



New York State's paleo-agenda: Right to bear spears, traps

Myriad state proposals include hands-on hunting and fishing

By Rick Karlin
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Albany - If our hunter-gatherer ancestors had political party affiliations, anthropologists haven't turned up evidence of them. But it's likely they would have approved of what might be described as a paleo-agenda for the new legislative session.

During the past week, lawmakers offered up bills to allow commercial spear fishing for striped bass, and to permit the hand-capturing and trapping of snapping turtles.

There's also a proposal to mandate a unit on hunting and fishing in high school physical education courses.

And Tuesday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo in his budget presentation said he wanted to allow crossbow hunting in New York.

Some of these proposals have come and gone over the years, and they are a reminder that budgets, school funding, ethics and campaign finance reform aren't the only issues politicians deal with.

Sometimes they must respond to an infestation of yard pests, which is one of the reasons cited for the turtle-trapping bill sponsored by Central New York's Sen. David Valesky, a member of the Independent Democratic Conference.

While it's legal to hunt turtles with a firearm or long bow, they can't be trapped or taken by hand.

In addition to hunters, some people want to be able to use live traps to remove the creatures, who have a reputation for biting and laying a large number of eggs, from their yards.

The proposed bill also notes that "snapping turtles were historically harvested for food."

The bill was discussed recently but held back during a Senate Conservation Committee meeting earlier in the week.

One reason: The proposal has terrapin fanciers shell-shocked — sorry — and they're fighting back with a letter campaign.

"We're concerned about the decline in snapping turtles," said Collette Adkins-Giese, an attorney with the national Center for Biological Diversity.

Adkins-Giese said turtles aren't like deer or other quick-breeding, high-population groups; the organization fears mass trapping for ethnic markets — turtle soup is considered a Chinese delicacy — could empty entire stretches of river.

Also being proposed is a measure by Republican Sen. Kenneth LaValle from eastern Long Island, that would allow commercial spear fishing for striped bass. Recreational spear fishermen can currently take the fish, and the legislation suggests there is a market for the species, which can be served extra-fresh if they are taken with a spear.

These bills were briefly discussed during a Senate Conservation Committee meeting on Thursday, two days after Cuomo said he wanted to allow crossbow hunting. The sport had been legal under a temporary program which expired in 2012.

Detractors, including those who hunt with traditional compound or long bows, question the authenticity of crossbow hunting, and they don't want the two seasons to run simultaneously. Crossbow supporters say it allows older or disabled hunters, who can't pull the compound bow on a traditional weapon, to participate.

Also considered was a bill from Catskills Republican John Bonacic that would mandate a course in hunting and fishing in high school physical education classes.

The idea is to encourage outdoor activity and put hunting and fishing in a positive light.

One committee member, Duanesburg Democratic Sen. Cecilia Tkaczyk, said she opposed it since it would be an unfunded mandate on the schools.