. During the final few decades of the twentieth century, the expectation of safety in suburban neighborhoods was largely an
illusion. In 1976, the *News-Press* published an article detailing the illusion of safety. Director of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Dr. E.O. Frye noted, “We’ve got a major problem with a real explosion of alligators in many urban areas of the state. They’re eating dogs and cats and there has been a growing number of attacks on people.” To that end, the Commission lifted the ban on alligator trapping. “In a unanimous vote,” the Associated Press reported, “the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission on Friday adopted a new alligator management policy allowing commercial harvesting of the animals ‘in areas where there are serious conflicts between alligators and people.’”250 Alligator conservation in the mid-twentieth century allowed humans to retain the ability to manage their fear of alligators, but perhaps more importantly, preserved the notion to suburbanites and tourists that they remained in comparative danger.

The illusion of safety was perhaps no more evident than in June 1988, when an alligator killed 4-year old Erin Glover near a residential lake in Englewood, Florida. Prior to the tragedy, several residents had voiced concerns regarding alligators near homes, claiming, “Everyone was blaming everyone, it seemed. Some residents said state officials did not respond to complaints of alligators on banks near yards,” wrote Amy Beck in June 1988.251 In the wake of the event, several residents demanded alterations of state law. “Maybe we’ve got to change some of the state laws. If an alligator is found in a small pond, we should be able to take them out. At least we can raise one hell of a stink about it,” claimed Charlotte County official David Schmidt. County Commissioner Jack Hufnagel echoed Schmidt’s concerns, stating “It’s ridiculous to have these things around. It’s a dangerous animal. To leave them where they can endanger children,”

---

he concluded, “is the height of utter stupidity.”

In the wake of the accident, state officials organized the first coordinated alligator hunt since 1962. Leaders did not opt for complete eradication but began a more aggressive policy of removing alligators from suburban settings to prevent future fatalities. Brevard County Fish and Game Commission Lieutenant Don McMillen stated, “By no means are we in the alligator-eradication business, which is what some of the Suntree residents wanted us to do. I think people need to realize wild alligators are a part of our natural wildlife heritage, and if they build a development in low-lying wetlands, they’re going to see alligators.”

In late twentieth century Florida, then, humans and alligators vied for privacy and livelihood. Pitted against each other in a hybrid environment, each combatant relied upon the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, as one historian noted, to act as the “stalwart mediator.” Todd Hardwick, a state-licensed alligator trapper speaking to Time in 2006 noted, “We’re putting our lives on the line, so you can have a safe backyard.”

Hundreds of miles of fences, the millions of dollars and labor hours spent to construct barriers, and the constant oversight of a state agency suggests that although accustomed to living, working, and vacationing with the animal, humans maintain significant fear of alligators despite modern amenities and access to biological and scientific data.

The increasing effort to remove alligators from suburban backyards became cloaked in the language of wetland conservation. Dennis David, alligator program coordinator for the Florida Game and Fresh Water Commission noted, “You’re not going to stop condominiums

---

254 Kirby, Mockingbird Song, 22.
255 Michael Lemonick and Kathie Klarreich, “Death by Alligator” Time Vol. 167 No. 22 (May 29, 2006); 49.
from going in because of alligator hunts, but it adds another reason to preserve wetland habitats."256 David’s call for wetland protection, though well-intentioned, propagated the notion that humans and alligators could not coexist in the Florida suburbs. The tide of condominiums did not stop, as David predicted. Despite being unwanted in quiet communities and backyards, the alligator and its charismatic persona was still a magnet for tourism. Political and wildlife officials, consequently, began championing state parks and the preservation of alligator habitats to attract inter-state visitors and commerce.

While many southern transplants enjoyed the illusion of safety in their backyards, public sentiment towards nature underwent a gradual transition. In Louisiana, the efforts to drain wetlands and expand the residential marketplace in New Orleans created a dull outcry for urban nature. Much like alligator farms and zoos, then, urban spaces provided the illusion of nature within an intensely monitored and regimented public setting. Swamp tours, or wetland excursions, in Louisiana began during the final third of the twentieth century. Boat tours into the Louisiana swamp—at least on their surface—signaled a renewed interest in wetland protection, but chartered boats, steadily increasing ticket prices, and strict regulations for each passenger revealed not a serious interest in wetland or alligator conservation, but instead filled the public need to feel connected to nature, though from a safe and comfortable distance. Often coaxed to the surface with raw meat or high-fructose food products, alligators were actors in a highly theatrical version of nature.257 Rather than thoughtful, balanced, caretakers of a fragile

---

ecosystem, boat captains operated more as ringmasters while alligators played the part of roaring tigers.

“For Southwest Florida visitors,” Anne Mitchell wrote, “the alligator clearly is king of the beasts.” George Madison, a resident of Sanibel, Florida noted of those who travel to nearby J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge, “The first thing people want to know when they come to stay with us is where they can see an alligator.” Madison often called guests’ attention to other species, cuckoos and pelicans, most especially, “but they want to see the ‘gators.” Refuge volunteer Norm Honest added, “I can’t tell people enough about crocodiles and alligators. This is a birding refuge, and they would rather come and listen about alligators.” The author of the piece did not seem surprised, as she claimed, “Nothing says ‘Florida’ more concisely than the image of an alligator,” and continued by describing its image on postcards as “genial and sometimes comic ambassador for Florida.”258 Turnbridge Wells, England resident Terry Smith offered a unique hypothesis, stating “I would think most people would want to see one because they’re big and powerful—real nature itself.” In addition to alligators’ physiology, Smith also remarked on their persona. “They’re like the big wildlife in Africa” he continued, “they have that sort of mystique.”259 In that sense, the iconography of fear and ferociousness both attracted domestic and international tourists while simultaneously served as motivation for retroactive vengeance.

Although many tourists had at least a passing interest in alligators, they were active representations of a broader societal shift that was unfolding during the latter stages of the twentieth century. “It’s not just the alligator, of course,” wrote Mitchell, “Ecotourism is big business and still growing as people seek the back-to-nature experience.” The “back-to-nature”

259 Mitchell, 12.
experience, however, relied heavily on representations of nature. More specifically, the natural world to which many tourists ascribed—rather than untrammeled wilderness—was a floral, faunal, and aquatic construction of human sentiments and perceptions of how the natural world should appear.²⁶⁰

The ecotourism industry, moreover, is a misnomer. The prevailing notion of ecotourism, even in the late twentieth century, centered upon animal welfare with at least a glancing nod to educating the public. The attractions, however, cater first and foremost to human convenience and safety. “Interest in these giant reptiles is so great,” Honest later commented, “refuge staff erect barricades around frequent sunning spots to keep people back.”²⁶¹ Barricades and elevated boardwalks, rather than protect alligators and their habitat from disruptive human behavior, prevented humans from becoming a danger to themselves. The state, then, not only relegated most alligators to refuges and tourist attractions, but also created both the physical and psychological barriers necessary for the public to achieve a “back-to-nature” sensation without sacrificing modern comforts and assurances of safety. By the late twentieth century, and perhaps long before, state wildlife officials had gift-wrapped nature and delivered it to a supposedly caring and thoughtful public. The “back-to-nature” movement, at least in the early 1990s, did not necessarily require humans to visit designated parks. In some instances, humans did not need to go back to nature; instead, nature came to them.

The Daytona Beach Museum of Arts and Sciences created a traveling exhibit titled “Alligators: Dragons in Paradise.” The exhibit, wrote Dana Ste. Claire, “present[ed] everything you ever wanted to know about these modern-day dinosaurs, including the vital importance of

²⁶¹ Mitchell, 12.
the alligator in Florida’s ecosystems, the history of the alligator in tourism, alligator wrestling, alligator and crocodile differences and their portrayal in history.”262 Removed from backyards and swimming pools, alligators were, by the close of the twenty-first century, largely relegated to parks and their entire natural history packaged for easy consumption on poster-board.

State wildlife officials in Florida and beyond also performed a psychological and linguistic coup d’état. By constructing both physical and cognitive barriers, state leaders defined nature for the public. Too simplistic is the notion that “humans” have defined nature over time. Instead, the process of definition was one of power in the hands of a few. Not all humans possessed the authority to define nature, and while the epistemological poles were no longer separated by the Atlantic Ocean, the structure of most societies required that state, local, and federal officials tacitly and subliminally instructed the public how to perceive the physical environment and its species. While visiting a Florida wildlife sanctuary, Pennsylvania resident Shirley Conner said of alligators, “I’d like to see one in its own habitat rather than go to a zoo.”263 Conner’s definition of an alligator habitat, then, was the Florida wildlife sanctuary setting. The alligator’s habitat was, of course, not it’s own, but rather the habitat that humans deemed appropriate for their own ends.

Under the ecotourism façade was also the presentation of the environment as casual entertainment. This approach was not to conflate recreation and entertainment, but instead to define each as a separate activity bearing different expectations and outcomes. Recreation, as defined here, consists of outdoor sporting activities—boating, fishing, hunting, swimming, et cetera. Entertainment is less an active physical engagement with the elements and more an effort

262 Dana Ste. Claire, “Exhibit gives snappy look at alligators’ history, habits,” The Orlando Sentinel, August 12, 1990, 209
263 Mitchell, 12.
at curiosity and wonderment. Within the confines of this definition, nature and particular groups of humans are items to be observed. Lee Tiger, a Seminole Indian and Florida tourism official, described the alligator as “a big part of tourism in Florida,” and spoke to tourists’ motivations by adding, “If they go to the Everglades, they must see an alligator, take an airboat ride and see an American Indian.”

Nature (and Native Americans) in this context were objects of amusement and wonder rather than integral components of society. Nature was, for tourists and suburban Floridians alike, a destination. Nature, and of course alligators, functioned primarily as moderately convenient harbors over which humans maintained absolute physical, linguistic, and psychological control.

Florida tourism officials utilized the allure of alligators to market their product throughout the nation. In 1972, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* published an Arthur Griffiths article in which he dubbed Florida “The Land of the Alligators.” Griffiths further cemented the façade of state parks as “wild” when he titled The Anhinga Trail as “one of the last great spectacles of nature in America.” Describing the Trail as he did belied his earlier observation in which he noted the “jet sonic booms which start alligators bellowing for miles.” Traveling to the destination, Griffiths continued, was an added benefit. “Equally surprising is the accessibility of it. Just off Route 27,” he assured readers, droves of alligators mingle with other wildlife, bask in the sloughs, viewed by visitors from paths and bridge-like boardwalks.” The public destination classification was present when park ranger Sam Mendien mentioned visitors. “Some people go through the Everglades and see nothing,” said Mendien, “and ask why the heck this was made a

---

264 Mitchell, 12.
wildlife park.” The act of driving to an easily accessible wildlife park and expecting to quickly find a bevy of wildlife was representative of the new perception of nature.

Setting aside public wildlife parks altered the expectations of the twentieth century middle class. Though most visitors understood that wildlife sanctuaries were not zoos proper, they were, however, designated spaces for human entertainment. In simpler terms, the snow globe was empty and tourists felt cheated out of their supposed entitlement to instant gratification through nature. Fear contributed to Florida’s allure as well, predominantly in Griffiths description of alligators “red evil eyes prowling the waters below.” Indeed, images of fear bookended Griffith’s piece, as he opened the article with “The alligators that lie in droves outside the information center along the Anhinga Trail at Royal Palm in Everglades National Park usually get to feed on most visitors in the end.” His opening paragraph was ultimately a whimsical foray into wetland life cycles, but the language of fear in concert with the idea of alligators feeding on humans added the element of danger California suburbanites associated with Florida and alligators. Fear of alligators, intertwined with the “wild” experience to which many tourists ascribed, was a fitting example of humans recognizing that fear exists and subsequently utilizing those emotions to draw people (and dollars) to the Sunshine State.

The March 7, 1999 edition of the Indianapolis Star profiled Tallahassee not for its penchant for college football, but instead for “the area’s natural beauty and historic sites.” State parks, or nature compartmentalized for public consumption, figured prominently in the piece. Jeffrey McMurray, author of the article and journalist for the Associated Press, touted Wakulla Springs State Park, and noted, “Its freshwater springs rank among the world’s deepest,

---

266 Ibid.
and the 3,000 acres of surrounding forest is home to a variety of birds, including anhinga and osprey; turtles and alligators.” 268 McMurray did not mention that Wakulla Springs boasts a luxury hotel, diving platforms, boat tours, vending machines, and was a partial set for the 1954 Hollywood classic, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Most important for McMurray, and for Hoosiers, was presenting an image of a natural paradise nestled only fifteen miles from the state capital. McMurray described the spatial and temporal configuration germane to the alligator conservation rhetoric of the mid twentieth century. Vacationing tourists could enjoy a “wilderness” experience—complete with beauty and reptiles—in a luxurious, convenient, and safe atmosphere. The latest version of the landschaft model, of separation and guided observation, had fully materialized.

Urban nature facilities were the physical manifestation of the human inclination to fear certain aspects of nature or species—tidy compartments of human fear. These spaces functioned as outdoor zoos. They were subject to, more or less, a degree of civil oversight and managed if not by trained professionals, then at least by city specialists. Humans could stroll through the parks on suspended bridges and causally view captive species. In certain instances, moreover, signs dotted the walkways and offered rudimentary education to visitors. Again, while not zoos proper, observers could enjoy a “wilder” experience through outdoor excursions. 269

268 McMurray, K4.
Figure 6.1  Wakulla Springs Boat Tour

The actual differences were slight, but the perception and marketing of these spaces appealed to segments of the population who lacked either the time, ability, or courage to board a vessel or embark on a guided wetland tour. Ultimately designed to control nature, urban spaces also control human fear. Humans entered these spaces with a general sense of safety because administrators deliberately arranged and controlled the interaction between humans and alligators. Inside the park was relatively safe—inside the boat was an *enjoyably* safe space in which humans encountered a “dangerous” world. The glass-bottom boats at Florida’s Wakulla Springs State Park, airboat swamp tours at Gulf Coast Gator Ranch, and the elevated walking
paths at Audubon Park Zoo Swamp Exhibit represented an effort to not only merge nature and education, but also to quench the public thirst for convenient, dangerous, and controlled nature.

When locals and tourists visited urban or convenient parks, they typically did so with the expectations of seeing alligators. Park officials and overseers were careful to create (and market) those spaces as visitor friendly and, to some degree, alligator friendly. Parks, moreover, already contained some facets of alligators’ habitat and did not usually require large-scale excavation and massive construction projects—with a few exceptions. Ultimately, recreation was the product. Another popular recreation attraction for locals and, most especially, for tourists was golf. By the late 1970s the Professional Golf Association Tour (PGA Tour) relocated its national headquarters from Washington, D.C. to Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. From that era forward, Florida would be the de facto golf capitol of the western hemisphere and, in addition, the de facto alligator capitol of the world. The allure of Florida golf functioned in similar fashion to other tourist attractions. It was simply another, increasingly profitable, venture where promoters could use alligators to attract tourists to their facilities. Alligators were not free to breed and roam in large numbers on luxurious fairways, so course architects and superintendents designed and marketed their courses as luxurious and, by controlling and maintain the appropriate number and size of alligators, exhilarating and dangerous.

As in previous centuries and decades, promoters manipulated the fear of alligators to fit the venue in which humans and alligators came into contact. Unlike parks located just beyond city limits, however, carving the Florida golf empire from swampland required significant environmental change. Since the movement to save alligators proved comparatively successful,

---

alligators could by the last third of the twentieth century appear almost anywhere, as evidenced in suburbs. Those numbers resulted in alligators appearing on both the most luxurious golf courses and the small municipal courses across the state. Golf courses were an extensions and microcosms of the new landschaft model. Real estate and tourism boosters, in concert with course architects and civic agencies, transformed what they believed to be dangerous swampland into recreational retreats for locals and tourists. Part of the appeal of playing a golf course in Florida (or the broader South) was the potential of doing so alongside animals that could potentially be a threat. Those animals, of course, were not an actual threat to human life, as course superintendents and their staff maintained tight control of the species. In addition to sports recreation, they too were creating a space in which humans could feel both a sense of security and a sense of danger simultaneously. The end result were highly manicured settings that appealed to both the wealthy and affluent and, in equal measure, to the middle and lower economic classes. The fear and allure of alligators and recreation, then, were universal regardless of socioeconomic status.

Before the relationship between alligators could begin, construction companies and real estate investors needed to rearrange large tracts of land from swampland to urban recreation settings. Though the completed courses were principally artificial, the rhetoric—and the fear upon which that rhetoric revolved—was very real. In 1978, Professional Golf Association Tour Commissioner Deane Beman reached deep into the organization’s coffers and paid one dollar for 415 acres near Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. The construction of Highway A1A disrupted natural drainage and created a brackish bog of weeds, snakes, and alligators. The result of Beman’s purchase was the Tournament Players Club of Sawgrass, now one of the most popular and lucrative venues in professional golf. Vernon Kelly, the chief project engineer tasked with
construction oversight, collaborated with course architect Pete Dye to hire David Postlethwait as construction crew foreman. “Postlethwait had more than 100 men working 80 hours a week in deplorable conditions. They wore snake boots and carried machetes, noted USA Today columnist Jerry Potter, “more to kill the rattlers and the cottonmouths than to cut the vegetation.” Startled by a snake, Kelly himself fell into a “gator pit, but luckily, “the gator was gone. It was a terrible stinking place.”

A year behind schedule and wildly over budget, TPC Sawgrass emerged from snake and alligator habitat to a highly-manicured leisure destination in northeastern Florida.

The leaders and crew did more than transform a marginal wetland into a world-class golf resort—they transformed what Florida meant. The “new” Florida was one of moderating human fears within hybrid environments. Throughout the twenty-first century, course officials remove alligators large enough to “pose a threat to the staff and golfing public,” which suggests smaller alligators are left to swim in Sawgrass waters and bask on its gentle slopes.

Indeed, a number of golf courses throughout the United States allow placid alligators—regardless of size—to roam with relative freedom across the links. Course superintendents permitted a select number of alligators to live on golf courses because it reinforced the comparatively popular idea that golf was a nature-friendly activity and created a façade of “wildness” in an otherwise highly managed cultural institution. In an abstract sense, the “wild” was an imagined place where suburban humans could feel a sense of excitement and sense of fear. On golf courses the fear was actual, though the venue was artificial. Alligators, however, laid claim to golf course real estate and

---

271 Jerry Potter, “‘Awful’ project finally became great golf course,” USA TODAY, n.d. Middle Search Plus, EBSCOhost (accessed October 15, 2016)
inspired a sense of fear long before the creation of TPC Sawgrass. In June 1921, Clearwater, Florida Chief of Police Joseph Russell warned the public that any individual who attempted to kill the resident alligators at the Clearwater Golf Course would face incarceration. Not only was Russell Chief of Police, but also served as “boss” of the course. The Chief was more concerned with his “pets” than with his course, “If golfers cannot get along with the ‘gators,” exclaimed Russell, “the golfers will have to play their cow pasture pool elsewhere, that’s all there is to it.” When Charles Livingston Bull, a Northeastern wildlife artist, stumbled upon one of the course’s alligators, he asked Chief Russell if the purpose of permitting alligators on the course was to provide a sense of thrill, Russell responded, “Partly.” Russell also indicated his intention to train the alligators as caddies for the upcoming Spring rush.273

Russell utilized the sense of excitement and fear alligators incite to create an element of adventure on his golf course. The act of playing golf on Russell’s course, then, was not simply a leisurely game, but instead a manufactured interaction between two species—each of whom was curious and fearful of the other. Chief Russell’s golf course experiment, with alligators was long before the newly established ground rules surrounding alligators, humans, and recreation. It does demonstrate, however, that Floridians had been using alligators—and manipulating the species’ reputation—to meet their own ends. In the nineteenth century, humans transformed the physical animal into financial gain through fashion accessories and alligator by-products. In the early twentieth century, however, farms, zoos, and golf courses used the fear inspired by the physical animal to another financial end. Both the physical animal and the fear of alligators, to be sure, remained static. The way in which humans manipulated that fear, however, varied according to circumstance.

273 “Don’t Shoot Alligators Is Golf Warning,” The Bismarck Tribune, June 1, 1921.
More than fifty years later, fear and alligators remained a consistent theme on Florida golf courses. During a match play competition between club regulars Sandy Johnson and Dot Conover, an errant drive from Johnson landed near the 18th-hole water hazard. Riding with a companion, Johnson finally found the ball resting next to a sun-bathing alligator. “We hadn’t seen him at first but when he saw us approaching,” she noted, “he scrambled back into the water real fast.” During the alligator’s scurry to safety, Johnson’s ball fell into the water, leaving her on the bank to consider the ramifications. Although the alligator was gone, Johnson remained noticeably frightened. “When he moved he startled me and I turned around just shaking, and when I put my foot down, my first thought was that I’d stepped on another alligator,” Johnson exclaimed. “That was the worst part” she continued, “the thought that I’d stepped on another one.” As a fifteen-year club veteran, Johnson knew that alligators lived on the course, but insisted that she was still “shaken” and hoped that this alligator encounter would be her last.274

As a club veteran, Johnson must have seen alligators luxuriating and lazily basking on the course. Her reaction to stumbling upon an alligator—an alligator that demonstrated no signs of aggression—demonstrated the power of fear. Despite her direct, observable evidence that resident alligators posed little to no threat to golfers, Johnson exhibited the primordial—and culturally massaged—sense of terror.

Johnson’s fear, however, was indicative not of any serious threat to her life or health, but rather evidence of the strain of fear humans had created about alligators. The alligator, after all, did not display any aggressive or territorial signals and its inclination to flee humans was typical alligator behavior. Vince Smith, author of the piece, composed his article against a backdrop of fear by highlighting Johnson’s horror. Smith too was representative of an ethos of fear. Rather

274 Vince Smith, “A scary ’gator experience,” Fort Myers News-Press, April 17, 1977, 10C.
than “A scary ‘gator experience,” Smith could have titled his article “Rules conundrum during heated match,” as Johnson’s ball became unplayable after the alligator forced it into the water.

Smith also accented his article with conceptions of gender, alligators, and the sport of golf itself. A fear of alligators, Smith implied, was a contest between males and females. “Stout-hearted men of my acquaintance have turned pale and quivered at the sight of an alligator yawning on some sunny bank alongside a Southwest Florida water hazard,” Smith wrote, though he did not ask why these men were so fearful of an alligator that was merely yawning on a sunny embankment. In his many years of covering golf for the *News-Press*, moreover, encounters between alligators and women had “rarely…reached these ears.” For Smith, it appeared, Sandy Johnson had achieved a remarkable feat that day, as she had “rearranged the male-dominated pattern of confrontations with gators…”

Smith’s language suggested a relationship between alligators and masculinity. Men had not only claimed the sport of golf as their own, but also held a self-prescribed monopoly on interactions with alligators. Men and women were both horrified by alligators, he suggested, but men were the vanguard against the aggressive, scaly reptiles. The “confrontations” to which Smith eluded did not appear to be confrontations at all, but instead a series of interactions in which alligators lazed on a warm bank or rushed back to the water at the first sight of humans.

Serious confrontations between humans and alligators on golf courses have occurred, however. In October 1977, the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission answered a request from Port St. Lucie, Florida officials to remove several alligators from Sinners Golf Course. The request from city officials “came after an elderly homeowner was dragged into a

\[275\] Ibid.
pond and seriously injured by an alligator.”276 The author of the article provided scant details regarding the encounter, but indicated that state officials issued marked warnings of sightings and reminded the public that feeding alligators violated Florida—and in 1977—federal law.277

David Slavens, a southwest Florida chiropractor, also suffered alligator inflicted injuries while playing golf. The six-foot alligator bit Slavens’ foot as he walked into tall grass near a water hazard. One beer, two puncture wounds, and six stiches later, Slavens insisted he would “forget about his golf balls when they land in the water.” The alligator suffered a much worse fate, as state officials destroyed the reptile for sending Slavens first to the clubhouse bar and then to the hospital for minor injuries. For good measure, authorities also killed another alligator found swimming in the lake.278

The David Slavens incident, in addition to a separate encounter in Lee County, Florida prompted at least one journalist to question the upcoming alligator hunt. By 1988, the issue of the article, alligators were no longer on the endangered species list. Several states and counties in Florida and beyond welcomed the new classification with guns. The editorial page in the August 2, 1988 edition of Florida Today cautioned humans to “Watch out for alligators,” and in the process of the warning, questioned the safety of hunters during alligator hunts. After an experienced trapper was injured by an alligator, the editors “hope[d] the brief training is sufficient to prevent an inexperienced hunter from becoming mangled or possibly killed by one of these dangerous predators.”279 On the heels of the national conservation movement, and in a state with perhaps the largest alligator populations, humans still feared and reviled alligators

277 “Gator Crackdown.”
278 Phil Fernandez, “Golfer fights off gator at Sanibel Island course,” Florida Today, July 31, 1988, 10B.
279 “Watch out for alligators,” Florida Today, August 2, 1988, 8A.
enough that they insisted—although unwitting participants—alligators were the more dangerous component of a state-wide, government endorsed initiative to kill them. In Florida, then, familiarity with alligators did not necessarily equate to understanding and acceptance. The fear of alligators remained pervasive enough in the late twentieth century that local inhabitants and even those casually familiar with alligators reacted with terror. Slavens actions and the language he used to describe the incident were not simply informed by the actual event, but also influenced by what he thought he knew about alligators. The primordial fear of alligators, expressed nearly four centuries earlier, and manipulated and refashioned over time, remained at the forefront of human psyche well into the late decades of the twentieth century.

Complete with a host of mammals, aviary species, and an occasional alligator, golf courses in the Deep South have served as de facto nature preserves. Because alligators were encountered in what humans perceived as a “safe” place, the level of fear is mitigated. Monitored and removed at the appearance of a threat, however, suggested that despite frequent encounters, humans still retained fear of alligators in modern society. That fear, similar to mid-century conservation rhetoric pivoted to a new human activity toward alligators. Golf courses, though certainly more artificial than most middle spaces, served a similar purpose as recreational and thrilling opportunities to engage with fear and pleasure. Alligators were the vehicle not only for that particular human fascination, but also an environmental and visual constant that appealed to several social and economic classes.

Once humans had—through a series of public and private discourses—established boundaries and mechanisms for protection, humans began the late twentieth and twenty-first century practice of hunting alligators for little more than recreation. In something akin to safari hunts on the Serengeti, humans began killing alligators again not for substantial profit, but
instead in an effort to prove they had conquered the nearly universal human fear of alligators. Trophy hunters sought only the largest, and conceivably most dangerous alligators. The kill was the physical act of confronting fear, followed quickly by the spectacle of publicly displaying the behemoth. State wildlife officials and the media joined the exercise, the former by setting bag limits and size restrictions, the latter by publishing and inherently promoting the practice. The narrative of alligators changed for a final time in the era. Humans still used the image of the alligator as an attraction, but this time as a game animal and sustainable resource. The journey from protected to hunting curiosity, however, unfolded over the course of a few decades as a competition between wildlife officials, hunters, and the public.

In May 2015, John and Mandy Stokes, together with their extended family, stood for a photograph behind the “Stokes Alligator.” At fifteen feet, nine inches, and 1,011 pounds, the Stokes Alligator was the largest alligator ever caught—and killed, of course. A taxidermist enshrined the entire body, and the family unveiled the alligator at the Mann Wildlife Learning Center in Montgomery, Alabama—nine months after its initial capture.280 In addition to the Stokes Alligator in Alabama, Mississippi also set a new alligator record in 2014. Robert Mahaffey, of Brandon, Mississippi caught a 756-pound record alligator in the southwest zone of the Mississippi River. The state-record for the heaviest alligator in Mississippi, moreover, “was broken three times [in 2014], and all of them came from the Mississippi River or nearby in a tributary.”281

Elizabeth Ratcliff, an alligator hunter from Canton, Mississippi, insisted trophy alligators were not her priority. “It’s not about records,” she commented, “We just want an alligator, we want to fight it, we want to hunt.”282 Ratcliff, whether she was willing to admit it or not, did seek out the largest alligators, and told Broom, “We decided to go a channel where somebody had been seeing a pretty big one that was about thirteen feet.” Upon seeing a host of boats already hunting in that channel, Ratcliff, admitted, “We headed to another channel where they’d heard of another big one.”283 The proposition of simply finding an adult alligator did not seem to satisfy the hunters’ spirits. Humans targeted only the largest alligators in modern society. In previous centuries, nearly any alligator would suffice. In the nineteenth century, hunters and trappers were busy trying to create safer spaces and organizing what they saw as a chaotic and unpredictable natural world. The urge to hunt only the largest alligators demonstrated the resounding success of the conservation movement, and now that humans had created a comparatively safe modern society, hunters could pick and choose the size of their prey. Fear remained, however, as humans had convinced themselves throughout the twentieth century that only the largest alligators were dangerous. Consequently, trophy hunting had a two-pronged effect. Hunters could remove the most dangerous portion of the alligator population while simultaneously managing their individual fears and the fears of collective society as well. Alligators being so numerous that hunters could carefully select and stalk their prize. By the turn of the twenty-first century, fear of alligators remained in the cultural conscience, but its status as a fearsome species placed it alongside wolves, bears, and mountain lions on calendars and coffee mugs.

283 Ratcliff in Broom, August 31, 2014.
Images of large, dead alligators in local and regional newspapers appeared to become more popular during the final decade of the twentieth century. Those images, moreover, were remarkably suggestive and powerful. A flurry of images surfaced with alligators suspended by lifting straps on a John Deere tractor or a Ford F-350. Standing proudly next to the corpse, mirrored by the Stokes family alligator, were a few adults and—in several instances—adolescents or young teenagers.

Figure 6.2 Family Poses with Record Alligator

Few images convey power and domination as a 1,000-pound alligator surrounded by two adults and a group of fourth grade children. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the cultural emphasis on alligators was immortalizing the animal—the slaying of the great beast.

---

284 Associated Press, “Alabama hunters haul in 1,000-pound gator,” The Dispatch Columbus, MS, August 20, 2014.
Although still defined as endangered by the federal government, alligators in Louisiana enjoyed only marginal protection. In this era, humans mitigated and manipulated their fear of alligators by exerting almost complete dominance over the animal. Humans were busy defining what constituted a trophy or shifting from control to management. If killed by an unlicensed hunter, journalists and naturalists rushed to express sorrow and sympathy for the deceased creature. If taken on private property, complete with appropriate fees and size limitations, it was a seemingly necessary step to avoid nuisance alligators. Similar to alligator farms and zoo-like attractions, the most appropriate avenue both to suppress human fear while simultaneously celebrate a creature was to exert power, most especially at the end of a gun barrel.

Louisiana, however, legalized alligator hunting in 1972—a mere five years after the Endangered Species Act. The widely held idea that once protected, all hunting of that species is prohibited regardless of geographical location, demonstrated by the alligator’s status in Louisiana, was a fallacy. Alligator protection was never static. The Lacey Act, while it did not prohibit harvesting alligators, regulated interstate commerce. Alligators could be killed, but hunters and entrepreneurs could not send alligator hides or by-products to any state where alligator harvesting is unlawful. The Endangered Species Act, moreover, protected alligator hides from being shipped overseas. The process of protecting a species, then, was decidedly local and depended on how each state defined “endangered” and “surplus” animals. Allen Ensminger, chief of the Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission, explained the value of allowing a specialized, experimental hunting season, noting, “It’s easy to just shut off everything and make it illegal to even have alligator skins in your possession. But we believe we can treat the alligator as a valuable recoverable resource,” he argued, “which can make it profitable for land owners to
leave their marshland holdings as they are instead of draining them for cattle grazing.”

Semantics were important in the commission’s new approach, noting, “the commission’s action merely shifts the emphasis from control to management.”

Landowners were the gatekeepers of alligator hunting in Louisiana and, rather than the hunters, the primary beneficiaries. “Alligator season is basically a landowner’s season,” remarked Winton Vidrine, Captain of the District VI game enforcement. In an already advantageous financial position by owning the land in the first place, Bobby Ardoin reported, “Landowners receive anywhere from 15 to 30 per cent of the profit of alligators hides,” while the state of Louisiana only collected taxes and collected license fees of twenty-five dollars for in-state hunters. “Mostly,” continued Ardoin, “the profit from hunting gators will go to individuals who are already wealthy. It’s definitely not a poor man’s sport.” Once the limit on alligator kills was met by a particular group on private land, “Almost all the hides taken in Louisiana are sent to Greenville, S.C., where they are tanned and turned into leather goods for the Justin Boot Company.”

The proposed alligator season in Louisiana was not without opposition. The National Audubon Society, most notably, voiced its concern through a wire from the Society’s President, Elvis Stahr. President Stahr’s primary concerns was centered upon numbers. Stahr said he, “did not believe alligators are sufficiently plentiful to warrant reopening the season,” and adding that the Audubon Society “had their own sources of information” that would dispute Louisiana’s

---

alligator population estimates, which set the number of alligators at approximately 250,000. Proponents of alligator protection in Louisiana, however, were thrust into a paradox. Landowners could potentially enjoy significant profits if they drained their swamplands for commercial development or livestock grazing. By offering a sizable portion of the proceeds from alligator hunting, landowners would be less inclined to further deplete or destroy the alligators’ natural habitat.

Opponents also warned of a rise in poaching if legislators lifted the ban on hunting. C. Edward Carlson, regional director of the U.S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife, attempted to ease those concerns. Carlson proposed, “the development of a unique marking system identifying the alligator hides so that it would be possible to follow the animal right through from time it was taken and processed to a manufactured product.”

Early efforts to save were largely centered upon the animal itself. While the alligators’ habitat was an important component of its existence, the swampland did not become a major feature of conservation rhetoric and doctrine in the final third of the twentieth century. Such discussion highlighted the rhetorical battles fought over alligators. The alligators were—quite simply—being alligators. Their presence, reputation, and cultural legacy of fear, however, sent humans scrambling and arguing about how best to manage their fear, create safe spaces, and allow humans the ability to experience the thrill of hunting a large predator.

Though the federal government removed alligators from the endangered species list in 1987, Gulf Coast states began easing restrictions and, in some cases, allowed truncated hunting seasons within particular counties or parishes prior to the delisting. The state of Florida banned

---

alligator hunting in 1961, but in a state with so many alligators and sharply divided public opinion, the Sunshine State’s residents, wildlife officials, and legislators wrangled with alligator hunting seasons well into the middle of the 1970s. Calls for hunting and killing alligators increased during the opening years of the 1970s. “Urbanization of the state’s wetlands has increased contact between people and the alligators,” reported Charles Ward, “and the state’s game commission reports that the death of a girl in Sarasota—officially blamed on a 10-foot alligator—has touched off a flurry of hate mail against the reptiles.”291 Fear of alligators, throughout much of the continental United States, was latent fear. That underlying fear, however, emerges rapidly in the wake of a human casualty. Public calls to either limit or extend alligator hunting seasons varied according to how often humans felt alligators were responsible for tragedy. For wildlife officials and legislators in Florida and Louisiana, managing the fear of alligators and, equally important, creating clear definitions between “good and “bad” alligators was an important component of twentieth century conservation.

A substantial increase in alligator population, in concert with secondary and tertiary justifications, provided the motivation for the leading environmental legislative and enforcement body in Florida, which began entertaining the notion of a hunting season in 1974. Opponents viewed the suggestion as a legislative catalyst for poachers, which Florida journalists and conservationists had condemned barely a decade earlier. Suddenly, it appeared, the problem with reptile hides was not only a Florida problem but also a global one. Alligator hides would not negatively affect an already booming market for hides or cause significant environmental damage. Chairman of the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission, Dr. Earle Frye, noted

“I don’t want to aggravate the problem, but I don’t believe you solve a world-wide problem by keeping the Florida alligators off the market.”  

Equally important was the encroachment of humans on alligator habitats. Conflicts between humans and alligators, legislators argued, would “sour public opinion,” thus arguing that the best way to save alligators was to make them scarce enough to remain on the outer edges in the kaleidoscope of Florida wildlife. The largest alligators, those primordial beings that attracted so much attention and so many dollars to Florida would, ironically, suffer the brunt of the season, as only alligators measuring more than eight feet were “allowed for trophy hunters.” The larger the alligator, then, the more fearsome and more deserving of death. 

By 1975, Florida officials determined the state’s alligator population healthy enough to implement a hunting season. According to journalist Oz Keagy, FGFWFC Director of Law Enforcement, Brantly Goodson “says that Florida’s alligator problems are as bad as Louisiana’s and the state thought it would have received permission for a limited gator hunt before now.” State estimates placed the alligator population in Florida at nearly half a million animals by the middle of the 1970s, a number that would spur federal officials to move the alligator from endangered to threatened in the Sunshine State. Florida’s proposed return to alligator hunting mirrored Louisiana’s. Rather than a state-wide harvest, either licensed individuals or wildlife officials would harvest large alligators discovered near residential and commercial developments, thereby reducing the number of human-alligator conflicts and limiting the market for poached skins and by-products. The logistical and economic operations of the enterprise—

---

294 Oz Keagy, “Florida's 500,000 Gators Fair Game For Hunters,” Fort Lauderdale News, October 8, 1975.
rather than the well-being of alligators themselves—would be the primary point of debate and discussion.

The standards set by these early hunting initiatives contributed to the rise of trophy hunting in the final decades of the twentieth century and beyond. “Colonel Goodson said the commission has been swamped with complaints from people who want alligators removed from their property;” Keagy reported, “not only are the gators getting more plentiful, but they’re getting bigger.”295 Director Goodson added, “It used to be that eight to ten feet was a really big alligator. Now alligators of this size are plentiful.”296 This realization and the hunting harvest parameters set forth in the mid-1970s were the historical antecedents of the late century images and news articles of encased alligators. In the contemporary South, as in Florida and Louisiana in the twentieth century, the largest and most easily accessed alligators faced execution.

Legislators and wildlife officials understood that the decision to allow limited alligator hunting in Florida would ignite fierce debate. To gauge public opinion, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (FGFWFC) randomly distributed, with the help of the Yellow Pages, ten thousand questionnaires to Florida residents in November 1976. The Commission enlisted the University of Florida to “analyze the answers before going into a new alligator control program that will include, for the first time in fifteen years, the legalization of some alligator hunting.”297 Fred Stanberry, chief of the wildlife management division of the FGFWFC, recognized the curious relationship between humans and alligators, noting, “I don’t know any other wildlife management problem like the alligator. He’s a wild creature,” Stanberry

295 Oz Keagy, “Florida’s 500,000 Gators,” Fort Lauderdale News, October 8, 1975.
296 Brantley Goodson in Oz Keagy, “Florida’s 500,000 Gators,” October 8, 1975.
continued, “but he might live in your back yard pond. He’s a valuable natural resource, but he can be dangerous.”

Despite a survey designed to gauge public opinion on alligators, the animal itself seemed only tangentially connected. The primary argument was not the ecological or cultural value of the species, but instead who would be allowed to kill them. The debate over hiring independent agents or only allowing the commission’s officers to kill alligators took the center and economical stage. “We want to see which method costs us the least,” Stanberry admitted, “and which one the public feels most comfortable with.” In short, money mattered and people mattered. Perhaps the most telling assessment from Stanberry emerged when confronted with the notion of not killing alligators. “If people want us to keep relocating them, then we’ll probably have to launch an intensive public relations campaign to tell them what our problems are.”

Florida’s proposal to allow alligator hunting endured similar opposition to that voiced in Louisiana more than a decade earlier. The Florida Audubon Society warned, “the plan would cause a renewal of poaching,” and continued, “due to fear, people are taking the law into their own hands.” The Audubon Society was not alone in their concern. State representative Ron Richmond sponsored the House bills and echoed the Audubon Society. “People are fearful of them,” he said, “and they’re taking the law into their own hands, which isn’t good.” To be sure, the Society was fully opposed to killing alligators. Indeed, as Society President Charles Lee argued, “But we would support something like regional action teams to either remove or kill and

---

299 Stanberry in Wilson, November 14, 1976.
300 Stanberry in Wilson, November 14, 1976.
301 “Alligator Hunting Debated,” The Palm Beach Post, April 14, 1976.
302 “Alligator Hunting Debated,” The Palm Beach Post, April 14, 1976.
destroy” nuisance alligators. The Society only opposed a formal, statewide hunt. A direct result of increased poaching and marginally regulated hunting seasons, the international trade in animal skins emerged at the forefront of opposition. Though a distinctly southern animal, the alligator was, at least for two centuries, connected to the global economy, prompting Lee to double-down on a large-scale hunt. “We’re concerned about the rest of the world,” Lee stated, and added that an established market for alligator skins would incite massive hunts across the globe.

The objectives, then, were threefold. The first task was to limit human-alligator conflicts by removing or killing large, culturally defined “nuisance” alligators and, equally important, implement a system of control to eliminate a boom in poaching and black-market hides. Finally, wildlife officials would attempt to educate the public on the realities of living with alligators in modern society to ameliorate the culturally entrenched fear of the animal. In doing so, humans effectively control not only what the alligator meant, but also control where the creatures could exist. The distinction of “nuisance” alligators was entirely dependent upon where humans encountered the animal. Viewed from the relative safety of an airboat, alligators remained a “wild” amusement; resting under a patio or luxuriating in a swimming pool, however, were “nuisance” alligators. The landschaft ideology—situating oneself away from perceived danger—was not simply a physical configuration, but a psychological and linguistic one as well.

By the winter of 1977, Florida officials approved an experimental alligator hunting program in six northern counties as soon as the weather warms up and the gators become more active. Head of the FGFWFC Wildlife Research Laboratory, Tom Hines, convinced the federal

government to downgrade the alligators’ status in Florida from endangered to threatened, claiming, “we provided them with enough data to prove that the alligator is no longer endangered. In fact,” Hines continued, “it has gone from a declining species to one that is increasing.”

The experimental season was not, however a traditional hunting season. While initial discussions included the size of alligators, the commission would only allow killing an animal after they received a complaint. Those responsible for killing alligators, moreover, were private hunters to whom the FGFWFC issued licenses based upon previous experience and knowledge of alligator hunting practices. Hines and his fellow wildlife officials hoped these parameters would lessen the $250,000 burden Florida devoted to capturing, relocating, and managing the state’s nuisance alligators.

One year later, the pilot hunting program reserved for a handful of counties expanded to include all of Florida. The FGFWFC selected fifty private individuals to track and kill nuisance alligators that measured more than four feet long. Each agent is limited to collecting one hundred alligator hides per year and received seventy percent of the profits. Bobby Futch, one of the few designated by the state, did not anticipate a significant financial windfall. “I’m not in it for the money,” Futch claimed, “I’m basically a law-abiding citizen who likes to hunt alligators. I know the counties around here and I know how to get gators. It’s something I can do now without breaking the law.”

Futch’s hobby would have earned him a jail sentence only a few years earlier, but Florida statues deemed his hunting appropriate once again.

Although Florida and Louisiana had relaxed alligator harvest laws, Mississippi alligators remained a protected species in the 1970s. Despite the protections, however, Mississippians

---

risked a jail sentence and a ten thousand dollar fine and continued to kill alligators. The response from the press demonstrated a remarkable change in perceptions of alligators. Bob Gwizdz, writing for the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, noted, “Nonetheless, some thoughtless individuals persist in harassing the state’s alligators.” Gwizdz also offered an unfavorable opinion on the killing of a large alligator in the Ross Barnett Reservoir. “In June, a twelve-footer nicknamed ‘Big John’ was senselessly killed by a high-powered rifle.” 308 George McKay, an investigative officer in Mississippi’s Department of Wildlife Conservation joined Gwizdz, stating he was “saddened by the waste.” 309 The killing of an alligator in Mississippi in the late 1970s represented, at least to a host of conservationists and journalists as a near travesty—quite a pivot from the unregulated commodification of the species only a few decades earlier. McKay also did not foresee alligators being removed from the endangered species list soon, “Not in our generation,” he noted, “let’s hope not.” 310 McKay must have been disappointed only eight years later as the federal government delisted the alligator.

By the early 1980s, journalists in Mississippi continued to reposition the alligator within the public consciousness. Leslie Myers opened her multipage alligator article by noting, “Alligator—those reserved, almost snobbish members of the crocodilian family—have been getting by for nearly 180 million years by minding their own business.” 311 Aside from being perhaps the only person to ever refer to alligators as “snobbish,” Myers repeatedly alluded to the alligator’s peaceful demeanor and, in addition, interviewed wildlife agents from Mississippi who, rather than impugn alligators for creating conflict, placed humans under the microscope. Sidney

309 George McKay in Bob Gwizdz, “It’s illegal in Mississippi,” *October 21, 1979*.
Woodson, special agent with the Mississippi Fish and Wildlife Service (MFWS), exclaimed, “The problem is not the gators. It’s these stupid people who don’t have the sense to leave them alone. If man would leave them alone,” he reiterated, “there wouldn’t be any problem.”312 The fearful were those who continued to harass and kill alligators. Myers concluded her piece by reminder readers to refrain from feeding alligators and, in addition, provided anecdotes of individuals prosecuted for harassing or killing alligators in Mississippi. For the time being, alligators in Mississippi still enjoyed statewide protection and a largely sympathetic public.

Only six months later, in January 1984, state conservation officials in Mississippi began considering alligator hunting. Steve Hallem wrote that wildlife investigators “are continuing into the shootings of alligators above the reservoir, but also reported that, “limited harvesting of alligators may soon be allowed in Mississippi as the reptile’s population rebounds far beyond expectations. . .”313 Later that same year, the Jackson Clarion Ledger reprinted an Associated Press article regarding the status of alligators in Mississippi. “Mississippi’s population of alligators”, reported Dan Even, “may be so plentiful that state hunters might get a shot at the pesky reptiles—in a couple of years.”314 The United States Fish and Wildlife Service intended to conduct a survey of alligator populations in southern states, the findings to which Mississippi wildlife leaders would respond with a hunting season. Scarcity of a species, then, had cultural capital. The fewer number of animals correlated to more people clamoring for their survival. Odd bedfellows within the conservation movement, hunters often advocated for saving particular species. Hunters, after all, needed animals both to fear and to kill.

The USFWS completed their survey in 1986, the results prompting Wendell Neale, a federal biologist stationed in Jackson, to formally declare, “The alligator has recovered. In some cases,” Neal extended, “it was never endangered, but protection has been a big factor in its recovery where it has recovered.” Already removed from the endangered species list in Louisiana, Florida, and Texas, alligators faced delisting throughout the rest of their traditional habitat. The initial forays into an alligator hunting season in Mississippi lost momentum due to spotty population counts. The results of the new federal survey, however, suggested the Magnolia State would soon reconsider adding alligators to its list of game species.

Though still protected in Mississippi, fear of alligators remained present in Mississippi news outlets, as Dave Steffen noted. “We get numerous calls about alligators and alligator problems. By and large, most of the calls are from people who are concerned about the safety of their animals, pets, and children.” The drawing that accompanied the story depicted a persistent fear of alligators, as the artist depicted an alligator causally severing the ankle of a hunter.

---

Between Myers’ story and the Dan Even’s article, the alligator again oscillated between fear and pity. Some of the same individuals who chided humans for creating problems, only a few years later, joined the call for alligator hunting in the name of public safety. Mississippi’s story of alligator hunting did not closely follow those of Louisiana and Florida, as the state did not adopt alligator hunting until 2005 in portions of Rankin, Madison, and Scott counties—most notably counties connected to the Ross Barnett Reservoir.

The degree to which alligators were endangered remained unclear. Even so, common themes emerged in the rhetoric. What was clear was that people were concerned about alligators and manipulated its image from fearsome predator to father of the wetlands—though a father figure that inspired fear. Affluent locals and tourists needed the ‘wild’—and the animals contained within that space—to be ‘wild.’ They also need trophy hunters to demonstrate that

---

even the largest alligators—or the largest representations of human fear—could still be killed and managed by mere weekender hunters. Hunters needed to middling class to demonstrate not only that important organizational work was being done, but also for their own psychological benefit. They were the ones on the front line confronting their fear, and as in the nineteenth century, were signaling to others that safe spaces—with a touch of wildness—still existed. In the late twentieth century, moreover, those space because increasingly comfortable and convenient. Hunting, as a broad cultural practice, was democratized in the late twentieth century. Long a male-middle class right-of-passage, females and African Americans hunted alligators in the Gulf South. The alligator was an integral part of their cultural milieu of fear and would remain so both in physical presence, iconography, and the pastime of hunting folkways.

Alligator hunting unfolded across various local, state, and regional lines. The locations and people ranged from concerned, unique, thoughtful, to outright scandalous. Those sentiments were a common theme amongst other large North American animals. The fight to save bison, wolves, bears, and mountain lions—to be successful—required a repositioning of the species in the public and cultural consciousness. By the last third of the twentieth century, alligators were simply the latest species in flux within a rhetorical and iconographic redefinition. Those who argued for hunting alligators cited the potential dangers of alligator-human conflict while those opposed to killing celebrated the species ecologically beneficial role and its place in the pantheon of Florida wildlife. Striking a balance between these two forces was left to state wildlife agencies, the new brokers between the public and wildlife. The result—not solidified until the twenty-first century—was an increase in trophy hunting and, in addition, an increase in alligator coffee mugs. Even in the end, fear triumphed. Killing large alligators in the field, posing for newspaper articles, and ultimately purchasing alligator-themed consumer goods remained
humans’ primary method of confronting their fear of alligators. Conservation was not, however, a complete failure. After all, the American Alligator rebounded exceptionally well in the late twentieth century. One aspect of conservation—saving the alligator for its own sake—failed. Conserving the alligator so humans could continue express their fears through dominance, killing, and control ultimately prevailed. As in early America, twentieth century Americans were still busy attempting to impose order upon natural settings and dominating the largest predators in that space as an effort to address the ancient fear impulses in their psyche.
CHAPTER VII

EPILOGUE: COME GATORS AND HIGH WATER

On Friday August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey slammed into the southwestern Gulf Coast near Port Aransas, Texas. The result was over 100 billion dollars in damage from storm surge, wind and, most especially, flooding. The incident revealed, however, that the landschaft mentality remains firmly grounded in modern society. With the rising waters in and around the Houston suburbs came an array of wildlife typically estranged from city and town limits. Chief among those, was a permanent and iconic fixture of the Gulf Coast—alligators. A resident of Missouri City, Texas, filmed (and photographed) two alligators patrolling, or lazily basking depending on the observer’s crocodilian orientation, in her backyard on August 27. Writing for the Washington Post, Karin Brulliard noted the vast numbers of animals that were beginning to appear and ultimately disrupt the otherwise safe and docile suburbs of southeastern Texas and even offered a disclaimer, noting, “But the Houston metropolitan area is home to thousands of American Alligators; more than twenty species of snakes, billions of invasive fire ants; and plenty of deer, raccoons, and other critters—all of which are struggling to escape the rising waters.”319

Brulliard, in conjunction with Texas wildlife officials, reminded readers that alligators were native to the area and that residents should not be concerned. One resident of Meyerland, who found a small alligator near her home, was less informed than perhaps most, stating, “The

alligator was definitely hurricane-related. I run on the bayou almost every day…we have a lot of wildlife around the bayou, especially considering how close we are to downtown, but I had no idea we had alligators!” After repeated efforts by wildlife officials in Texas and surrounding Gulf States, humans avoided alligator-related conflict. When a natural event forces—or allows—alligators to frequent backyards, sidewalks, and flooded garages, the cultural institutions at which humans devoted much of their time, became compromised. In a strange twist of definition, these alligators were neither good nor bad alligators. They were, as suggested in article, victims of Hurricane Harvey. Had the alligators appeared on an ordinary sunny day in July, humans’ interpretation of them, and perhaps their fate, would have been quite different. The repeated efforts of wildlife officials to inform the public that these alligators were not “menacing” suggested that people still needed to be reassured they were not in immediate danger. Consequently, and despite many efforts to the contrary, the human fear of alligators persisted in the twenty-first century. That fear was striking enough that a major international newspaper and various reptile experts thought it necessary to issue public statements regarding the animals’ presence.

The relationship between humans and alligators has largely been one of control. Alligators—in part because they look fearsome and pose a threat to human life—were representations of a natural world that was dangerous and required order. But there was more than that. Alligators were a lens through which humans attempted to understand not simply animals around them, but also how humans grappled with their own biological shortcomings. As humans moved confidently through the centuries exerting what they believed to be control over a

---

powerful natural force, Hurricane Harvey was only the most recent reminder that humans’
collective efforts in creating order and safety was—and will continue to be—a work in progress.
REFERENCES


Burbach, Chris, “State to allow gator season in Sept.: Floridians must walk a fine line,” *Florida Today*, June 21, 1988, 8B.


Conner, Mervyn, “A Visit to the Los Angeles Alligator Farm,” *San Francisco Call*, June 1, 1912.


Fernandez, Phil, “Golfer fights off gator at Sanibel Island course,” *Florida Today*, July 31, 1988, 10B.


---------, quoted in Oz Keagy, “Florida’s 500,000 Gators Fair Game For Hunters,” Fort Lauderdale News, October 8, 1975.


Gwizdz, Bob, “It’s illegal in Mississippi, but people still kill them,” Clarion-Ledger, Jackson, Mississippi, October 21, 1979. Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.


Henigman, Louise, “County joins call for gator action,” News-Press, Fort Myers, Florida, June 7, 1988, 1A.


Keagy, Oz, “Florida’s 500,000 Gators Fair Game For Hunters,” *Fort Lauderdale News*, October 8, 1975.


Lee, Charles, quoted in “Alligator Hunting Debated,” The Palm Beach Post, April 14, 1976.


McKay, George, in Bob Gwizdz, “It’s illegal in Mississippi, but people still kill them,” *Clarion-Ledger*, Jackson, Mississippi, October 21, 1979. Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS.


Mitchell, Peter, “Death brings flood of alligator reports,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, June 7, 1988, 5A.


Potter, Jerry, “‘Awful’ project finally became great golf course,” *USA Today*, n.d. Middle Search Plus, EBSCOhost, Last Accessed October 15, 2016.


Ratcliff, Elizabeth, quoted in Brian Broom, “State, world record gators confirmed,” *Clarion-Ledger*, Jackson, Mississippi, August 31, 2014, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.


Unknown, “Don’t Shoot Alligators is Golf Warning,” *The Bismarck Tribune*, June 1, 1921.


Unknown, “Florida Attractions: The Crop of Alligators—How They Carry Their Open Countenances Around—Their Fondness for Dogs and Small Niggers,” *Western Home Journal*, Lawrence, Kansas, May 1, 1873.


Unknown, “Must Have License to Kill Alligators,” *The Donaldsonville Chief*, Donaldsonville, Louisiana, July 31, 1920.


Unknown, “Sam’s Story Of The Alligator,” *Richmond Weekly Palladium*, Richmond, Indiana, August 5, 1837.


Unknown, “She Mastered the ‘Gator: A Texas Woman’s Plucky Battle With a Saurian in the River,” *Great Falls Tribune*, Great Falls, Montana, November 12, 1890.


