



**Testimony of  
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***Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2021 Executive Budget Proposal:  
Topic Environmental Conservation***

***January 27, 2021***

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) regarding the New York State Executive Budget released this month. While we are pleased to see that Governor Andrew Cuomo has proposed that New York's Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) continue to be funded at \$300 million in New York's SFY 21/22 executive budget, we are troubled to see that the Zoos, Botanical Gardens and Aquariums Program (ZBGA), within the EPF, is facing a \$3 million reduction. We, at WCS, respectfully ask you to restore the \$3 million reduction proposed in Governor Cuomo's SFY 21/22 Executive Budget.

Living museums, including zoos, aquariums and botanical gardens, provide millions of New Yorkers a cultural and educational experience every year, and are vital employers in communities across the state, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

WCS saves wildlife and wild places worldwide through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature. To achieve our mission, we harness the expertise in the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium with the power of our Global Conservation Program in approximately 60 countries. The Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium allow us to engage millions of New Yorkers each year to become involved in wildlife conservation. Through support like ZBGA, we are able to focus where it matters most—utilizing our scientific expertise to educate New Yorkers.

We thank and applaud the New York State Legislature for your tireless work to grow ZBGA funding to \$16 million statewide over the years. A cut to ZBGA of this magnitude could translate to major losses in ZBGA grant support for the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium – a reduction too severe for any non-profit organization to endure, especially during COVID-19. We have remained committed to maintaining our full-time staff during this pandemic as a number of our essential employees are specifically covered through ZBGA grant support. WCS essential staff have remained working onsite caring for the animals and maintaining park operations with strong safety protocols in place.

Living museums, like the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium, have faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic while serving as critical safe outdoor venues for millions of New York residents living in cities and beyond. The loss of earned revenue due to closures and reopenings at reduced capacity has been staggering. While our parks were closed to the public for several months, in accordance with New York State executive orders and guidance, the WCS zoos and aquarium never stopped caring for our collection of more than 17,000 animals and never stopped serving the public. With the safety of our staff and visitors a top priority, we have implemented safety protocols for our staff and guests, as well as shifted our public engagement and youth development programming to digital platforms during the closures and continue to strengthen these platforms since reopening.

Administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), the ZBGA Program has proven over the years its economic and environmental benefits to the entire state. ZBGA-funded living museums are critical networks that inspire and educate millions of students, their teachers, families, and the general public who visit our facilities. ZBGA supports the vital care of wildlife and plants at living museums in communities throughout every New York State county, and in turn we protect natural resources, as well as foster future generations of environmental stewards and STEM workers. These special places throughout the state generate hundreds of millions of dollars each year and are core to stabilizing local economies by providing good paying jobs and supporting local businesses. During this pandemic, living museums have proven to be safe experiences for the public and families by enforcing behavior that science has shown to be effective – social distancing, outdoor experiences, and mask wearing.

In short, New York's zoos, aquariums and botanical gardens 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. Living museums have continued to provide more than quality environmental education and uniquely beautiful tourist destinations; they are strong economic engines during these unprecedented and difficult times.

With a combined attendance of more than 2.5 million visitors annually, the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium, are both tourist and family destinations serving diverse audiences in some of the poorest congressional districts in the country. Our living collections help save endangered species, educate and inspire tens of thousands of teachers and children in environmental science, and help us maintain our award-winning programming and interactive educational experiences for diverse constituencies -- thanks to the support of ZBGA funds. In New York State, the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium employ more than 2,700 full-time, part-time, and seasonal employees. Additionally, WCS has more than 400,000 online advocates in New York State representing every State Assembly and Senate district.

Enhanced safety protocols for our staff and guests were put in place at the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium based on best known public health practices. Since reopening to the public, we've had more than 600,000 visitors come through the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium. More than ever, visitors are seeking safe outdoor opportunities to recreate, heal, and connect with nature. Destinations like the

Bronx Zoo have become models for best practices in welcoming the public at a time when regulated, safe outdoor spaces are one of the few venues families can visit together.

Governor Cuomo has consistently shown unprecedented support for New York State's environment, in particular by maintaining EPF funding during a difficult budget year. We respectfully request that this commitment continues and that the legislature maintain the \$300 million in the EPF and restore ZBGA back to \$16 million. Thank you.