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A shame animals can't vote

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The overarching problem for key environmental issues in Governor Paterson's Draconian proposed 2010-11 state budget is that bluebirds don't vote.

Neither do kestrels, rainbow trout, hemlocks or park benches.

So trusting the state Legislature in an election year to restore a proper sense of perspective or balance to a bare-bones budget is a chancy business at best. There are so many eager and deserving New York hands out there seeking more state funds for their particular special interest, in an economy that can't sustain them all. Hands and voices that also go into voting booths, a fact not wasted on our elected officials. What chance does the hemlock have in that equation?

Here's what appalls me most about Paterson's budget proposal in terms of the environment: first, that he made disproportionate cuts to signature programs and agencies and, second, that he implicitly relies on the yearly cat dance with the Legislature for whatever funds that might be restored in the process.

That's not leadership; it's playing Russian roulette with the needs of clean water, pure air, wetlands, farms, parks and the rural economy.

When I say disproportionate cuts, the truth is staggering. The proposed budget cuts most state agencies and programs by single-digit percentage points. But the Environmental Protection Fund, which fuels a host of environmental programs, farm protection and rural economic development, would be cut by a third. That, after the EPF was swept in the recent past of a half billion dollars.

Of the 650 state jobs projected to be lost in Paterson's proposal, 130 of them are in the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the tiny Adirondack Park Agency. The DEC will lose 54 positions at a time when it already is cut deep into the bone. Thanks to a series of idiotic cuts that began in earnest during the Pataki years, field staff and institutional memory have all but disappeared from an agency that our state constitution mandates as steward to the land, the water, the air and all the creatures therein. Given the agency's horribly reduced manpower, that is becoming virtually impossible to do.

If Paterson's lopsided budget is implemented, state parks will close. How many and which ones, the parks office isn't saying yet. But expect to hear more about that this week during legislative hearings. Paterson wants to cut that agency's budget by nearly 20 percent. That would bring the cuts to a total of nearly 40 percent in 18 months. He's waging war on parks. What a travesty.

State parks aren't just beautiful places to visit and recreational hubs, or luxuries as the governor seems to imply. In rural areas up here, state parks are little economic engines, returning many times their budgeted costs to localities.

Land acquisition funding took a real drubbing, from \$59 million last year to zero in Paterson's proposal. A startling drop to be sure, although given the state's economic distress not as shocking as it might seem. The governor knows full well that relatively well-off intermediaries like the Open Space Institute and The Nature Conservancy can afford to be somewhat more flexible as to when they get paid. These entities are holding vast amounts of real estate for us, much of which will eventually become part of the forest preserve in the Adirondacks.

But that doesn't mean The Nature Conservancy especially, with its \$110 million commitment to the Finch Pruyn lands, shouldn't be a bit nervous about the state zeroing out land acquisition funding. Even a partial unraveling of that deal would be devastating to the future of the Adirondack Park. A token amount in that account, and words of reassurance to reaffirm commitments the state has made for these purchases is the least we ought to be doing. But so far, nothing. Silence breeds suspicion, deep suspicion.

If there's a pattern, and I think there is, it is a dismaying one for rural upstate, for environmental protection. This is an administration that is indifferent to the environment at best, and hostile at worst. There simply doesn't seem to be a feel for the needs of rural upstate. The governor and his closest advisors are downstate urban types, and I know it's an awful stereotype, but I don't think they know any better.

But hypocrisy, they certainly know, and they are steeped in it. At the same time he is vilifying the Legislature for just about everything, the governor is also placing legislators in the unpopular position of growing the budget. That's going to have to happen to save aspects of the Environmental Protection Fund, and to give our stewardship agencies, notably the DEC, a fighting chance. That's the right thing, the ethical thing to do.

What the governor and his key advisors have to get over is accusing those who disagree with him of being unethical. For example, his playing drum major in support of blowing the cap off charter schools got exactly what it deserved. The Legislature got no credit for standing up and saying "no." Well, it's getting credit here.

Along the same lines, the governor can be right in principle that the state budget should be as close to zero growth as we can collectively get it. But that doesn't make him automatically right about managing the particulars. I know his people got it wrong when it

comes to the environment. Let's see what the Legislature can do to make bluebirds smile again.

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