

ALLIGATOR:*An LEP Word-List Item Examined*

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“American alligators can inspire great fear in humans, as they can have as many as 80 teeth at one time (and 3000 in the course of a lifetime), the upper of which are always visible, whether their mouths are open or closed.”

A list of 166 words ending in “-tor” recently stimulated conversation in A/3/1, home of the LEP (Language Enhancement Program). Most of those words were agent nouns traceable through an English verb to a Latin verb. A narrator narrates (Latin *narrare*), a director directs (*dirigere*), an investor invests (*investire*), and an escalator escalates (*scandere*), or can at least allow its travelers to do so. Of course, there are exceptions, as a gladiator does not “gladiate” and an alligator does not necessarily alligate. Though “alligate” is an English verb traceable to the Latin *alligare*, meaning “to tie,” it is not etymologically related to that massive crocodilian reptile known scientifically as *Alligator mississippiensis*, and more commonly as the American alligator. “Alligator” has a unique etymology among the types found on the word list, for its origin is traced to Spanish *el lagarto*, which came from the Latin *lacerta*, both translating to English as “lizard.” To know the territory of the American alligator is to understand this derivation, as Spanish Florida (*La Florida*) existed long before its more peripheral locales would become parts of “these United States” of Georgia and South Carolina (1788), Louisiana (1812) Mississippi (1817), Alabama (1819), and its spatial plurality, the State of Florida (1845). Explor-

er Juan Ponce de León founded *La Florida* in 1513, and the Spanish would keep most of it for all but 20 years, until 1821. In 2013, the United States Postal Service would honor Ponce de León and his territorial legacy by issuing a commemorative stamp to recognize the 500 year anniversary of *La Florida*. The focus here, however, is not on the geography of Spanish Florida or the etymologies of English words ending in “-tor,” but rather the legends, realities, and impacts of the alligator itself, as this animal and what it represents can spark curiosity, excitement, and imagination, the degree to which one hopes an item present on such a word list is capable of initiating.

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American alligators can inspire great fear in humans, as they can have as many as 80 teeth at one time (and 3000 in the course of a lifetime), the upper of which are always visible, whether their mouths are open or closed. The alligator moves at 17 KPH on land and swims at 32 KPH, and its vocal expression is heard as a deep bellow. Despite having brains weighing less than one gram, they are intelligent, having the foresight to lure-in wading birds as prey by balancing twigs on their snouts as “bait” desirable to the unsuspecting nest-builders. The collective noun for alligators, should you be fortunate enough to find a group of them, is “congregation.” Their mating season is June, and a female can lay between 10 and 50 eggs at a time, with the sex of the baby alligator being determined by nest temperature (cooler temps yield females and warmer temps yield males).

Nests are made of mud, sticks, and plants, and natural habitat has been a major concern for advocates of both alligators and ecosystem-preservation. Alligators were listed as an endangered species from 1967 through 1987, as private and governmental intervention helped recognize the impacts of wetland drainage resulting from population growth in areas surrounding the South Florida Everglades, as real-estate development has grown increasingly since the late 19th century. Concern expressed over such impacts can be found in the works of journalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas and songwriter John Anderson. Anderson's "Seminole Wind" composition celebrates a land of eagles, otters, alligators, tribal warriors (namely Osceola and Micanopy), saw grass and cypress trees, while lamenting the costs of man's "search for wealth untold," as well as destructive actions taken in the name of "progress" and "flood control." The delicate balance of development and conservation has continued to be a hotly-charged political topic in South Florida until this day. The alligator plays a role in preserving ecosystems found in areas such as Everglades National Park, where the animal performs an excavating service to create "gator holes," often 20 meters long, which provide a home for itself in the dry and cold seasons, as well as refuge for many other species. As for humans' fear of alligators, attacks mostly result from efforts to feed the animal, an illegal action throughout the United States.

Mention of the abbreviated "Gator" in the United States is likely to elicit one

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of the three following images: University of Florida athletics, the Gatorade beverage brand, or the series of Gator Utility Vehicles produced by a corporation doing business as John Deere. For 110 years, sports teams from the University of Florida have branded themselves as the "Florida Gators," and the accomplishments of their representatives are nearly unmatched by universities in the eastern United States. Since 1972, Florida Gator athletes have represented 40 countries at the Olympic Games, and they have won 126 gold medals, a figure matched by only one other university located east of the Mississippi River (that being University of Michigan "Wolverine" athletes, who have won 144 medals). Children attending Gator-related events and competitions are often eager to meet Albert and Alberta, the anthropomorphic "couple" serving as the university's official mascots. The two plush-costumed

alligators, clad in orange and blue regalia, circulate the venues housing UF's 21 varsity sports teams, eager to engage with fans in order to preserve and brighten the family-friendly atmosphere. One such venue, known as "The Swamp," seats a capacity crowd exceeding 90,000 fans. Gator teams celebrate a total of 39 national championships and 233 Southeastern Conference (SEC) championships. The Gatorade sports drink was invented in 1965 by Dr. Robert Cade and his colleagues from the University of Florida College of Medicine, and its success rose in concert with the Gator (American) football team. The Gatorade brand experi-

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enced growth that led to its being purchased by Quaker Oats in 1987 and later PepsiCo in 2000. A recent annual report revealed that Gatorade is one of PepsiCo's top-selling products, trailing only Pepsi Cola, Mountain Dew, and Lay's Potato Chips. As for the John Deere Gator Utility Vehicles, colored green like alligators often are when their environments contain high levels of algae, their production began 25 years ago, as their popularity has demanded 54 different models of Gator in five distinct categories. Such variety allows a wide range of choice in power sources, maximum speeds, steering capabilities, towing capacities, and bed capacities, as the Gator is used for effective transportation, hauling, and logistical support. One thinks of the Gator vehicles' frequent presence on large farms and ranches, though they can be found in almost any industry, including turf-grass maintenance and military-combat support.

As we have observed, the American alligator is able to evoke much imagery and meaning for those who spend time in its territories of the southern United States, as well as for those interacting with borrowers of its name. It is an animal one may long to see, but probably not at too close of a distance. Part of what makes a legend is perhaps its being a rare sight. I have seen alligators in three distinct spots in the South Carolina Low Country: a wildlife refuge at Bulls Island, a rural pond in a Red Top subdivision, and a golf course at Hilton Head Island. Knowing the power and capabilities of this reptile can help one to appreciate the native tribes of Old Florida who lived more comfortably integrated with nature than most of western civilization, as evidenced through the exhausting obstacles facing the United States during the costly Florida Wars of the 19th Century. Decades of fighting and millions of dollars never could remove the Seminoles from the Everglades, and they remain there today. Examining such history as that of Florida and South Carolina, we see that alligators are only one aspect of the storied landscapes, much like they are only one aspect of a long word list recently discussed by advanced English students visiting the LEP. Such props as word lists, along with dictionaries and newspapers, can serve as useful conversational stimuli for teachers and learners who wish to examine and practice the English language. The LEP is located in Room A/3/1, and has been a flourishing presence for the Faculty of Languages and Translation.

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