



Testimony to the joint State Assembly and Senate Committees on Environmental Conservation

Daisy Rodríguez

Executive Director, Government & Community Affairs

Wildlife Conservation Society

Re: Zoos, Botanical Gardens and Aquaria (ZBGA) SFY24/25 Budget Restorations

February 6, 2024

I would like to thank Chair Glick, Chair Harckham, and members of the Assembly and Senate Committee on Environmental Conservation for the opportunity to testify regarding the New York State Executive Budget released this past month by Governor Kathy Hochul. My name is Daisy Rodriguez, and I am the Executive Director of Government & Community Affairs at the Wildlife Conservation Society.

The Governor's Executive Budget for SFY 24/25 proposes diverting \$25 million of the Environment Protection Fund's (EPF) \$400 million to cover state agency staffing expenses. This proposed offload would not only slash numerous vital EPF programs but would also significantly shrink funding for the Zoos, Botanical Gardens and Aquaria Program's (ZBGA) by 15%, reducing the statewide fund from \$20 million to \$17 million. As such, a \$3 million cut to ZBGA would lead to proportionate grant reductions to over 90 living museums across the state, a burden too heavy to bear for any non-profit organization, particularly in these challenging times. As such, we thank you for your strong historical support for these vital environmental programs and ask the Legislature to reject these cuts to the EPF and restore ZBGA to at least \$20 million.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) combines the power of its zoos and an aquarium in New York City and a Global Conservation Program in more than 50 countries to achieve its mission to save wildlife and wild places. WCS runs the world's largest conservation field program, protecting more than 50 percent of Earth's known biodiversity; in partnership with governments, Indigenous People, Local Communities, and the private sector. Its four zoos and aquarium (including the Bronx Zoo and the New York Aquarium) welcome more than 3.5 million visitors each year, inspiring generations to care for nature.

At the core of our initiative lies the involvement of millions of New Yorkers annually through the work at the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium. By empowering individuals to become proactive participants in wildlife conservation, we aim to foster a sense of shared responsibility. ZBGA's crucial support for the care of our Zoo's and Aquarium's animals helps us make our parks accessible to New Yorkers, educating and inspiring them to take meaningful actions in support of conservation efforts.

However, living museums such as the Bronx Zoo and New York Aquarium are grappling with rapidly escalating operating costs and debilitating local budget cuts. Despite diligent efforts to minimize expenses and operate efficiently, essential tasks such as feeding animals and nurturing botanical collections, as well as funding the salaries of staff responsible for these critical functions, cannot be compromised. Living museums have proven to be a wise investment for New York State throughout the

four decades of ZBGA support. We serve as economic engines, creating well-paying jobs, functioning as dynamic STEM educational hubs that annually educate over a million schoolchildren, and provide safe green spaces that are accessible to all New Yorkers.

The Coalition of Living Museums (CLM), comprising all ZBGA grantees, collectively oversees and meticulously curates more than 160,000 acres of green space across the state, ensuring these natural sanctuaries remain preserved for the enjoyment and education of all New Yorkers. Through a diverse array of programming, the CLM provides over 200,000 hours of access to these green spaces, fostering a deeper connection to the natural world among New Yorkers.

With a combined operating budget totaling \$600 million, the CLM serves as a significant economic engine throughout the state of New York, injecting vital resources into local economies and communities. This substantial investment supports the employment of over 14,000 individuals across CLM organizations, providing stable livelihoods for New Yorkers.

The impact of the CLM extends far beyond its immediate workforce and participants. Annually, over 10 million visitors benefit from CLM programming and access, with more than 2 million enjoying free or reduced-rate admission, ensuring that these invaluable resources remain accessible to all. Additionally, the support of 410,000 members and the dedication of 16,000 volunteers further underscores the widespread commitment to the CLM's mission and vision.

Perhaps most significantly, the CLM serves as a cornerstone of education, with over 1 million school children benefiting from the enriching experiences provided by CLM programming. These educational initiatives not only foster a love for nature but also cultivate critical thinking skills and environmental awareness among the next generation of stewards.

Living museums across the state extend heartfelt gratitude to the New York Assembly and Senate for their steadfast support and protection of this program over the past decade. We implore you to reject the proposed cuts and diversions from the EPF and to actively strive toward restoring ZBGA funding to at least \$20 million.