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A Social History of the American Alligator

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REVIEWS

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A Social History of the American Alligator.—Vaughn L. Glasgow. 1991. New York, St. Martin's Press. ISBN 0-312-06287-7. \$29.95.—The American Alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) is one of Florida's most familiar large predators. It is also a tourist icon, a university mascot, the source of a variety of commercial products and the subject of stories, myths and fancy. Vaughn L. Glasgow, director of special projects for the Louisiana State Museum, brings together much of the facts and fancy about alligators in this 259-page book, including numerous illustrations and an extensive bibliography.

Alligators gained a reputation for mythic ferocity, size and age primarily through the accounts of early visitors to Florida and Louisiana. William Bartram's 1794 description of alligator behavior typified these accounts: "Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder . . . the floods of water and blood rushing out of their mouths and clouds of vapour rising from their wide nostrils were truly frightful." When some of these old legends died, new ones took their place, such as the recurring stories of alligators in the New York sewers. Even as late as 1977, a movie screenwriter's prologue included a description of "a gator as big as an elephant that eats little children and attacks men in boats with the power and ferocity of a landlocked Moby Dick." But not all of the myths surrounding alligators have been horrific. Glasgow also reports that as recently as 20 years ago, some people still believed that rubbing alligator oil on their bodies would help their rheumatism. His research into the folklore surrounding the American alligator is useful because he has used these misconceptions to introduce readers to the truth that has emerged from scientific research. As a result, for instance, the reader can conclude that alligators don't grow to be 25 or 50 feet long, their preferred prey is not people and they would have trouble surviving in the sewers of a northern city because it is too cold and there is not enough to eat. In short, Glasgow sets the record straight once and for all.

Even if people were often terrified of alligators in the wild, they were fascinated with them in captivity. During the 19th Century they were included in many private menageries in Europe. Dead alligators, or at least certain parts of them, were also popular. Once people learned how to tan the hides, skins were used for everything from shoes to upholstery. Teeth were used for jewelry and to calm teething infants. Even alligator meat has become a popular restaurant menu item. Glasgow's compilation of alligator trivia gives this book an added dimension that is rewarding for general readers or specialists.

But Glasgow writes that the exploitation of alligators eventually led to a serious population decline, leading to protective legislation as early as 1908. Protection, however, was limited and widely ignored and populations continued to decline. Eventually alligators gained full protection under the Endangered Species Act. Populations are now high enough to sustain limited annual hunts. Today, many alligator products come from alligator farms experimentally begun during the 1920s. Glasgow notes that although the farms have been controversial among some conservation and animal-protection organizations, they have fostered scientific research that has increased our knowledge about these animals. He even reports the "entertaining" possibility that research into the function of the alligator's musk glands could yield an alligator repellent. William Bartram could have certainly put that to good use.

I would recommend this book as a useful addition to any library for either its natural history or its reference collection. The book is reasonably priced and could be useful in the personal library of anyone interested in having detailed information about the American alligator at his fingertips.—**Tom Palmer**, 1805 26th St. NW, Winter Haven, FL 33881.