

**Geography, Identity And Florida's Specialty License Plates**

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The United States is a country with a deeply-engrained love affair with the automobile (Jakle and Sculle 2008). Owning an automobile is not only a status symbol, but it is also a mark of individuality. An automobile can come to reflect one's identity, painting images such as economic status, social and environmental awareness, rebelliousness, and even national identity (Gilroy 2001, Edensor 2004). However, automobiles are not static, identical expressions of identity as automobiles not only come in different shapes, colors and sizes, but one model of automobile may differ dramatically from one year to the next. Furthermore, owners often individualize their automobiles by adding factory options such as sunroofs, fog lights, tinted windows, spoilers and vinyl graphics.

In addition to performance modifications and aesthetic upgrades, automobile owners may use their vehicle as a means to express support for certain causes, colleges, and sports teams through affixing bumper stickers, magnets or window decals to their automobile. Whether it is a ribbon magnet supporting the fight against breast cancer, a sticker calling for a politician's ouster, or a decal supporting the local football team, these symbols of expression often give an indication to a person's identity. These facets of identity can also be expressed through the use of vehicle license plates. This can be done in several ways, for example, through requesting a personalized state-issued plate or through a license plate frame that surrounds a plate attached to a vehicle (Figure 1).

Over the past twenty-five years, an increasingly popular way to outwardly express one's beliefs and identity on one's automobile has been through the use of state-approved, created and issued specialty license plates (Northup 2009, Leib forthcoming). For example, the state of Florida currently offers drivers over one hundred different specialty license plates to choose from with over 1.6 million such plates on the

state's roads. Among their options, drivers can choose plates that proclaim support for activities such as golf, fishing, tennis, and soccer, as well as the arts, the Boy and Girl Scouts, and breast cancer research, to highlighting the state's native flora and fauna such as panthers, manatees, sea turtles, wildflowers and trees, to supporting Florida's professional sports teams and its public and private colleges and universities, ranging from the University of Florida to Clearwater Christian College (Figure 2).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the geography of Florida's specialty license plates. In particular, this paper's central focus is on the spatial distribution of Florida's specialty license plate registrations, what factors may account for such patterns, and how specialty license plates can be used to help explain Florida's diverse social and physical geographies. The findings of this research suggests that these patterns are based on demographic trends in the state, the location of universities and sports franchises and their corresponding fan regions, and the proximity of physical geographic features, such as the Everglades. After a brief consideration of license plates

**Figure 1. Personalized license plate (“We hate New York Yankees”) and surrounding license plate frame (“Boston Red Sox”).**



*Source: Photographed by Author 2 in Newport News, Virginia. May 2010.*

**Figure 2. Selection of Florida organization and causes specialty license plates.**



*Source: Photographed by Author 2 in Newport News, Virginia. May 2010.*

and identity, this article provides background on the history of Florida's license plates and the specialty plate program. The remainder of this article examines Florida's specialty license plates sales and discusses their geographic distribution in the state.

### **License Plates and Identity**

Shortly after the invention of the automobile, governments in North America and Europe started to regulate their usage and require vehicle owners to register their automobiles with the state. In the U.S., New York was the first state to register automobiles in 1901, while in 1903 Massachusetts became the first U.S. state to issue to its automobile registrants a standard license plate with the state of registration clearly marked. Other states quickly followed Massachusetts' lead, and by 1918 Florida became the last of the then 48 states to issue a standard state-identified license plate (Fox 1994).

Even before Florida began issuing license plates in 1918, states started embellishing their plates with state seals and symbols, starting in 1910 with a state seal placed on Michigan's license plate and a keystone found on Pennsylvania's plate (Fox 1994). Many states followed, and through the use of pictures and slogans started advertising economic and symbolic aspects of their states on their license plates. Early examples of the use of pictures on license plates include Arizona's 1917 license plate which featured a steer head to promote the state's cattle industry, New Hampshire's 1926 license plate prominently featuring the 'Old Man in the Mountain', and Idaho's 1928 plate featuring a large potato. States also imprinted slogans on their early license plates to promote their state's history (e.g., Maryland's 1934 'Tercentenary' plate), aspects of the state's economy (e.g., South Carolina's 1933 plate featuring the slogan, 'The Iodine Products State'), and to encourage tourism (e.g., Maine's long-running 'Vacationland' slogan which first appeared in 1936). Thus, state-issued license plates provided states with 'rolling billboards' to advertise aspects of their state.

Thus automobiles and the license plates that adorn them often serve to express aspects of identity. In their research on the fluidity of movement on the landscape, Sculle and Jakle (2008) write of the geographical implications of "signs that move," which range from

commercial trucks to tattoos. They note how “moving signs substantially contribute to peoples’ sense of place – to how they conceptualize themselves as being geographically situated” (57). License plates “with their periodically changed logos, distinctive colors and slogans, constitute another, although very subtle, auto-related sign dynamic” (64).

Leib (forthcoming) suggests that the use of slogans and images on plates can be utilized by government officials to promote banal nationalism. He states that “the slogans on and designs of license plates provide one very visible means for governments to mold expressions of these identities tied directly to the place imprinted on that plate.” This notion of identity expression can be extended to personalized plates and, more germane to this paper, specialty license plates, where individuals through a choice of government-approved and created license plates can use this very visible medium to mold expressions of their own identities.

In some aspects, the plethora of choices drivers have in terms of specialty plates make these plates similar to bumper stickers. Sculle and Jakle (2008, 65) note that bumper stickers are “reminders of the near universal search for individuality in a mass culture, especially the desire to be noted.” Case (1992, 107) argues that bumper stickers provide three opportunities for users to contribute to the cultural story of ideas symbols and perspectives. . . . (a) interject one’s own perspectives, values and statements into the environment of mass-mediated messages; (b) proclaim a unique personal identity through symbols and statements representing one’s interests, affiliations, values and claims to glory, thus attempting to escape the anonymity which characterizes much of modern life; and (c) observe new, often creative messages, symbols and usages being introduced into the culture environment of ideas.

As a means of advertising preferences and expressing identity, specialty license plates share much in common with bumper stickers. Purchasing a specialty plate deviates from the mass produced standard plates of a state and allows the automobile owner to create an identity via her or his vehicle. It also allows for the automobile owner to highlight a particular topic, thereby creating a public discourse. As Sculle and Jakle (2008, 65) argue, “Bumper stickers” (and we would add specialty license plates) “stand tantamount to a kind of face-to-face

conversation, but with anonymous others.” Thus, while drivers can use music and other technological devices to distract from both the sounds and sights of the road (Edensor 2004), that drivers are “strapped *into* the driving seat” with “minimal movement” (Urry 2004, 31, emphasis in original) lends itself to having to confront these expressions of identity directly.

At the same time, specialty plates differ from bumper stickers in that the choice of causes promoted and messages advanced on these plates are circumscribed by the state. While most states provide drivers with numerous specialty plates to choose from, they can only choose from causes and messages approved by the state. In fact, the specialty-plate approval process has become heated in numerous state legislatures concerning controversial causes and designs (Webster and Leib 2001, Leib 2009, Leib forthcoming).

Thus, specialty license plates serve not only as a means to project individual identity of one’s automobile and by extension one’s self, but they also incorporate that person into the group identity associated with that plate. Specialty license plates reinforce identification with like-minded people, be it a university, a sports team, an environmental concern or a social cause.

### **Grapefruits, Oranges, and Sunshine -- License Plates in Florida.**

While the state government of Florida is the vehicle registration and licensing authority in the Sunshine State, drivers pay for their vehicle registrations and purchase their license plates through the offices of their county’s tax collector. As a result, data is available concerning automobile registration and licensing (including specialty license plates) at the county-level, thus allowing for an analysis of the spatial distribution of registrations and license plates at the county level. However, before we examine these county-level patterns, it is necessary to briefly outline the history of Florida license plates.

The state of Florida began registering automobiles in 1905. As part of the registration process, the state assigned the owner of each vehicle a registration number that was to be displayed on the back of their car. However, the state left it to each car owner to create their own license plate (Brock 2002). As well as the state, a number of Florida's cities also required vehicle owners to register their vehicles with their governments. Of these cities, Jacksonville became the first, in 1910, to issue a standard license plate to all of its

registrants (Brock 2002). In addition to the state and many cities, the Florida legislature enacted a law in 1911 requiring motor vehicle owners to also register their vehicles with their county tax collector. Thus starting in 1911 and continuing through 1917, each of Florida's counties also issued their own county license plates. Thus, between 1911 and 1917 it was possible for Florida vehicles to be carrying three separate license plates: a homemade state registration plate, a standard issue city plate, and a standard issue county plate (Brock 1987a, 2002).

In May 1917, the Florida state legislature ended this confusion by enacting a law that made the state the sole motor vehicle registration authority. As a result, in 1918, the state of Florida issued a standard-issue plate to all drivers, becoming the last of the then 48 states to do so, and ending the era of city and county private automobile registration plates (Brock 1987b). Shortly after the first issuance of plates, the state started adding pictures to their plates, with a large state outline appearing on plates from 1923 to 1926, and two grapefruits adorning the 1935 plate (Figure 3). From 1949 to the state's 1975 issue, state license plates

**Figure 3. Florida 1925 (map) and 1935 (grapefruit) standard issue license plates**



*Source: Photographed by Author 2 from Author 2's collection.*

carried the famous “Sunshine State” slogan (with exceptions in 1951 [“Keep Florida Green”] and 1965 [“400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary” in honor of the 1565 founding of St. Augustine]) (Brock 1987b) (Figure 4). In 1979, a large state map appeared in the center of the plate (where it still exists today), and in 1998, an orange was placed on top of the map.

The current design, first issued in 2003, contains an image of two oranges superimposed on a state map, the state website “myFlorida.com” at the top, and the county where the driver registered the vehicle at the bottom (Figure 5). Drivers have the option of substituting the “Sunshine State” slogan or, since 2008, the phrase “In God We Trust” for the county name (Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicle 2010a; Florida Legislature 2010a).

Since the early 1920s, Florida motor vehicle regulations have required motorists to display only one license plate, on the back of their vehicle. Given this, a number of ‘booster’ plates were made by the state that motorists could purchase and place on the front of the vehicle promoting the state’s tourism industry or safety awareness. Such state-made booster plates go back at least to the early 1930s, including boosters with a map of the state and such 1930s-era slogans as “Florida for Health”, “Empire of the Sun”, and “Florida all the Year.” Probably the most iconic of this type of plate was the safety-inspired “Arrive

**Figure 4. Florida slogan standard issue license plates**



*Source: Photographed by Author 2 from Author 2's collection.*

Alive” front booster plates made by the state starting in 1970 (*Daytona Beach Morning Journal* 1970, *Palm Beach Post* 1970).

From 1903 to 1975, each state, including Florida, offered only one style of license plate for standard automobile registrations. This changed in 1976, when Georgia, Maryland, and Virginia offered all drivers the opportunity, at an additional cost, to purchase and display an optional Bicentennial-themed license plate instead of the standard issue plate (Leib forthcoming). The next state to offer its drivers an optional specialty license plate was California, in recognition of the 1984 Summer Olympics held that year in Los Angeles.

Florida issued its first optional specialty plate available to all drivers in January 1987, with a plate honoring the astronauts who died in the 1986 explosion of the Space Shuttle, Challenger (Figure 6). However, what differentiated the Challenger plate from the previous optional Bicentennial and California Olympic plates was

**Figure 5. Florida standard issue map license plates (1979-present)**



*Source: Photographed by Author 2 from Author 2's collection.*

**Figure 6. Florida Challenger specialty license plate (First issued in 1987)**



*Source: Photographed by Author 2 from Author 2's collection.*



that a majority of the proceeds from the additional costs of purchasing a Challenger plate went to an outside organization rather than being added directly to state government coffers (fifteen of the seventeen to twenty-four dollar additional fee for purchasing the Challenger plate was to go to the Astronauts Memorial Fund to build a memorial and education center at Cape Canaveral's Kennedy Space Center) (Norton 1986, *Ocala Star-Banner* 1986).

The popularity of the Challenger plate encouraged the state of Florida, as well as states across the country, to issue their own series of specialty plates raising money for and awareness and support of a variety of groups, organizations and activities (Northup 2009). As a result, drivers could display their personal preferences not only through front 'booster' plates or bumper stickers on the back of their vehicle, but now could display their preferences through their state-created, approved, and issued specialty license plate.

In Florida, the Challenger plate was followed in October 1987 by collegiate license plates used to raise money for scholarships at nine state universities. The first environmental license plate appeared in 1990 when the "Save the Manatee" plate was issued (Brevard County Tax Collector 2010; Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicle 2010b). At present, Florida offers 114 specialty license plates, including one exclusively for motorcycles, with topics ranging from universities and professional sports teams to health concerns and environmental issues. Florida continues to accept applications for new specialty license plate designs and recently considered allowing for corporate advertisement on license plates (FoxNews.com 2010; see Florida Senate Bill 1442 for details [Florida Senate website 2010]).

### **Geographic Patterns of Florida's Specialty License Plates**

In the remainder of this article, we examine the geographic patterns of specialty license plate sales across Florida. Data for 2009 was collected from the website of the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (2010b). With the exception of the motorcycle specialty plate, In order to account population variances among Florida's counties, we examined the ratio of selected specialty

license plates issued in a given county to the total number of specialty plates issued in that same county.

The data was then mapped using ArcGIS and analyzed in order to find visual patterns. Select specialty license plates were further analyzed using regression modeling in order to discover potential correlations with demographic indicators to help explain emerging patterns. Demographic data was taken from the United States Census 2000 decennial data as well as the 2008 American Community Survey.

**Findings**

In 2008, there were over eight million private and commercial automobiles registered in the state of Florida (U.S. Department of Transportation 2010). In 2009, there were 1,604,956 Florida specialty plates registered, either newly issued or renewed, accounting for approximately twenty percent of all automobile plates issued in the state. The most popular specialty plate was the University of Florida plate with over 120,000 registered, more than 44,000 than the second most popular plate, Helping Sea Turtles. The Sea Turtle plate was closely followed by plates for Florida State University, Protect the Dolphins, and Protect the Panther (Table 1). In terms of the top sellers in each county, the University of Florida plate was the top

**Table 1. Top Selling Specialty License Plates from 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2009**

<i>Plate</i>	<i>Total</i>
University of Florida	120,858
Helping Sea Turtles Survive	76,804
Florida State University	76,216
Protect Wild Dolphins	75,912
Protect the Panther	73,060

*Source: Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website*

**Table 2. Top Selling Specialty License Plates, by County**

<i>Plate</i>	<i>Number of Counties</i>
University of Florida	28
Florida State University	13
Protect Wild Dolphins	6
Helping Sea Turtles Survive	5
Tampa Bay Buccaneers	3

*Source: Calculated from Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website*

## *The Florida Geographer*

seller in 28 of Florida's 67 counties. The Florida State University plate was the top seller in 13 counties, followed by Protect Wild Dolphins, Helping Sea Turtles and professional football's Tampa Bay Buccaneers (Table 2).

The remainder of this section examines the geographic patterns of a selection of Florida's specialty license plate sales. We have subdivided these plates into three categories: 1) professional sports teams and colleges; 2) recreation, social issues and military; and 3) environmental concerns.

### *Professional Sports Teams and Colleges*

Florida currently issues nine different specialty plates representing its professional sports franchises (Figure 7). John Bale (2003, 117) points to three factors affecting the extent of a sports team's fan region, "the area over which a team draws its support": first, "the size of the city which [the team] is located; second, the existing quality of the club's performance since supporters are somewhat responsive to the win/loss record of their team; and, third, the quality of the opposition." He notes that television exposure may also alter a fan region of a team.

There are several ways to measure the spatial extent of a sports team's fan region. Roseman and Shelley (1988) delineated sports teams' fan regions by mapping the

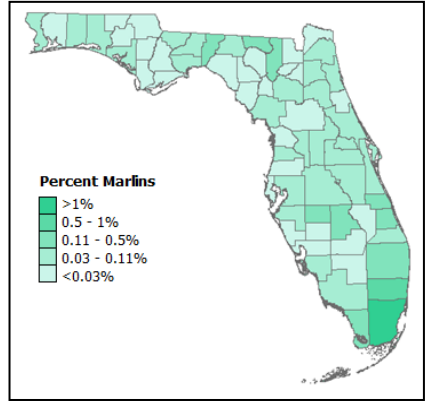
**Figure 7. Selection of Florida college and professional sports**



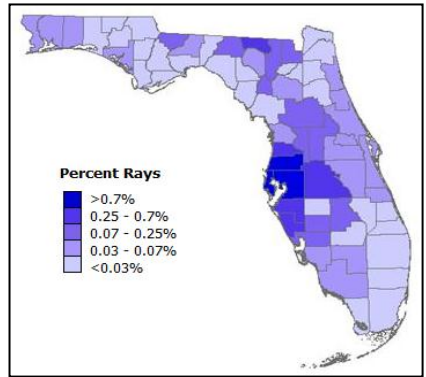
*Source: Photographed by Author 2 from Author 2's collection.*

location of radio station affiliates in each team's radio broadcast network. Another way we propose to measure fan regions is to examine the spatial distribution of the specialty license plates sold for professional sports franchises. It stands to reason that sales of a specialty license plate for a given team would be greatest in the team's home county as well as in adjacent counties, where we would expect to find the core area of its fan region. For example, Figures 8 and 9 represent, respectively, the sales of specialty license plates for Major League Baseball's Florida Marlins, who play their home games in Miami, and Tampa Bay Rays, based in St. Petersburg. Florida Marlins plates are most common in the team's home county of Miami-Dade; these tags account for just over one percent of all specialty plates registered in that county. Miami-Dade County accounts for 46 percent of all Florida Marlins specialty plates. Miami-Dade is followed by Broward and Palm Beach Counties to the north, and Monroe County, which borders Miami-Dade to the south and west. Similarly, Tampa Bay Rays plates were most popular in Pinellas County, home of the Rays, and neighboring Hillsborough County, which is home to the city of Tampa. The surrounding counties of

**Figure 8. Florida Marlins specialty license plates, percentage of total specialty plates by county**



**Figure 9. Tampa Bay Rays specialty license plates, percentage of total specialty plates by county**

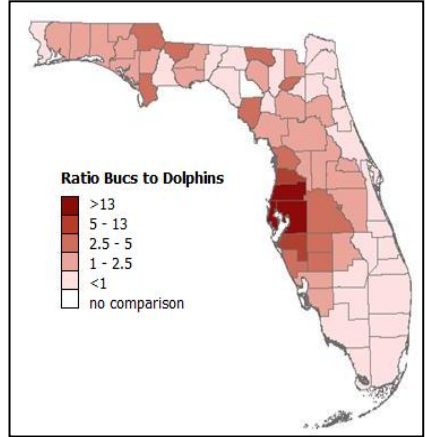


*Source: Calculated from data available on the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website (2010b). Maps created by Author 1.*

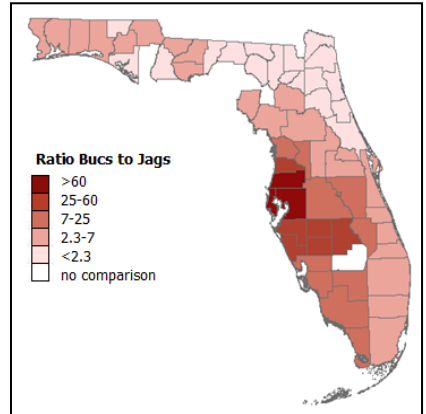
Pasco, Manatee, Hernando, Sarasota, Hamilton and Polk were also common sites for Tampa Bay Rays specialty license plates.

While it is rather intuitive that specialty license plate sales will be highest close to a professional team's home stadium or arena, these types of plates can also help delineate where one fan region ends (or weakens) and another fan region begins (or strengthens). For example, Figure 10 compares the sales of specialty license plates for the National Football League's Tampa Bay Buccaneers with that of the NFL's Miami Dolphins. In this case, we examine the ratio of Buccaneers plates sold for every one Dolphins plate issued. While Buccaneers plates sold well in Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas Counties, such plates struggle against Dolphins plates in south Florida and in counties along Florida's east coast. Both plates are competitive in north Florida, with Buccaneers plates performing stronger in northwest Florida. Figure 11 displays a similar comparison, this time the distribution of Buccaneers plates versus those of Florida's third NFL team, the Jacksonville Jaguars. Again, the Buccaneers plates perform well close to the team's base, but are outperformed in northeast Florida by Jaguars plates. However, the

**Figure 10. Ratio of Tampa Bay Buccaneers specialty license plates per Miami Dolphins plates**



**Figure 11. Ratio of Tampa Bay Buccaneers specialty license plates per Jacksonville Jaguars Plates**



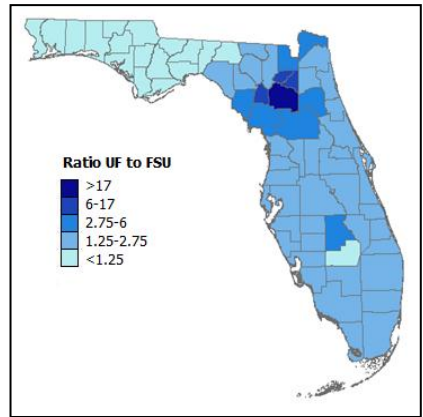
*Source: Calculated from data available on the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website (2010b). Created by Author 1.*

Buccaneers plate outsells Jaguar plates in southern Florida, especially southwest Florida. Therefore, through such an analysis, we can deduce the general fan regions for the three professional football teams in Florida.

Similarly, by examining specialty license plates we can determine fan regions for collegiate sports teams. While the sale of collegiate specialty license plates are primarily geared towards the academic institutions, with proceeds benefiting academic scholarship programs, it would be a mistake to not attribute the sale of specialty plates for the state's top universities to their respective athletic programs (see, for example, *University of Florida News* 2008). It is not unfair to suggest that such plates are geared more towards the universities' athletic prowess than their academic reputation given that the specialty plate designs for the University of Florida, Florida State University, University of Miami, and University of South Florida prominently feature these schools' athletic logos rather than their universities' seals.

Specialty license plates for the University of Florida (UF), the top seller during the study period, sell extremely well in its home county of Alachua, as well as counties with large populations such as Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, and Orange. When compared to the sales of Florida State (FSU) license plates, UF's chief sports rival, the popularity of the UF plate becomes concentrated around Alachua County (Figure 12). The UF plate enjoys moderate success in peninsular Florida, but lags behind the FSU plate in the Panhandle. Compared to the University of Miami

**Figure 12. Ratio of University of Florida specialty license plates per Florida State University plates.**

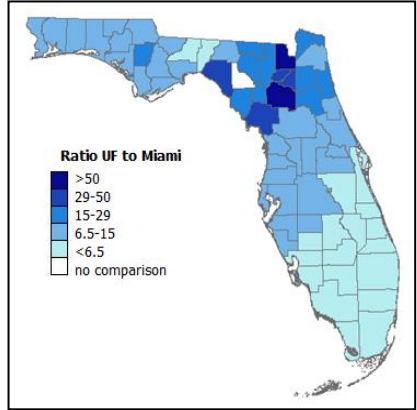


*Source: Calculated from data available on the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website (2010b). Map created by Author 1.*

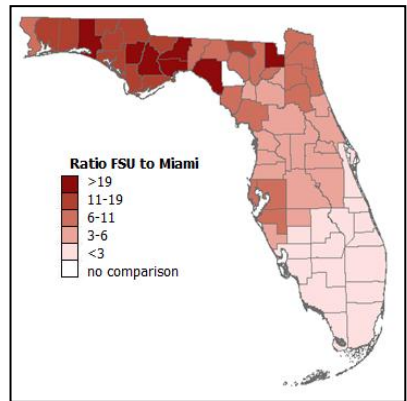
(UM) plates, UF plates struggle in south Florida, but dominate in northeast Florida (see Figure 13). UF plates sell well compared to UM plates in the Panhandle, with the exception of Leon County, home to Florida State. Not surprisingly FSU plates far outsell UM plates in north Florida, while UM specialty plates remain concentrated in south Florida (Figure 14). Similar comparisons can be made with the University of Central Florida and the University of South Florida, as well as between the state's two major Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) – Florida A&M University, located in Tallahassee, and Bethune-Cookman University, located in Daytona Beach.

Smaller Florida colleges and universities that do not enjoy the same exposure as the University of Florida or Florida State do not possess a wide distribution of their respective specialty license plates. However, by mapping out the sales of these smaller universities, we can clearly locate the home county of those institutions. For example, nearly 59 percent of all specialty license plates for Edward Waters College were issued in Duval County, home of the HBCU. Specialty plates for Warner University, located in Lake Wales in Polk County, are the most concentrated of all specialty license plates; 62 percent of Warner's

**Figure 13. Ratio of University of Florida specialty license plates per University of Miami plates**



**Figure 14. Ratio of Florida State University specialty license plates per University of Miami plates**



*Source: Calculated from data available on the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website (2010b). Created by Author 1.*

plates are issued in Polk County. Plates for Clearwater Christian College, the state’s specialty license plate with the smallest number of plates sold, are concentrated in its home county. Of the 75 Clearwater Christian College plates sold in 2009, 30, or 40 percent, were issued in Pinellas County.

As these examples illustrate, the geography of specialty license plates can not only demonstrate fan regions, but can also be used to measure the extent of influence of the state’s colleges and universities.

*Recreation, Social Issues and Military Plates*

The second group of specialty license plates includes those that focus on social issues, health issues, and the armed forces. Many of these plates are categorized by the state of Florida under the generic label “miscellaneous.” There are 49 “miscellaneous” plates ranging in topics from Stop Heart Disease to NASCAR to Support Our Troops. Some, such as the Challenger/Columbia and Choose Life plates, are among the most popular, while others such as the American Red Cross and Horse Country plates are near the bottom in terms of sales. Many of these types of specialty license plates create particular patterns that follow demographic trends in Florida (Table 3).

**Table 3. Pearson’s Correlation between Select Demographic Indicators and Specialty License Plates**

	Percent White	Percent African-American	Percent over age of 64	Percent Poverty	Percent Professional	No English spoken at home	Less Than 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Education	Percent with Bachelor’s degree
Agriculture	-.203	.035	-.145	.535**	-.478**	.229	.710**	-.523**
Challenger	.225	-.314**	.248*	-.410**	.322**	.178	-.250*	.316**
Salutes Veterans	.386**	-.359**	.453**	-.166	-.189	-.189	-.133	-.201
Live the Dream	-.610**	.567**	-.347**	.390**	.070	.119	.249*	-.027
Share the Road	.100	-.081	.237	-.530**	.726**	.015	-.604**	.744**
Support Soccer	.039	-.213	.140	-.258*	.280*	.438**	-.004	.354**
United We Stand	.372**	-.367**	.465**	-.453**	.141	.087	-.298	.261*

\*\*Significant at .01

\*Significant at .05

Source: Calculated by Authors



## *The Florida Geographer*

Geographic concentrations of sales for many of the recreation-themed specialty plates can either be explained by where the activity holds organized events or mirror demographic trends in the state. With the headquarters for the Florida Youth Soccer Association and the Florida State Soccer Association both located in peninsular Florida – Orlando and Tampa respectively – it is not surprising that the Support Soccer plates are popular in that region. Areas with a significant number of households that do not speak English well may aid in interpreting the pattern of Support Soccer plates (Pearson’s correlation 0.438). Part of this potential relationship is explained by large populations of immigrants, particularly Hispanics, living in south Florida (see Somers 2008, Hispanic Market Weekly 2009, Ortiz 2009). The pattern for the Play Tennis plates is a bit more dispersed than the Support Soccer plates. However, counties where the plate is popular tend to be those with notable tennis resorts, including Okaloosa, Hillsborough, Manatee, Sarasota, and Nassau, as well as Volusia County, which is home to the United States Tennis Association’s Florida branch. Share the Road license plates, which benefit bicycle organizations in the state, are most common in Alachua and Leon counties, both home to the two largest state universities in Florida. Not surprisingly, these two counties have the highest percentage of people with bachelor degrees and those working in management or professional fields, both indicators with which the Share the Road plate positively correlates (.744 and .726 respectively). Finally, over 11 percent of all Horse Country plates are issued in Marion County. The city of Ocala, located in Marion, is well-known for its thoroughbreds and is the birthplace of the last U.S. Triple Crown winner, Affirmed.

In terms of specialty license plates with social implications, the Live the Dream plate, which commemorates the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., tends to do well in north Florida compared to south Florida. Other than DeSoto and Hendry counties, counties in the north tend to have a higher percentage of their specialty plates be Live the Dream than other parts of the state. Given the importance of Martin Luther King, Jr. in African American history and memory (Dwyer and Alderman 2008), it should come as no surprise that counties with a higher percentage of African Americans tend to have more Live the

Dream plates than counties with a lower percentage of African Americans. Thus, the Live the Dream plates appear to be associated with counties with sizable African American communities (Pearson's correlation of .567). Two other social plates, Florida Salutes Veterans and United We Stand, are both common in areas with higher percentages of people over the age of 64 (.453 and .465 respectively), suggesting a relationship between those plates and senior citizens. Finally, there may be a relationship between the Agriculture specialty license plates and counties with high rates of poverty (.535), as well as individuals with no more than a ninth grade education (.710). Counties that have a significant proportion of the Agriculture plates include southern, citrus-growing counties of Glades, Hardee, and Hendry, as well northern counties such as Gilchrist and Lafayette where agriculture is the primary economic activity. Military specialty license plates reflect areas of the state where particular military installations are located. Air Force plates are popular in Okaloosa County (Eglin Air Force Base), Bay County (Tyndall Air Force Base), and Brevard County (Patrick Air Force Base), as well Santa Rosa County, which neighbors Okaloosa County; Hillsborough County, home of MacDill Air Force Base, lags behind. Navy plates account for a significant portion of specialty plates in Escambia County (Naval Air Station Pensacola), neighboring Santa Rosa County (NAS Whiting Field), and to a lesser extent Duval County (Naval Station Mayport and NAS Jacksonville).

Each of these examples reflect either key areas where certain activities take place or the state's demographic trends.

### *Environmental Plates*

The final group of specialty license plates examined is environmental plates, plates that raise awareness of the state's flora and fauna, and features of the state's physical geography (Figure 15). These plates tend to be concentrated close to the areas of concern and reflect the physical geography of the state of Florida.

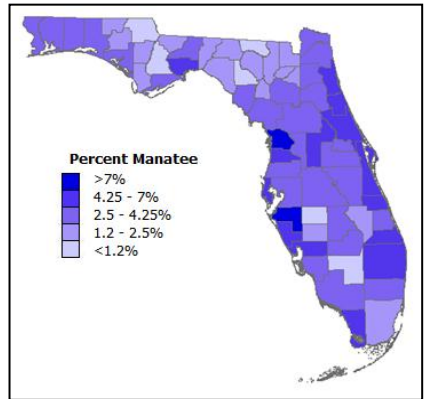
Formerly the number one selling specialty license plate in Florida, the Protect the Panther plates are issued throughout the state. When the percentage of Panther plates issued in each county is examined a geographic pattern emerges that paints a picture of the current home of this endangered species. South Florida, in particular the counties Collier, Palm Beach, Hendry, Lee and Broward, have a significant proportion of Panther plate sales reflecting the limited area where the panther now resides (The Florida Panther Society, Inc. 2010). Similarly, the Save the Manatee license plates also enjoy widespread issuance, but in particular make up a significant percentage of specialty plates in Citrus County, Sarasota County, and, appropriately enough, Manatee County, all areas of noteworthy manatee populations (Figure 16). Helping Sea Turtles Survive plates are common in areas of known, widespread sea turtle nesting areas, including Indian River, Martin, and Palm Beach counties on the Atlantic coast, and Franklin, Gulf and Sarasota counties on the Gulf coast (Figure 17).

**Figure 15. Selection of Florida environmental specialty license plates**



*Source: Photographed by Author 2 from Author 2's collection.*

**Figure 16. Save the Manatee specialty license plates as percentage of total specialty plates by county**



*Source: Calculated from data available on the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website (2010b). Created by Author 1.*

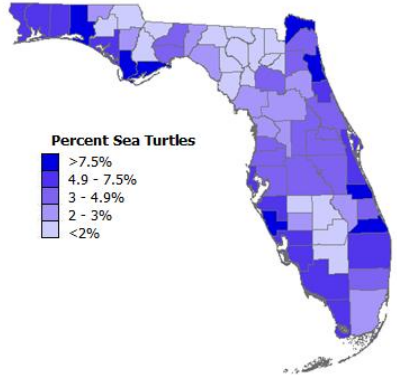
Specialty license plates that support a particular physical feature tend to concentrate around that given feature. With the exception of Franklin County, which is located in the Panhandle, sales of the Everglades plate are concentrated in southwest Florida (see Figure 18). The Indian River Lagoon plate is popular in counties in which the lagoon is located – Indian River County, Martin County, Brevard County, St. Lucie County and Volusia County (Figure 19).

### Discussion

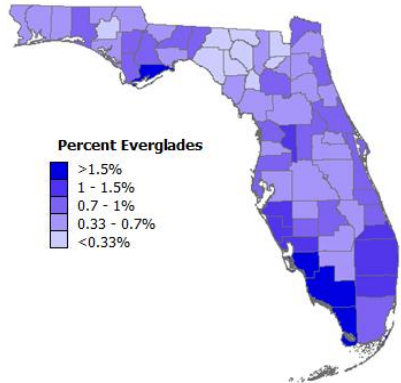
With this paper, we have demonstrated various ways through which the geography of Florida can be understood by studying the state’s issuance of specialty license plates. However, there are a few inherent problems with using such plates to draw conclusions about the geography of Florida.

First, while correlations can be made with regards to some plates, there are often other factors that explain the pattern of a given plate. The specialty license plate that commemorates the space shuttle tragedies – originally commemorating the Challenger accident, the plate now incorporates the 2003 Columbia tragedy – negatively correlates to

**Figure 17. Helping Sea Turtles Survive specialty license plates as percentage of total specialty plates by county**



**Figure 18. Everglades specialty license plates as percentage of total specialty plates by county**



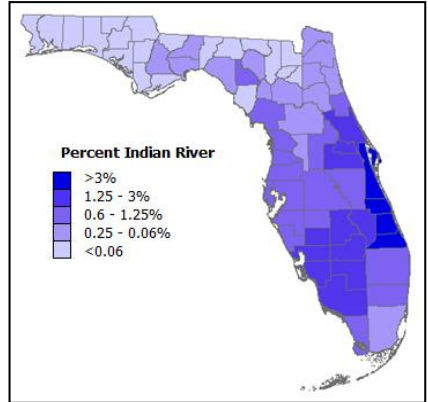
*Source: Calculated from data available on the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website (2010b). Created by Author 1.*

counties with high percentages of African American populations (-.314). However, sales of the space shuttle plate are primarily concentrated in Brevard County – home of John F. Kennedy Space Center – and surrounding counties (an area also known as the ‘Space Coast’). The significance of Challenger/Columbia plate sales decrease with distance from Brevard County, leading to lower ratios of the space shuttle plates in areas such as north Florida, where a higher percentage of African Americans live. Thus, distance from Cape Canaveral, rather than racial factors per se, better explain the geography of the Challenger/Columbia plates.

Second, some plates do not fit clear patterns or offer no feasible explanation for the patterns that do exist. The Support Education specialty license plate is popular in Osceola and Hamilton counties. However, one cannot assume that these counties support education more than Monroe or Calhoun counties, both of which rank near the bottom in the ratio of Education plates sold.

Third, because purchasing a specialty license plate entails paying additional fees – most cost an additional \$25 – on top of standard vehicle registration fees, total cost could have an effect on an automobile owner’s willingness or ability to purchase such a plate. Floridians without additional income to spend on specialty license plates may not be able to purchase a plate that displays their beliefs in a cause or support for a team. That cost can have an effect on the sale of license plates is reflected in the decline in total sales of specialty license plates in 2009, which is due in part to an increase in automobile registration fees (Smith 2010). The economic impact on the purchasing of specialty

**Figure 19. Indian River Lagoon specialty license plates as percentage of total specialty plates by county**



*Source: Calculated from data available on the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles website (2010b). Map created by Author 1.*

license plates can be seen in the correlation between the percent change of sales and poverty (Pearson's correlation 0.366). Counties that experienced a negative change in sales tended to be among the most impoverished counties in Florida. This pattern is reinforced by the fact that counties with low rates of poverty tended to have a higher ratio of specialty license plates to standard state-issued plates (Pearson's correlation -0.469).

## **Conclusion**

Nevertheless, from the examples provided above, it is clear that the issuance of specialty license plates in Florida help paint a picture of the geography of the state. Certainly, as Leib (forthcoming) suggests, there are many other avenues for geographers to explore with regards to specialty license plates. Such future topics with regards to the present research include how the geographic patterns has changed over multiple years, and how the pattern of sales in Florida compares to the patterns in other states that issue a large variety of specialty license plates (such as Maryland, Tennessee and Virginia). Regardless, it is clear that license plates, whether standard, state-issued plates or specialty plates, are more than simply a way to register one's vehicle with the state.

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