

Granholm should consider her conservation legacy

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BY LISA WOZNAK

For most governors, the Big Three are the economy, crime and education -- the issues that define their campaigns and time in office. But in history's rearview mirror, it is often conservation that makes a legacy.

Although he served just one term in the Wisconsin executive office, 1959-62, Gaylord Nelson won the nickname "the conservation governor" for proposing a massive recreational land acquisition and development initiative, the Outdoor Recreation Action Program, funded by a one-cent cigarette tax. Known internationally for his launching of Earth Day in 1970 while he was a U.S. senator, Nelson as governor started a program that, within 20 years, had acquired more than 450,000 acres for the people of Wisconsin.

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As Oregon's top elected official from 1967-75, Tom McCall championed a land-use law that helped protect the state's spectacular landscapes during a time of unprecedented population growth, and another law that protected public access to the state's Pacific beaches.

As Michigan's governor from 1969-82, William Milliken addressed many issues, but today he is most clearly identified with environmental and conservation battles. Thanks in large part to Milliken, Michigan has enjoyed a nationally significant bottle and can deposit law that has cleaned up roadside litter, recycled millions of pounds of aluminum and glass, and reduced energy consumption for almost 30 years.

What will Gov. Jennifer Granholm's legacy be?

No one can know, of course. In 50 years, historians may define the Granholm years as a time dominated by fights over state taxes and spending.

But there's also a chance that Granholm could be remembered as the chief executive who assured Michigan's natural beauty and natural resources did not suffer historic disinvestment and decline. And, in the process, she could also be the governor who demonstrated that protecting these natural assets was a crucial part of the state's economic transformation.

Since the new century began, Michigan general fund tax dollars devoted to conservation have plummeted far more than the overall budget decline. State campgrounds have closed. Maintenance of state parks has been deferred. Critical programs to protect air and water have been shortchanged.

The trend is grave, and it will only get worse without strong executive leadership, showing environmental creativity, courage and a willingness to learn from other states.

Missouri has, since 1976, earmarked a voter-approved portion of its sales tax for conservation. The levy now reaps more than \$100 million annually. A 2000 survey showed that 81% of Missourians support the job the state is doing. A well-crafted, well-communicated conservation plan for Michigan might also pass muster with voters.

If raising and earmarking taxes for conservation sounds outlandish in an era of "tax recall boot camps," the governor might consider other financing options. The state's constitutionally protected Natural Resources Trust Fund could be amended to increase the annual amount of revenue available to purchase and develop parks and habitat for native species. Only one-third of the annual receipts and earnings are now spendable each year. Even more attractively, Michigan voters could be asked to authorize \$1 billion or more of bonds, using Trust Fund revenues to pay them off, with the money invested in long-term natural resource protection.

As Gaylord Nelson said in 2000, "We have finally come to understand that the real wealth of a nation is its air, water, soil, forest, rivers, lakes, oceans, scenic beauty, wildlife habitats and biodiversity. Take this resource away, and all that is left is a wasteland. That's the whole economy."

Nelson was out front in this issue in the early 1960s and, as a result, he is remembered for it. It's not too late for Granholm to be remembered as a conservation governor, too.

*LISA WOZNIAK is executive director of the Michigan League of Conservation Voters, which has just released a report titled, "Losing a Legacy: Why Michigan's Magnificent Places are at Risk," outlining the implications of the demise of DEQ and DNR funding. You can view the report at [www.michiganlcv.org](http://www.michiganlcv.org).*

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