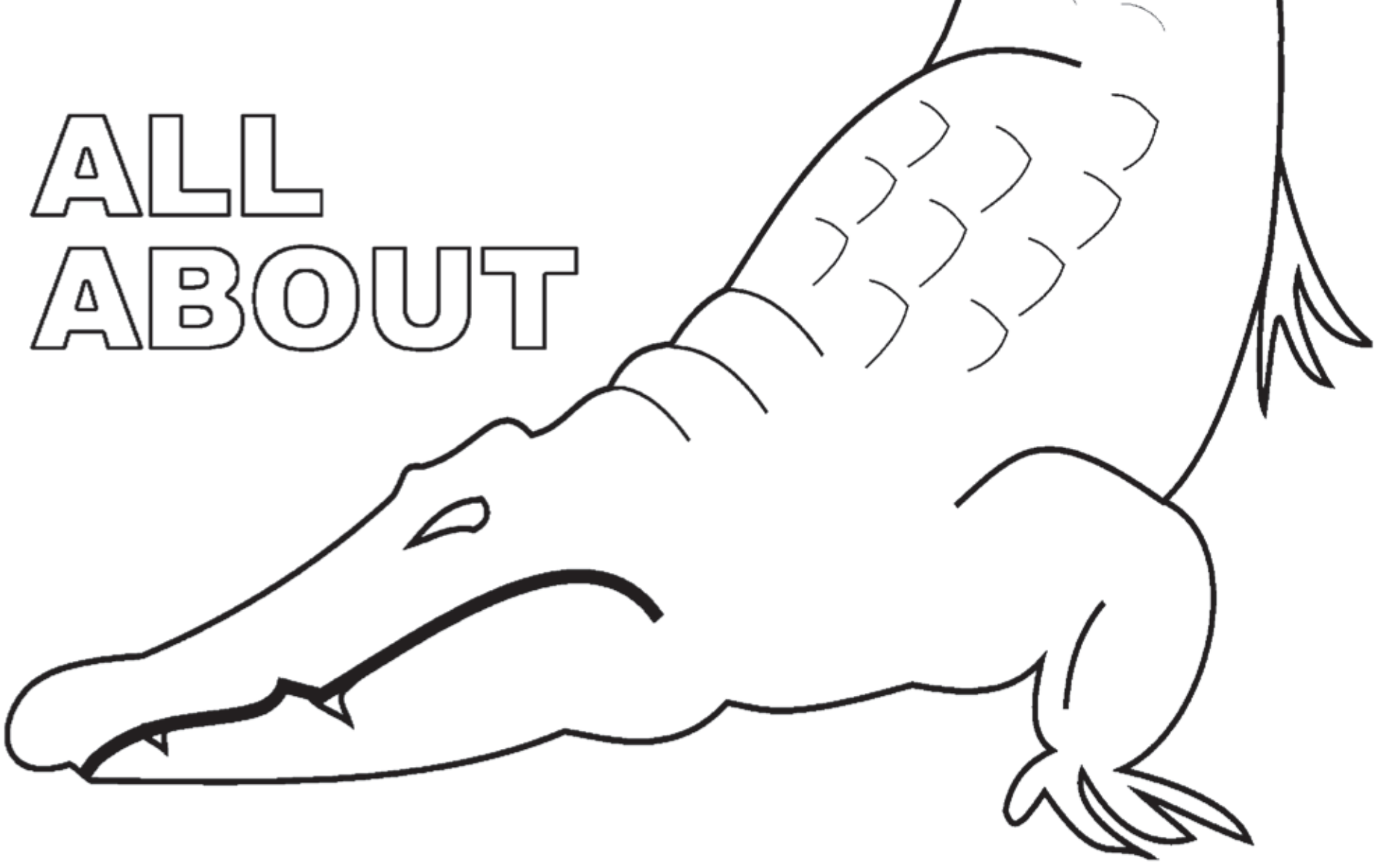
ALL ABOUT



ALLIGATORS

The American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*):

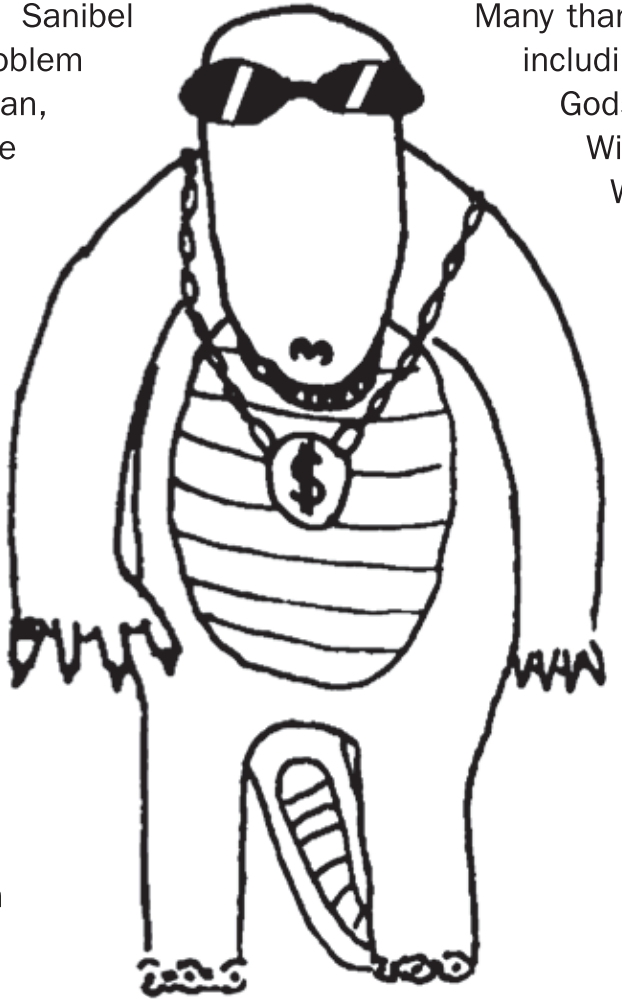
- Is a direct descendant of dinosaurs that first appeared more than 200 million years ago;
- Belongs to a group of cold-blooded animals (ectotherms) that includes snakes, lizards and turtles;
- Derives its name from the Spanish word for lizard, *el lagarto*;
- Plays an important role in the ecology of Florida's wetlands by creating gator holes that support fish and wildlife during times of drought;
- Is listed as a "species of special concern" in the State of Florida, and is listed federally as "threatened" due to similarity in appearance to the "endangered" American crocodile;
- Lives in fresh or brackish water, including golf course water hazards, canals, lakes, marshes, swamps, rivers, creeks and ponds;
- Has four short legs with five toes on its front feet and four webbed toes on its hind feet that assist in swimming;
- Is darkly colored with a broad snout and has large ridges on its back and tail called scutes (pronounced *scoots*);
- Lives for 30-35 years in the wild; can live for more than 50 years in captivity;
- As an adult male in the wild, can grow as long as 14 feet and weigh more than 1,000 pounds;
- Basks in the sun to help warm its scaly body;
- Adults eat just about anything – fish, birds, turtles, crabs, raccoons, dogs, cats, snakes, carrion (dead animals) and even other alligators;
- Has jaws strong enough to crush the shell of a turtle;
- Rips and swallows its food but cannot chew;
- Can stay below water without air for more than two hours during winter;
- Is a very fast swimmer and capable of short bursts of speed (lunging) on land;
- Moves on land by lifting its body and part of its tail and running on its toes;
- Stalks prey quickly and silently and drowns or crushes its prey;
- Becomes sexually mature when it approaches 6 feet in length. Males travel far, in water or over land, in search of a mate. Females construct nests of sticks, leaves and mud to incubate their eggs for about 65 days. The temperature of the nest determines the gender of the hatchlings: lower temperatures produce females; higher temperatures yield males;
- Is unusually maternal for a reptile and guards her nest until her 20 to 50 eggs hatch. She is never far from her young and may protect them fiercely.

For more information, visit MyFWC.com/gators

MASTER OF THE MARSH

Illustrations drawn by members of the Sanibel School Seventh Grade Community Problem Solving Team including: Kaitlyn Herman, Maura Dowling, Shawn McCarney, Elle Farrell, Jimmy Shannon and Laura Turner, with guidance from their coach, Dr. Trish Herman of Barry University. Design/ layout by Renny Severance. Additional drawings contributed by Dave Horton, Pete Turner and Frank Olcvary.

Community Problem Solving (CmPS) teams worldwide identify problems facing their communities and offer solutions. As a result of fatalities caused by alligator attacks in Florida, the Sanibel School 7th Grade CmPS team developed ***All About Alligators*** to show how to interact with these powerful reptiles. Their goal is to prevent further destruction of alligators due to human ignorance.



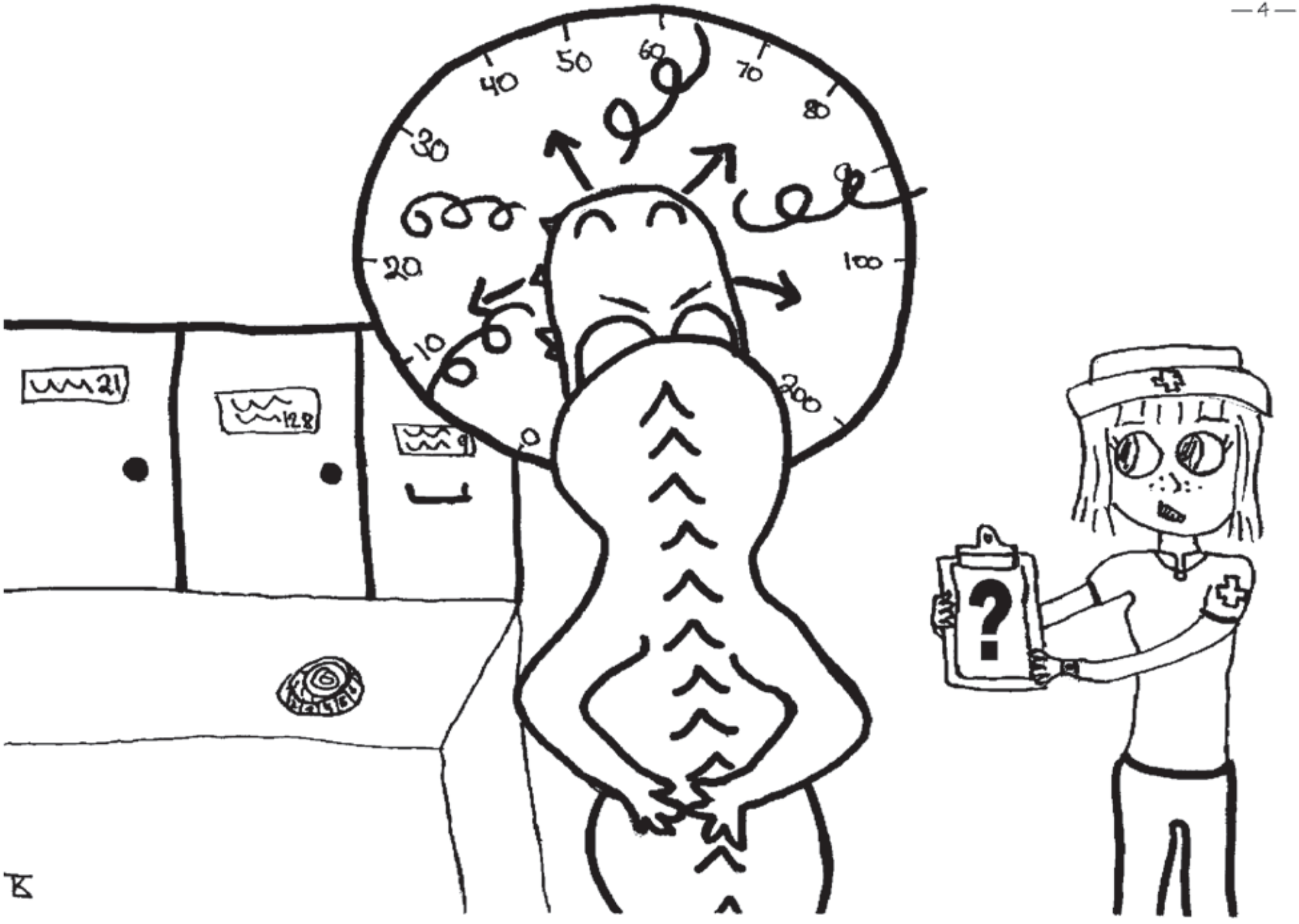
Many thanks to our panel of experts on alligators including: Toni Westland, Jeff Combs and Kevin Godsea of J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge; Lt. Jamie Phillips and Chief William Tomlinson of the Sanibel Police Department; Dr. Rob Loflin of the City of Sanibel Conservation Department; naturalist/alligator handler Mark Bird Westall; Kristie Anders of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation; Harry Dutton with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; and wildlife veterinarians Dr. PJ Deitschel and Dr. Amber McNamara.

Funding for this printing provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, May 2007.

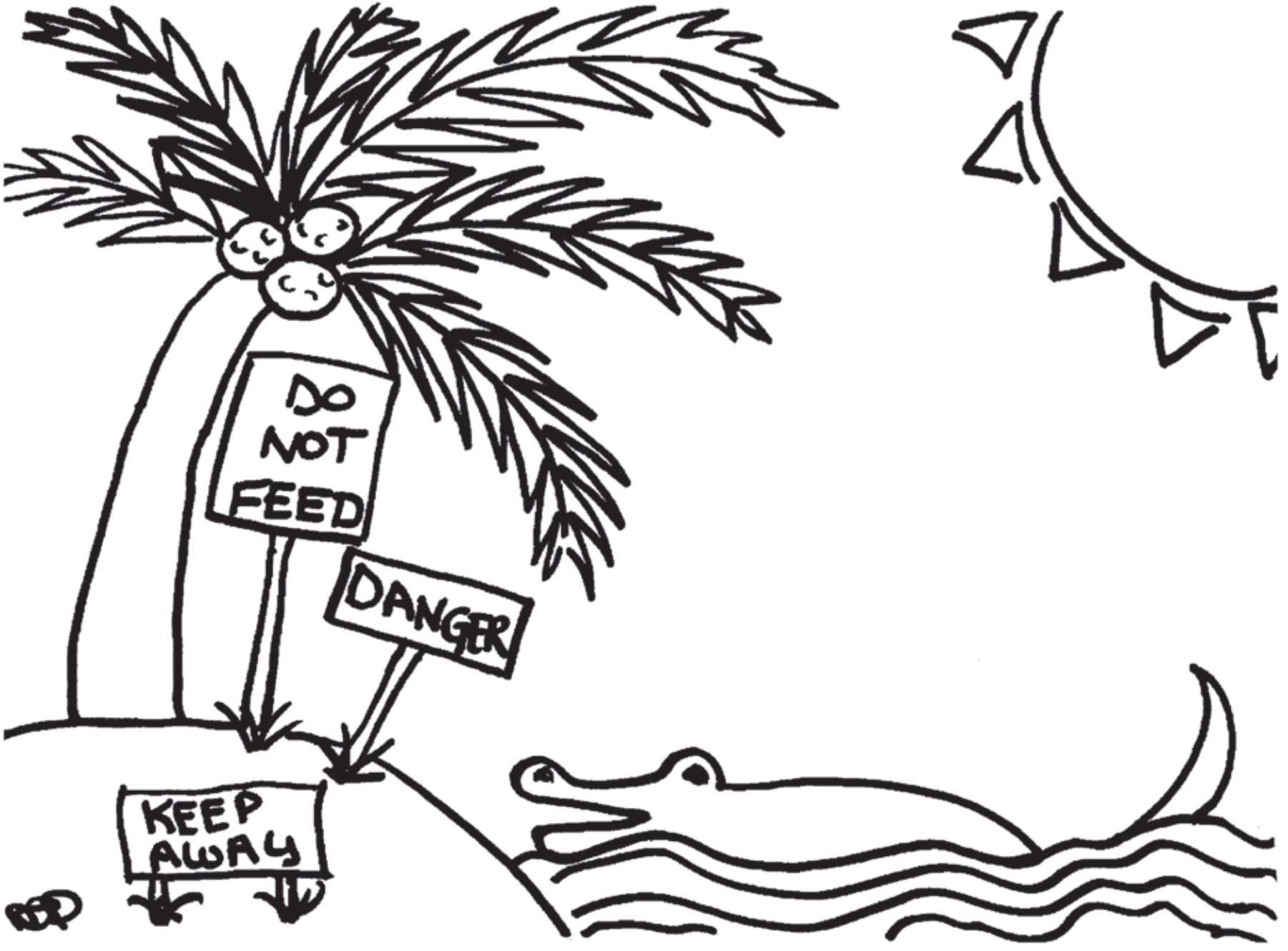
MyFWC.com/gators

All About Alligators **is dedicated to the memory of Janie Melsek, who died on July 23, 2004 after an alligator attack, and to the heroes who came to her rescue and tried to save her.**

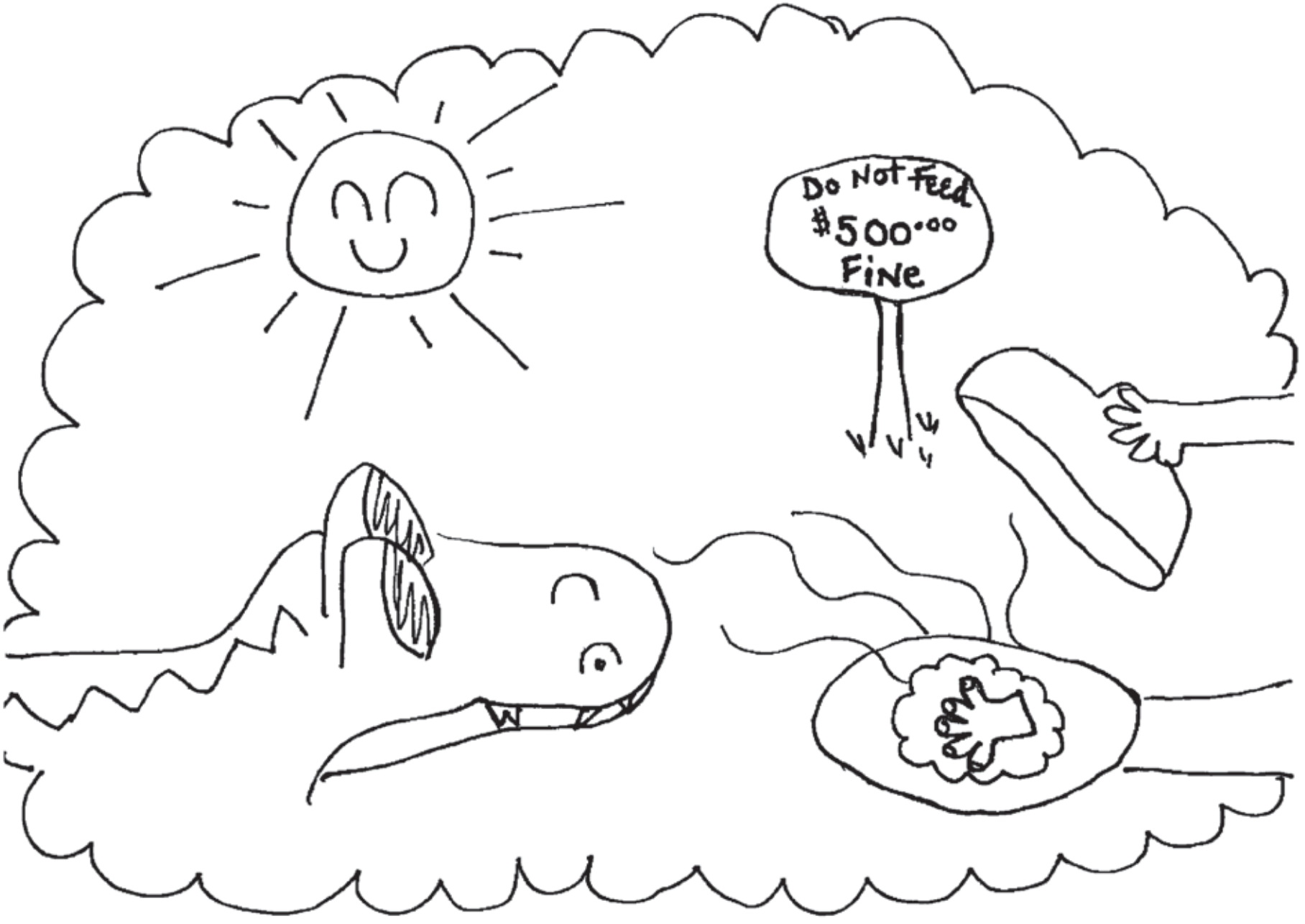
© 2005, L. Lagarto



Adult male alligators can weigh more than 1,000 pounds and grow as long as 14 feet.

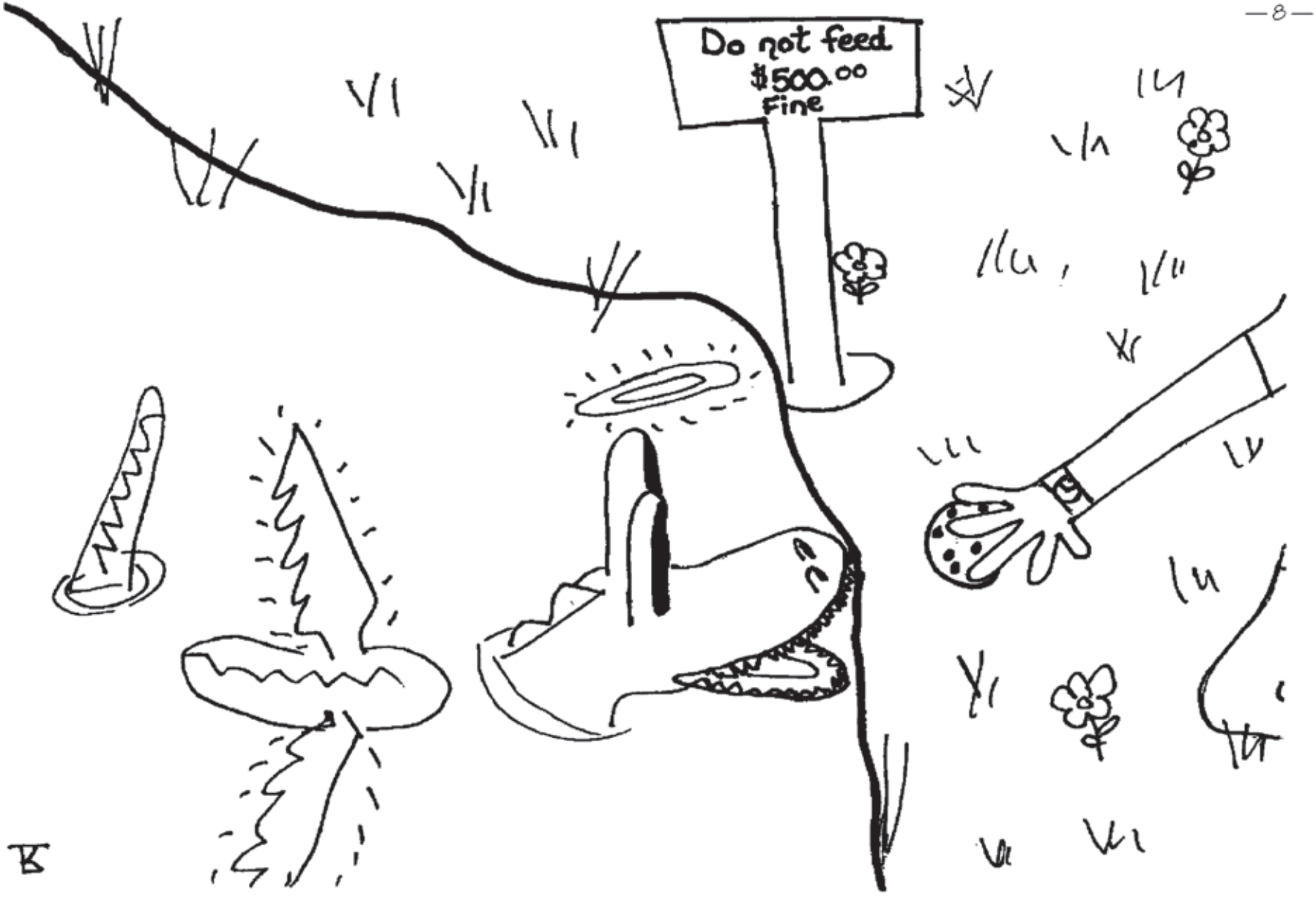


Never approach or feed an alligator.



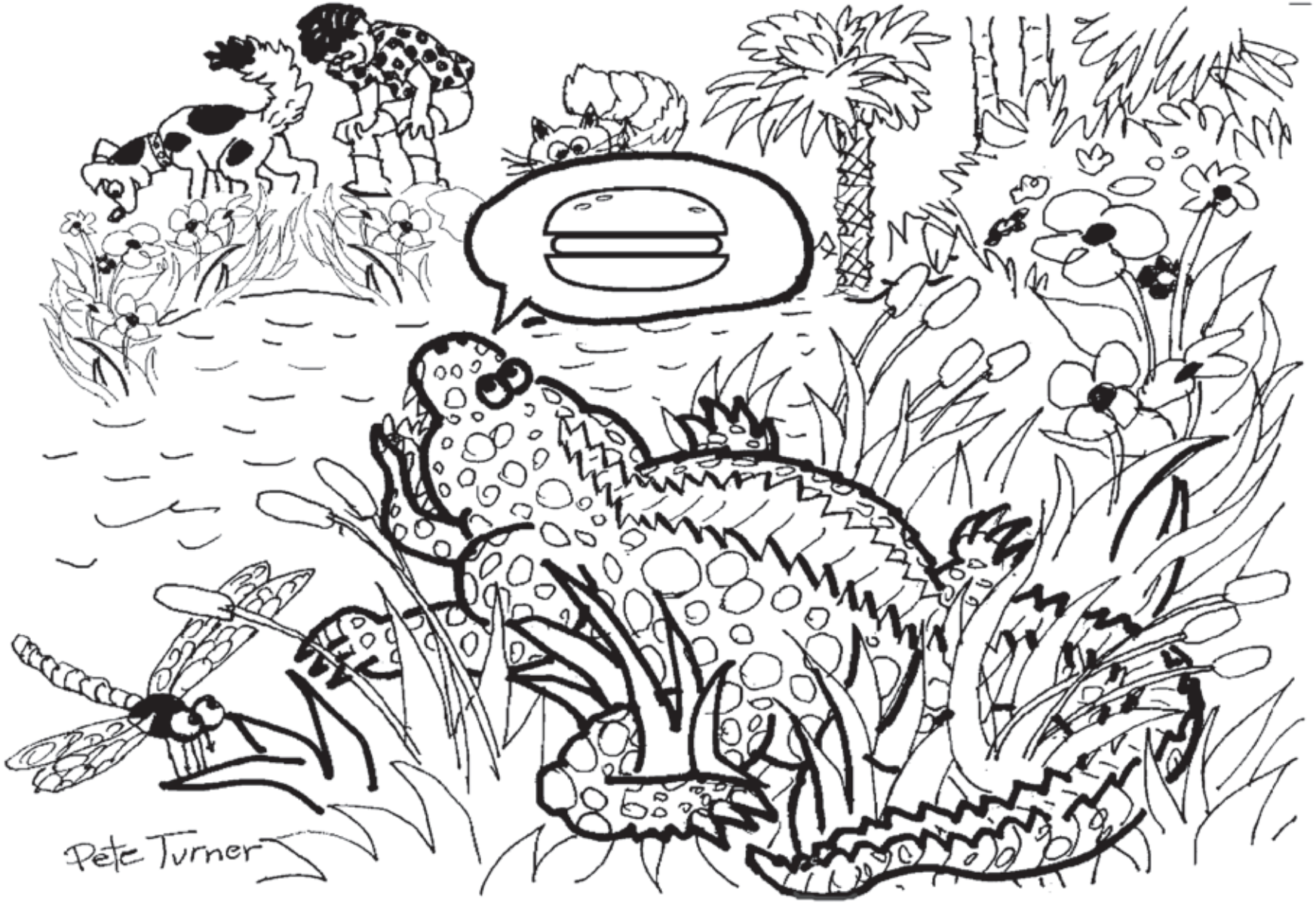
Feeding alligators makes them lose their fear of humans.

A hand-fed alligator becomes a nuisance and will be trapped and destroyed.

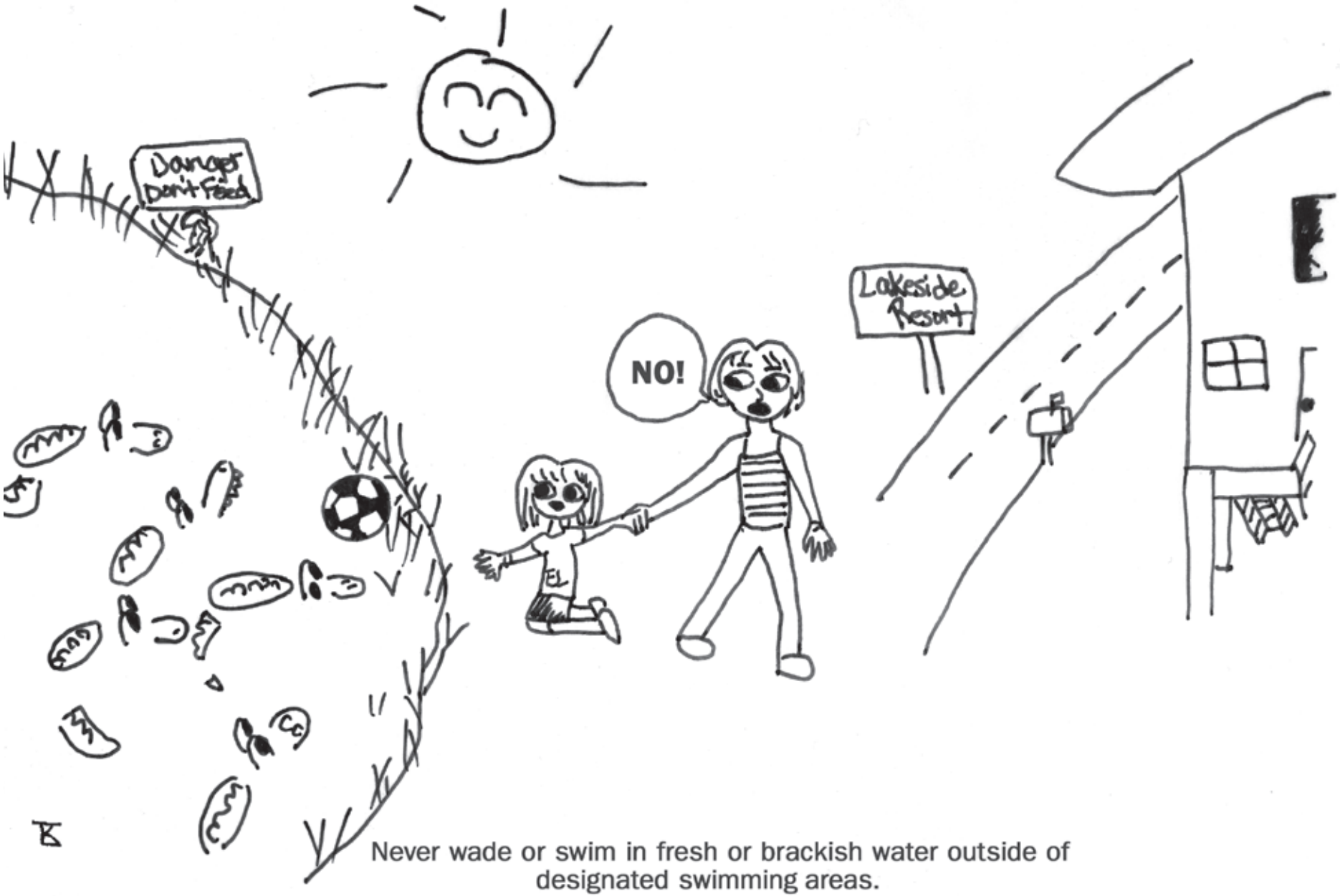


If you feed an alligator, you are breaking the law and face up to a $500 fine and/or 60 days in jail.
If you are caught more than once you could face additional fines or days in jail.

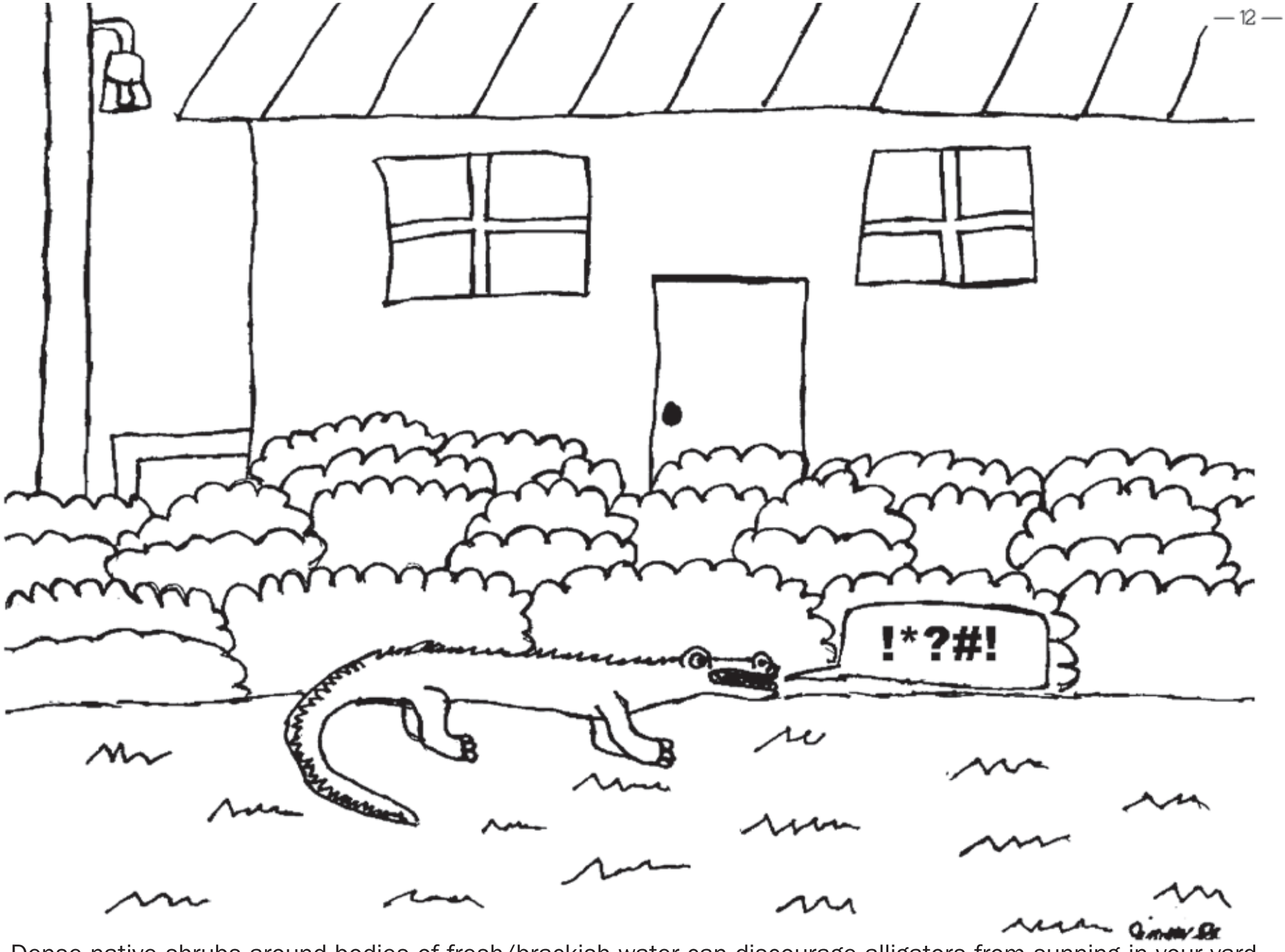
Alligators eat fish, turtles, snails, birds, small mammals –
just about anything that wanders by.



Children should always have a grown-up nearby when playing near, or in, fresh or brackish water. Keep pets on a leash and away from the water's edge.

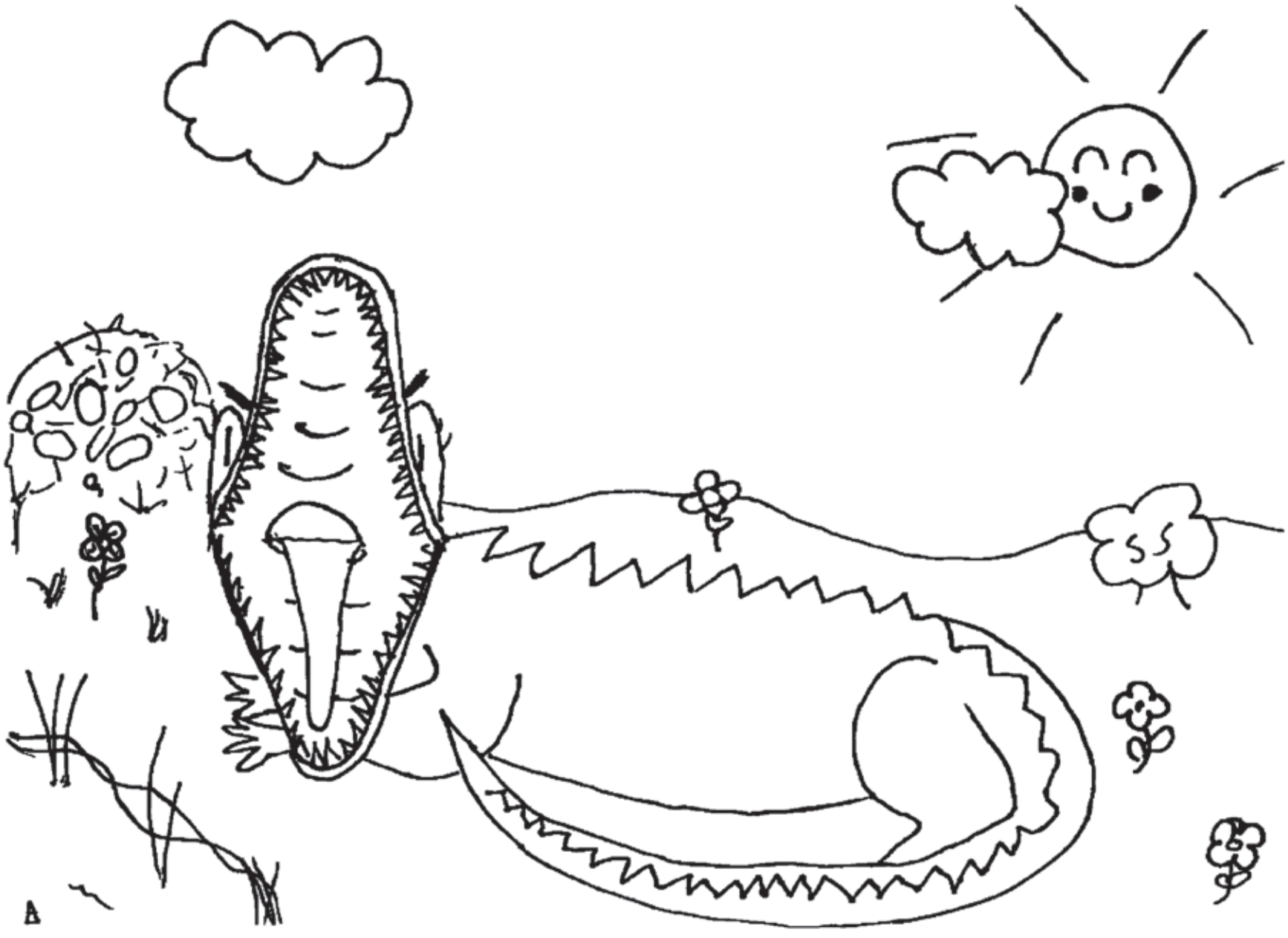


Never wade or swim in fresh or brackish water outside of designated swimming areas.



Dense native shrubs around bodies of fresh/brackish water can discourage alligators from sunning in your yard.

Adult alligators dig holes or take care of holes that hold water year-round.
Other fish and wildlife use gator holes during times of drought.



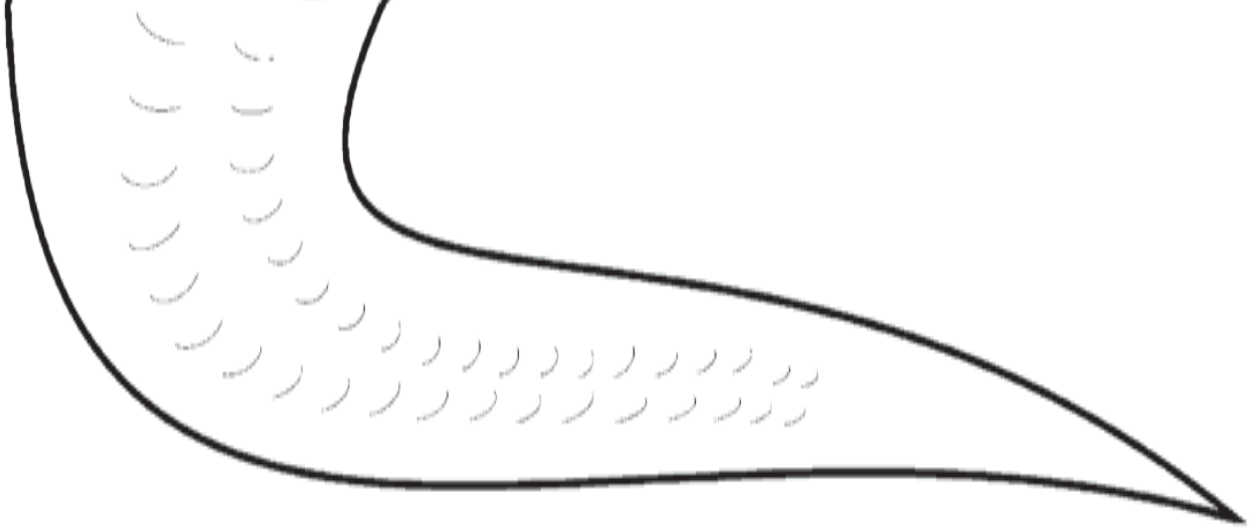
A female alligator can be fiercely protective of her nest, eggs and young.
She is never far from her hatchlings.

Hey kids!
What did you learn about me?

The American alligator:

- is a direct descendant of _____ that lived more than _____ years ago. (p. 2)
- creates _____ , which help fish and wildlife survive during times of _____. (p. 2, 13)
- is similar in appearance to the endangered _____ and is listed federally as _____. (p. 2)
- lives in _____ or _____ water. (p. 2)
- can weigh more than _____ pounds and grow as long as _____ as an adult male. (p. 2)
- eats just about _____, including (name 2) _____ and _____. (p. 2, 9)
- _____ and _____ its food but cannot _____. (p. 2)
- should never be _____ or _____. (p. 5)
- loses its _____ of humans when it is _____. (p. 6)
- becomes a _____ when it is hand-fed and will be _____ and _____. (p. 7)
- is a danger to anyone who wades, swims in or plays near _____ or _____ water, especially children and pets. (p. 10, 11)
- is never far from her _____ and can be fiercely _____ of them. (p. 14)

If you feed me, you face a fine up to $ _____ and/or _____ days in jail. (p. 8)



THE END

NEVER FEED AN ALLIGATOR

Alligators, like all wild animals, deserve respect and space. They are predators. Their nature is not to be attracted to humans.

But, an alligator loses its natural fear of humans when it is hand-fed. It cannot tell the difference between a piece of food and the hand that offers it. An alligator that approaches humans is deemed a nuisance and will be trapped and destroyed.

This powerful reptile may bite anything that wanders near its territory, so keep children and pets away from fresh and brackish water everywhere in Florida.

Contrary to popular belief,
a human cannot elude an alligator by running in a zig-zag pattern.

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