

Testimony of Janet M. Torres
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Wildlife Conservation Society
On behalf of the Coalition of Living Museums
For the New York State Division of the Budget Town Hall Hearing
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My name is Janet Torres, Director of Government and Community Affairs for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). WCS is a private nonprofit working to save wildlife and wild lands in New York and around the world through science-based conservation and education from our Bronx Zoo headquarters. Today, I am here as a member of the Coalition of Living Museums, a nonprofit organization representing the interests of New York's living collection institutions. I'd like to thank the Division of Budget for holding this series of budget hearings, and for affording the Wildlife Conservation Society the opportunity to testify.

We recognize that, in the coming year, the state faces some challenging fiscal realities. However, the need for fiscal restraint notwithstanding, it is important to ensure that protecting and preserving New York's environment remains at the forefront of your budgetary decision-making.

WCS is a member of the Coalition of Living Museums (CLM). CLM's 98 member institutions span 44 counties and represent a diverse cross-section of New York's zoos, botanical gardens, aquariums, arboretums and nature centers.

Like other cultural centers, our "living museums" aim to educate and inspire the public. However, we require constant intensive care of our wildlife and plants. Living museums generate millions of dollars each year for the state in tourism and economic development.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2005, the ZBGA program was moved into the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and increased to \$6 million (the first increase in 20 years). In FY 2007, the EPF was expanded to \$250 million and within it, the Zoos, Botanical Gardens and Aquaria program (ZBGA) was increased to \$8 million. This is a tremendous step forward in our battle to protect New York's environment today, tomorrow, and for generations to come.

ZBGA was intended to provide 10 percent of the combined operating costs of New York's living museums, but has failed to keep up with the rising costs of these facilities. Municipal support also has not kept up with inflation and funding remains stagnant. In addition, it is increasingly difficult for us to raise private funds from foundations for basic operations and maintenance since foundations prefer to support specific programs rather than general operating costs. The ZBGA program serves a critical role in providing the basic care necessary to keep our animals healthy and thriving. Our living collection requires constant care, even during times of economic hardship. Unlike art galleries, the Bronx Zoo cannot close a wing when funds are low.

WCS has a combined collection of more than 17,000 animals of over 1,200 species. Our spectacular collection of wildlife educates and excites the minds of approximately four million visitors each year. Funding from the ZBGA allows the Bronx Zoo and the New York Aquarium to purchase vital animal medicines, collection supplies, and food. The lives of our animals depend on the funding we receive through ZBGA.

To help New York's living museums survive in these difficult times, we ask that the FY2008-2009 State Budget include a \$300 million itemized EPF with a schedule for the fund to grow to \$500 million by 2010, with an accompanying permanent increase in dedicated real estate transfer fee revenue. On behalf of the Coalition of Living Museums, I urge you to increase ZBGA to \$10 million. As we strive to increase the EPF to \$500 million in 3 years, we hope ZBGA will grow with it, to \$20 million annually. This would represent a giant step in combating the toll taken by inflation over the years.

WCS works on the front lines of climate change by looking at how increasing temperatures are affecting nesting birds and other wildlife in the Alaskan Arctic. The Wildlife Conservation Society has also been an outspoken proponent on the issue of forest carbon. Current data shows that more than 20 percent of the world's annual carbon emissions – which totals more than the entire United States produces – come from deforestation in tropical areas around the world. By working to safeguard tropical regions from deforestation, we are doing our part to help cool the planet. In other words, if you want to save a polar bear from the effects of climate change, then the best way to do it is to save gorilla habitat in the Congo, or the jaguar's home in Brazil.

On the local front, WCS is a partner in the new Urban Assembly School for Wildlife Conservation in the Bronx. It is the first school of its kind in the world and we are committed to training the next stewards of the environment. In addition, WCS has administered \$14 million in grants from the Federal government to community organizations to restore the Bronx River.

In our commitment to preserving the environment, WCS has partnered in other broader environmental causes. We support updating the existing bottle deposit law—New York's most successful recycling and litter prevention program—by including non-carbonated beverages such as bottled water, iced tea and sports drinks. It would also require beverage companies to

return any unclaimed deposits to the Environmental Protection Fund to fund recycling and other environmental programs. We strongly urge you to include the Bigger, Better Bottle Bill in the executive budget, as its adoption would result in significant environmental and fiscal benefits to all New Yorkers. Adoption of the updated bottle bill will go a long way toward bringing us closer to our goal of a \$500 million EPF and \$20 million ZBGA by 2010.

I hope you will agree that living museums play an important and unique role in the education of our youth and the future of New York State's environment. We look forward to working with you to grow these vital environmental programs.

Thank you.