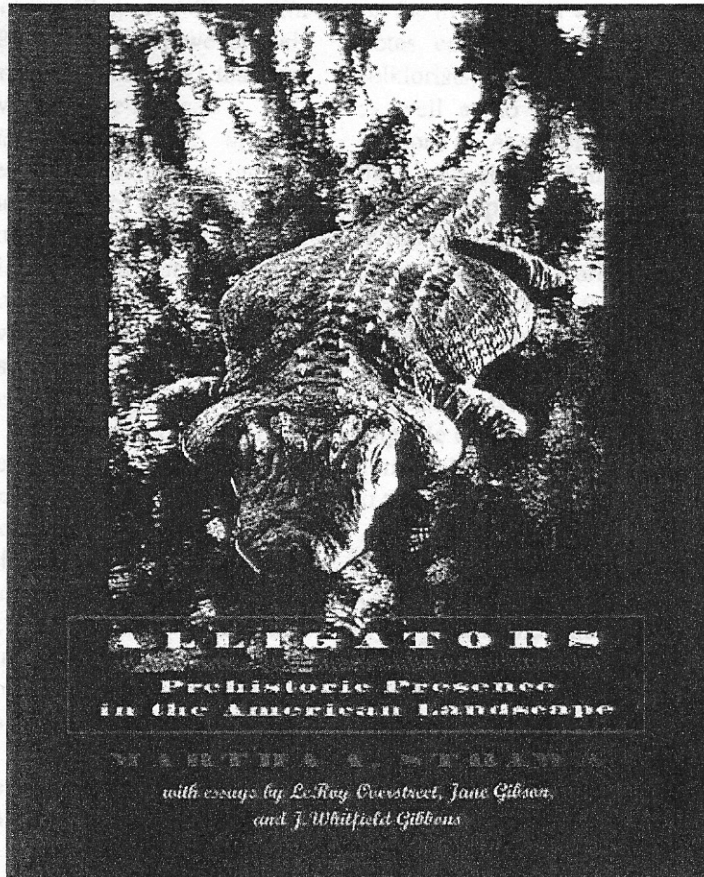


## Book Review

William E. Parker



*Alligators: Prehistoric Presence in the American Landscape*, by Martha A. Strawn, with essays by LeRoy Overstreet, Jane Gibson, and J. Whitfield Gibbons (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, in cooperation with the Center for American Places, 1997). ISBN 0-8018-5289-7. Hardcover, xii + 229 pages, 158 color photographs, oversized trim size, \$39.95.

Martha Strawn's photographic images have always concentrated on a direct encounter with the subjects of her camera work. Revealing an alert visual and cognitive intelligence, her work shows an extraordinary range of empathy with the context from which her images derive—the world itself. Her discovery of perceptive patterns in that visual world make it possible for others to share her subjects while learning about photography's finest potentials for presenting form and content. These qualities, so unique to her art, are beautifully rendered in Strawn's new book, *Alligators: Prehistoric Presence in the American Landscape*, which appears in the award-winning

book series, *Creating the North American Landscape*.

First and foremost, Strawn's book is a remarkably impressive interdisciplinary achievement. Its 158 exquisite color photographs, presented in 32 engaging visual sequences, is enhanced by the inclusion of three essays by authorities in the field of alligators, anthropology, and crocodylian ecology, as well as by accompanying narrative captions and vignettes. She has created a series of photographic images where formal/aesthetic value and documentary/informing content are coequally emphasized. Quite honestly, I know of no other book on this subject that is as provocatively inform-

ing and motivating toward environmental concerns. Certainly, the closest relative is Alistair Graham's, *Eyelids of Morning: The Mingled Destinies of Crocodiles and Men* (New York Graphic Society, 1973), which included the fine photographs by Peter Beard of the Kenya environs and creatures. There is also text information in Strawn's book that links it to Wilfred T. Neill's *The Last of the Ruling Reptiles: Alligators, Crocodiles, and Their Kin* (Columbia University Press, 1971). However, neither of these publications nor other books that feature alligators has Strawn's unique focus.

*Alligators: Prehistoric Presence in the America Landscape* creates a new field of inquiry that combines art and the science of ecology in profound ways. These extraordinarily effective and affective photographs aim to change our consciousness of environments and creatures, an aim that encourages both preservation and protection. What drives this consciousness is Strawn's photographic sequencing. Never focused on easily recognizable, tiresomely repetitive or formulaic stylistic approaches, Strawn reveals her subject matter with a range of views. There are vastly spacious environmental/contextual photographs, many having an intentional realization of the picturesque yet assiduously avoiding the "romantic." There are also haptic views (close-up, close-framed, centralized images which suggest our proximity to the subjects, forcing intimate recognition) and field-oriented views (use of the wide-angle lens and radical cropping of subject matter). Most pronounced in lending the work its intriguing range is Strawn's marvelously realized use of roving narration, which allows the viewer, while conscious of the mediation of the photographer, to remain intimately aware of the presence of the subject. Strawn's ability to create heightened viewer empathy is no less than brilliant.

The three essays in the book are by LeRoy

Overstreet, "Memories of Gator Hunts," Jane Gibson, "Living by the Wetlands," and J. Whitfield Gibbons, "Living with Alligators." Overstreet is a nuisance-alligator hunter, who has worked for the State of Alabama in this capacity since 1990. His impressive documentation of a "life with gators" and the serious/hilarious events (some suspiciously tall-tale delights) associated with gator hunts verge on the mythic. His wonderful text, filled with anecdotes, enhances a document that should appeal to folklorists, historians interested in Southern culture, as well as to experts in environmental matters. Gibson, an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Kansas, explores "Shellcracker Haven," a pseudonymous wetlands community in Florida. Her story describes true events and rural people living and working in this wetlands environment. Finally, Whit Gibbons, professor of Ecology at the University of Georgia and a Senior Research Ecologist at the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory, writes about sustainability and stewardship. He offers a splendid amplification of the relationship between people and alligators as it pertains to the American land ethic.

Strawn's book makes an important contribution to many disciplines. It should become a significant and lasting document, a publication fully worthy of joining the other splendid books produced by the Center for American Places for the Johns Hopkins University Press. This book should have a wide appeal to photographic studies programs, natural history and zoological museums, studies in sociology and anthropology, university and other libraries, institutions concerned with environmental studies and even programs interested in regional and vernacular literature and cultural geography. I am certain that *Alligators: Prehistoric Presence in the America Landscape* will figure as an enduring contribution to contemporary American art and environmental concerns.

