

Black to the Future

Lawmaker looks ahead to protect the environment.

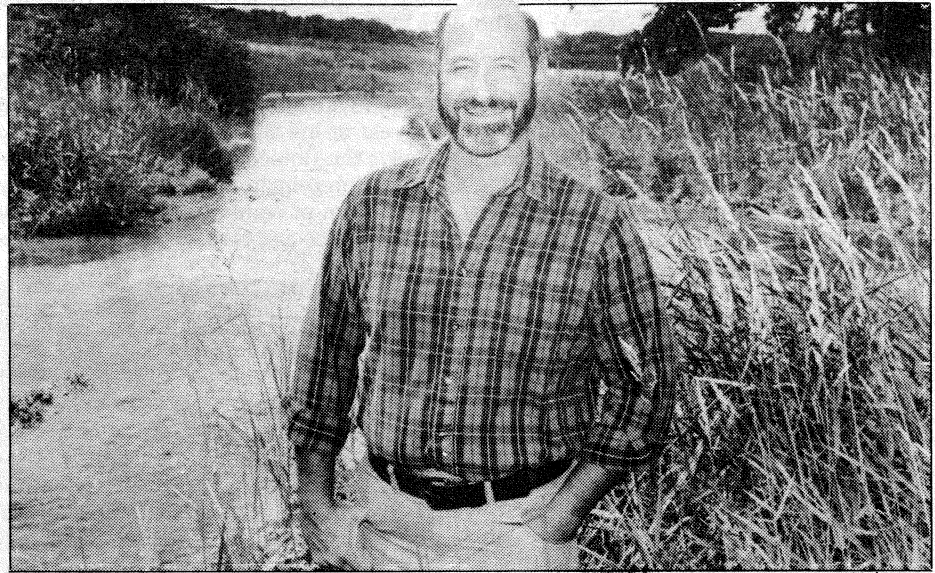
BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Spencer Black (D-Madison) represents Wisconsin's 77th Assembly District. Now in his fifth term, he chairs the Assembly's Natural Resources Committee. Black is the author of numerous environmental initiatives, including the Stewards'ap Fund—the largest conservation effort in Wisconsin history—the statewide recycling program, the Endangered Resources Matching Grant program to protect endangered species and the Safe Drinking Water 2000 initiative to clean up toxic water sites. Cited by numerous environmental groups for his activism, Black is generally regarded as the Legislature's leading environmental advocate. He has master's degrees in urban and regional planning and public policy and administration from the UW-Madison. He is married to Pam Fornell, a physical therapist. Their son, Timmy, is 5.

"Often, it's hard to be optimistic when you're working to protect the environment. What makes me optimistic is the concern the public has for the environment. This concern is very strong, and it's particularly strong among young people, who are growing up with the consequences of environmental degradation.

"I spend a fair amount of time talking in schools and speaking with young people. A real concern for the environment seems to be part of their value system now. That's very encouraging because as they become voters, they will vote for lawmakers who will protect the environment. In the future, we'll have better lawmakers than we have now.

"Every gain we've ever made in protecting the environment—be it John Muir protecting the Yosemite Valley over a hundred years ago or the Clean Air Act or the Stewardship Fund—has only come about because of strong public participation. That means very, very strong public support and the willingness of average citizens to get involved in advocating for protection of the



BRENT NICASTRO

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environment.

"Protecting the environment in our political system is always an uphill fight. When you're protecting the environment, you're talking about the future.



"For example, handling waste properly today prevents a problem that may not show up for 20 or 30 or 40 years. So protecting the environment is a long-range proposition.

"Unfortunately, politics is too often a short-range proposition. The time horizon is two years or four years, the length of a term in office. We'd be better off if politicians would think about the next generation more than they think about the next election.

"Protecting the environment is an uphill battle because there's a tremendous amount of money and power often arrayed against environmentalists. I think back to 1990 when we fought for the recycling bill. There was an army of lobbyists employed by those who wanted to weaken and kill that bill.

"But there was also tremendous public support for the bill. Hundreds of people

attended hearings all over the state. School kids wrote letters. All that public pressure is why we have a recycling law now in Wisconsin—one of the strongest in the nation.

"I don't think we'd have very many other environmental laws if it wasn't for public concern and public pressure.

"Often, people who oppose environmental protection try to frame the issue as 'jobs versus the environment': Do you want a good environment or do you want a good economy?

"I've never thought that was a true choice, because Wisconsin's economy, in large measure, is based upon the fact that we have made real efforts to protect our environment. Granted, they aren't always fully adequate efforts when you consider that since white colonization, we've lost over 50% of our wetlands and 60% of our southern hardwood forests. Of our once-great grasslands—prairie and oak savannas—less than one-tenth of a percent remains.

"Still, we've saved more than most states, and that's why people come here to recreate, live and work.

"If in the name of 'economic progress' we harmed the quality of our life in Wisconsin, the quality of nature here—we would indeed be killing the golden goose." ■