



## **Restoring ZBGA: Quality jobs and economic engines, safe experiences with the natural world, and inspiring environmental education in every corner of NY State**

**January 27, 2021**

**2021 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing, Environmental Conservation**

The Honorable Liz Krueger, Helene Weinstein, Todd Kaminsky, and Steven Englebright:

From the *Buffalo Zoo* to Suffolk County's *Riverhead Foundation for Marine Research* and everywhere in between, the Zoos, Botanical Gardens, and Aquaria (ZBGA) line of the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) directly supports *essential* staff caring for living collections of 95 zoos, botanical gardens, nature centers and aquaria in every corner of NY State. This forty-three year success story would not be possible without the leadership and support of the NY State Assembly and Senate. Thank you!

The SFY 21/22 Executive Budget proposes a \$300M EPF, which is the continuation of historic investment in this important, dedicated fund. **For reasons that are not clear, the Executive Budget also disproportionately cuts the ZBGA appropriation by 19%, reducing the statewide fund from \$16M down to \$13M.**

**A \$3M cut to ZBGA may result in proportionate cuts to each grant recipient – a reduction too severe for any non-profit organization, even in the best of times.** Like every business, living museums face unprecedented challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Safety of staff and visitors always comes first, but essential staff need to care every day for living animals and plants—one cannot just quarantine the penguins in the basement until the pandemic passes. Living museums have proven we are safe experiences for the public and families by enforcing behavior science has shown to be effective – social distancing, outdoor experiences, and mask wearing. Yet almost one year into this crisis, living museums remain subject to an outdoor 33% capacity restriction. This capacity mandate, while understandable in the early days, severely restricts earned income that supports jobs and forces many institutions to turn away New Yorkers seeking outdoor activities.

**Living Museums statewide are extremely grateful to the NY Assembly and Senate for growing and protecting this program over the last decade, and again ask you to make ZBGA restoration a priority with your leadership and in your one-house budgets.**

**Here are just three reasons why restoration should be a priority:**

### **1.) Restoring ZBGA to \$16M helps keep outdoor museums accessible to the public at a time when families need outdoor experiences:**

New Yorkers yearn for safe outdoor experiences as evidenced in the million plus audiences welcomed since our collective re-openings in July. Local residents want a curated experience, with timed entries and capacity limits that keep their family safer than alternative outdoor experiences without such controls and safeguards. We receive appreciation every day for our enforcement of mask wearing, social distancing practices, and careful, daily monitoring of our employees' health.

**Access to safe green space, particularly in urban areas, is an issue of equity and fairness.** Our visitors are often our neighbors, many of whom are not able to travel to one of our magnificent State Parks. In staying close to home, many also experience large crowds and the lack of safety enforcement in our municipal park system. Even though living museums' earned income has been curtailed by the 33% capacity restriction, all of us have created new programs for reduced or no-cost admissions. In short, botanical gardens and zoos help to meet demand for outdoor space at a time when New Yorkers' mental and physical health need the extra boost resulting from time outdoors.

## **2.) Restoring ZBGA to \$16M maintains employment and fuels local economic development:**

Living museums provide more than quality environmental education and uniquely beautiful tourist destinations; they are strong economic engines during difficult times. Leveraging ZBGA funding awarded through a competitive grants process, living museums employ at least 4210 full-time and 2728 part-time New York State residents and generate hundreds of millions of dollars each year for the state in tourism dollars and economic development.

Institutions like the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences, the Utica Zoo, and the Theodore Roosevelt Sanctuary and Audubon Center on Long Island are core to stabilizing local economies by providing good paying jobs and supporting local businesses. **Wildlife Conservation Society** and the **New York Botanical Garden** both have a major economic impact upon the Bronx and New York City – generating significant amounts of employment, purchasing goods and services, and drawing visitors and visitor spending to the city. This impact benefits not just the private sector, but also generates substantial tax revenues through sales and income tax receipts from employees.

## **3.) Restoring ZBGA to \$16M maintains quality environmental literacy programs statewide:**

While living museums advance their missions by helping to breed and protect endangered species, addressing the impacts of global climate change, and fighting the spread of invasive species, we are most proud of educating and inspiring thousands of public school teachers and millions of school children, literally growing the next generation of conservation stewards. It is not a stretch to say that living museums are the state's heartbeat of ecological literacy. Critical to the goals of the EPF, living museums educate the next generation of conservation stewards and create an informed electorate that values and understands the severe threat to our planet posed by climate change.

In the time of COVID, living museums have pivoted to providing rich, educational experiences online for classrooms and teachers. **Education has not stopped**, and audiences have expanded for our free online activities for children and families. One example among many is: <https://www.nybg.org/planttalk/discover-evergreens-make-your-own-swag/>

For all these reasons—and so many more—living museums implore the Legislature to restore ZBGA and make this program whole in the adopted SFY 21 / 22 budget. For questions or further details, feel free to contact Aaron Bouska at [abouska@nybg.org](mailto:abouska@nybg.org). Thank you.