

# BOOKS

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*A swampwise account urges respectful wisdom about American alligators*

## Know Your Wild Neighbor Well

By Peter N. Spotts

**M**ANY years ago, a friend and I were returning from a movie one balmy Florida evening. As we walked past homes with tidy lawns and low-topped palms, she stopped suddenly and pointed to one of a dozen manicured backyards that bordered on a placid, fair-sized pond. It was the kind of idyllic scene that graces many a real estate pamphlet. In a hushed voice she announced: "An alligator took that family's dog a couple of days ago."

As is often the case, the gators, whose habitat is under pressure from human development, get the rap for doing what comes naturally. Meanwhile, despite events

more tragic than the loss of FiFi, many people fail to learn enough about the creatures to take sensible precautions that reduce the risk of unpleasant encounters with 11-foot long, quarter-ton reptiles.

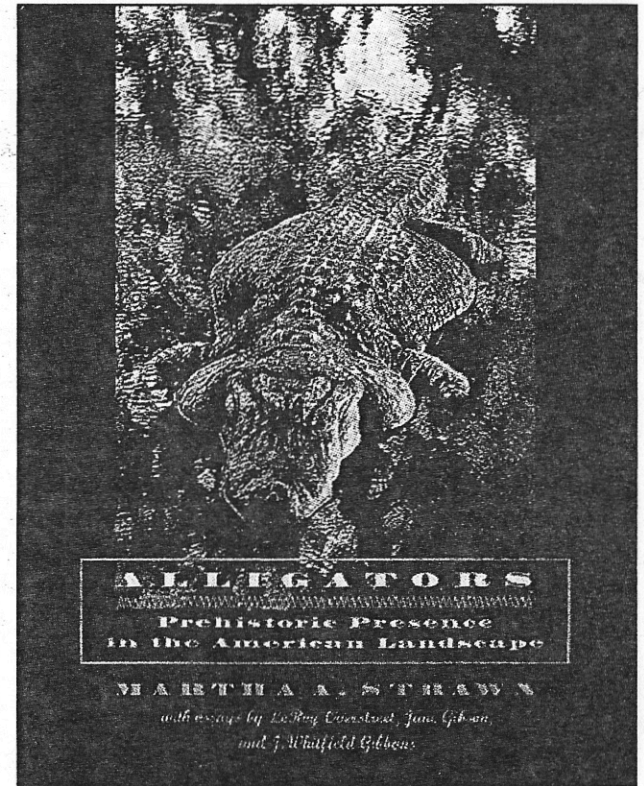
The tension between one of the most ancient inhabitants of the southeastern United States and the region's more recent arrivals – humans – lies at the heart of Martha Strawn's "Alligators: Prehistoric Presence in the American Landscape."

Strawn, a photographer, Florida native, and art professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, writes that the book is, first and foremost, a book of photographs. As advertised, the book is laden with photos – some not for the faint-hearted, particularly those depicting alligator hunts, skinning, and butchering.

But it's more than a photo book: It's a survival manual in coffee-table-book trappings. Strawn's text provides insights into alligator habitats, the reptile's ecological role, and its cultural significance. In addition, she commissioned a trio of essays – by an ecologist, a conservation anthropologist, and a 50-year veteran of alligator hunts, LeRoy Overstreet.

Not surprisingly, Overstreet's swampwise account of living with and hunting alligators is the most engaging and informative. Overstreet's essay carries practical wisdom about alligators, their habits, and the need to carefully manage this "resource" – knowledge and respect – that his more erudite companion essayists worry is disappearing from the Southeast.

At first glance, this book seems destined for the gator-farm gift shop or in "local interest" section of an air-conditioned Southern bookstore. But it deserves a wider reading. We live in an age in which thinking "green" is



valued, but so is a home with a view or access to a quick, preferably gator-free, swim. For their own safety as well as that of their children and pets, people who move to the edge of a wild habitat – whether an alligator's in Florida or a mountain lion's in the foothills of the Rockies – need to spend time with books like this to learn about their new "neighbors."

■ Peter N. Spotts is a science writer for the Monitor.

**ALLIGATORS: PREHISTORIC PRESENCE IN THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE**

By Martha A. Strawn  
The Johns Hopkins University Press  
227 pp., \$39.95