



Slogan

Welcome to the Sunshine—
Not the Alligator—State

Section 1. The term “Sunshine State” is hereby designated
as the official nickname of the State of Florida.

—House Concurrent Resolution 5514 (1970)

I HAVE THIS FASCINATION with civic slogans. The cornier, the stranger, the better. This comes in part from workaday newspaper writing, where it’s perfectly normal to use some bizarre slogan on second reference as a place-name substitute. And because here in the Sunshine State I grew up in the World’s Most Famous Beach, which everyone knows is Daytona Beach.

I love my hometown slogan because it’s an obvious, up-front lie about how my little town actually is kind of a big deal. This disconnect from reality gives it the feel of a local joke. When you say it, people wonder if you’re putting them on. And you probably are. Putting on the tourists is a rich Florida tradition.

The city slogan’s origins date to sometime in the 1910s, and it was cemented in place during a few weeks of excellent

publicity in 1930s when daredevil drivers set land-speed records on our hard-packed sands, witnessed by the world's sporting press, celebrities, and newsreel cameramen.

In our modern branding environment a slogan like that sounds like a parody of old-time Florida tourism boosterism. It makes the sophisticated marketing professional cringe; something else in its favor.

I suspect our beloved state slogan “the Sunshine State” also makes the sophisticated marketer cringe. To be precise, it's our official state nickname, as belatedly recognized by the legislature in 1970. Like my town's nickname, we didn't claim it first—we swiped it in front of everyone, but it's still beloved.

The Sunshine State slogan has been a feature on our license plates since 1949. That date is significant. Before World War II Florida was known by all kinds of sobriquets—the Peninsula State, the Everglades State, the Alligator State . . . nothing stuck in the popular imagination. Highlighting your biggest swamp or scariest reptile is not always the best pitch for moving real estate or attracting tourists.

“Florida is called the Alligator State because its creeks and rivers and swamps are full of alligators,” *The Rainbow Book of American Folk Tales and Legends* still cheerfully explained to children in the 1950s. Let's go there, Daddy! Will there be bears, too? And sharks? What about pythons? And we'll get to see them? Promise?

After World War II, as road systems expanded and mass-market tourism exploded, Florida took on the sunshine state slogan already used by California, New Mexico, and South Dakota. South Dakota even had the slogan stitched to its flag. No matter. Sunshine became our state identity, one we claim

in the face of summers full of 2:00 p.m. Old Testament-style thunderstorms and active hurricane seasons. “Florida, folks: Land of perpetual sunshine. Let’s get the auction started before we have a tornado,” Groucho Marx announced before unloading swampland on the rubes in the 1929 movie *The Cocoanuts*. Our dramatic weather was already a national joke at the dawn of the talkies.

The Sunshine State name seldom appeared in print until the Great Land Boom of the 1920s that was parodied in that movie. But Land Boom sales forces made such vigorous use of the phrase that by the 1930s it felt like a permanent part of the promotional landscape. “Florida has always been called the Sunshine state,” Carita Doggett firmly asserted in the Depression Era book she produced for the Florida State Hotel Commission, *Florida: Empire of the Sun*, without fear of contradiction.

The Sunshine State license plate bill seemed overdue by the time it was introduced by State Sen. Joseph Johnston of Brooksville in 1949. Johnston served only one term in the Florida Legislature as part of a rich and varied professional career, but when he died in 2009, the headline in the *St. Petersburg Times* read, “Epilogue: Joseph Johnston, father of Sunshine State license plate.”

And that is what he was remembered for: putting the state nickname on every Florida road and parking lot and imprinting the phrase into the Florida consciousness. Soon the nickname Alligator State crawled into the swamp of historical memory.

Florida’s success at heisting the slogan was so complete that by 1992 South Dakota gave up and redesigned its flag. There was no use in even trying anymore. They hauled down

their flag, surrendering in the face of the raw marketing power of Florida tourism.

As somebody born well after 1949, I have the Sunshine State identity stamped onto my consciousness. I have no memory of hearing my home called anything else. I've driven the Sunshine State Parkway, drilled my kids so they'd meet the Sunshine State Standards set by the Department of Education, and cheered for Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University's teams playing in the Sunshine State Conference; I've written extensively in defense of the government in the Sunshine Law and can sing "Come to the Florida Sunshine Tree" from memory. The sunshine thing, symbolized by the smiling sun wearing shades on every tourism map and state attractions postcard, is inescapable.

The Sunshine State is Florida's identity reduced to one of the ancients' four elements: We are fire. It is our economy reduced to one draw: We are for tourists. And it encapsulates the single best comeback we have when people complain about things here: Yeah sure, but it's bright outside most of the time. Can't argue with that. Yes, we are also a bright spot for crime, drugs, poor mental hygiene, political craziness, state and municipal corruption, heedless driving, poorly maintained infrastructure, underfunded schools, environmental destruction, sinkholes, lightning, hurricanes, sharks, and pythons, and sure, sea-level rise may cause the entire coastal enterprise to slide into the sea like Atlantis—but damn, it's nice and bright outside. Even in February.

We're not the Mental Health State. We're the Sunshine State. Come on down!