

American Alligator



Florida has a state bird and a state flower. Did you know that we also have a state reptile? If you were to guess which one it is, you'd maybe get it right: The alligator! Alligators like to live in wet places: lakes, swamps, canals, and, of course, the Everglades. You only find them in your pool or front yard when they are moving from place to place trying to find fresh water.

We don't know exactly how many alligators were in Florida when William Bartram was here in the 1770's, but

when he was traveling on the St. Johns River, he wrote that "alligators were in such incredible numbers and so close together from shore to shore that it would have been easy to have walked across their heads" ([Van Doren 1928: 118](#)). These alligators were probably fishing, and that is why there were so many in one place.

We see a lot of alligators around today, but not as many as Bartram did. Huge numbers of alligators were killed for their hides, to make purses, boots, and even coats. Because of this hunting, and because the wetlands where they lived were being drained, alligators were disappearing from Florida. This is why they were put on the Endangered Species List in 1967. This meant that people could not hunt them anymore. It also meant that some of their wetland homes were a little bit safer from people moving in.

And it worked: There are now more than one million alligators living in Florida, and they are no longer endangered. They are still under "controlled management" by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. This means that the wetlands where they live are given special care so that they and other Florida wildlife will have healthful environments in which to live and thrive. It is now legal to hunt alligators again, but hunters need to get permits, and they can only kill a certain number each year.

Questions

1. What have you learned about the American alligator?
2. Do you think that the American alligator needs to be "rescued"? Why or why not?
3. How would you represent what you have learned about the American alligator in an art work?