

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

DECEMBER 2025



Welcome to the last newsletter of 2025! With the year coming to a close, we are so proud to reflect on a year's worth of growth, fresh ideas, and inspiring moments and grateful for the contributions of so many in this amazing community. The Advancing Empathy team wishes everyone a joyful end of the year filled with rest, good health and time with loved ones—and renewed energy to step into the new year with momentum.

Announcements:

Last call to [submit a presentation proposal](#) for our Virtual Empathy Summit (closing December 4th). We encourage anyone in our Network to submit a proposal and to submit proposals that may fall outside of the list of priority topics!

Meet your 2026 committees: We are excited to welcome a cohort of new committee members. You can learn more about our committees and new members [here](#).

Guidelines for talking about animals with disabilities: [This article](#) and [accompanying tool](#), created by disability scholars and zoo professionals, provides best practices for framing conversations surrounding animals with disabilities.

New Keeper Infographic: The Network has expressed the need for more empathy-focused resources for animal care staff. To address this need, we have co-design an empathy infographic with animal care staff from around the Network that can be used in multiple formats designed to fit your needs whether you are including it in a PowerPoint or hanging above your staff microwave. [You can find these materials here](#).

Committee Updates: [Here](#) is what our committees worked on this past month.

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

December 3 @ 10 am - 11 am | Learning Group: Using empathy to tell better conservation focused stories

January 13 @ 10 am - 11 am | Coffee chat: Empathy training methods for front line staff

January 28 @ 11:30 am - 1:00 pm | ACE for Wildlife Network Onboarding Session: Winter Session

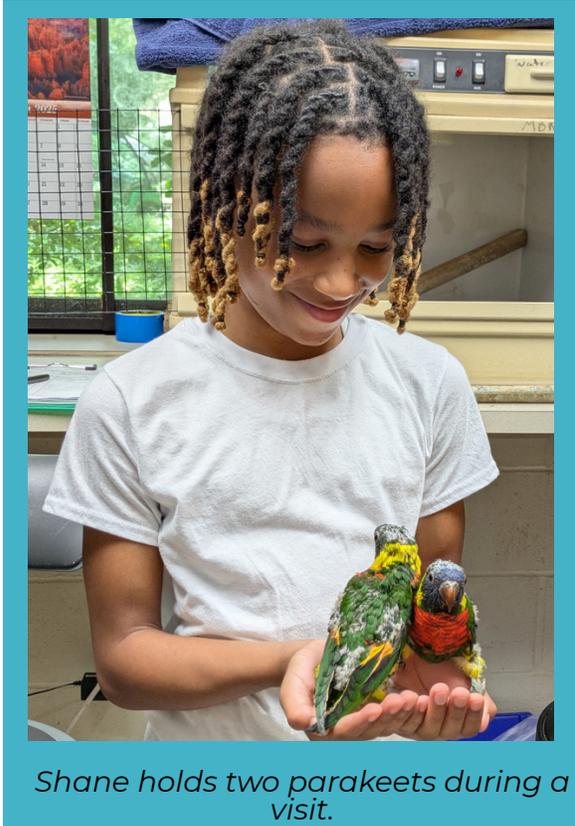
February 10 - 12, 2026 | Virtual Empathy Summit

Healing Together: Louisville Zoo's "Future Healers Got Zoo Buddies"



**Content Note: The following story references gun violence and trauma.*

Across the zoo and aquarium community, we're seeing a shift in how people view our role in their everyday lives. No longer are we just places to observe wildlife. Zoos and aquariums are becoming sanctuaries for community, connection, and even healing. The Louisville Zoo embodies this evolution through their inspiring Future Healers Got Zoo Buddies program, which gives children affected by gun violence a safe and restorative space to heal through the power of animals, empathy, and hope.



Shane holds two parakeets during a visit.

The story of Future Healers Got Zoo Buddies began in 2020 when University of Louisville medical students and trauma surgeons partnered with local advocate Christopher 2X to form Future Healers, a program addressing the invisible wounds of children living with the effects of gun violence. Their goal was to nurture young humanitarian advocates who see both their own worth and their potential to heal others. A year later, after a visit to the Louisville Zoo, the group expanded their vision. In collaboration with the Zoo, Future Healers Got Zoo Buddies was born—connecting children ages 4 to 13 with animals and nature as part of their healing journey. Some participants have lost loved ones to violence, while others have personally survived traumatic events. Each family is invited into a welcoming environment where safety, empathy, and discovery come first.

Children visit the Zoo throughout the year for exclusive educational programs, camps, and behind-the-scenes experiences centered on a "One Health, One Planet" philosophy. They meet keepers, veterinarians, and conservationists who model compassion in action, showing that their futures can be filled with possibility.

The healing power of these encounters is profound and often deeply personal. One Zoo Buddy, Malachi, who lost his sight after being shot at just six years old, met a hand-reared flamingo chick during one of his visits. As he gently explored the bird's soft feathers and spindly feet with his hands, keepers asked him questions to spark curiosity—inviting him to imagine colors, textures, and the bird's movements. The moment was filled with laughter and wonder, reminding everyone present how connection transcends sight. Another participant, Shane, has found his peace and passion in birds. Known among keepers for his enthusiasm, he was recently invited to help care for newly hatched lorikeet chicks being hand-raised behind the scenes. Each visit has helped Shane grow more confident in his place at the Zoo.

Now in its fourth year, Future Healers Got Zoo Buddies serves more than 40 children and their families. The program continues to show that empathy for animals can help heal the human spirit, and that within the bonds between people and wildlife, there is always room for hope.

The Alaska SeaLife Center: Deep-Dive Digital Messaging that Builds Lasting Connections



This month, we're heading north to the Alaska SeaLife Center (ASLC)—Alaska's only public aquarium that also serves as a marine research hub and wildlife rehabilitation facility. One of the things we admire most about ASLC is their engaging digital storytelling, where staff bring audiences along on the personal journeys of the rescued and resident marine animals in their care.

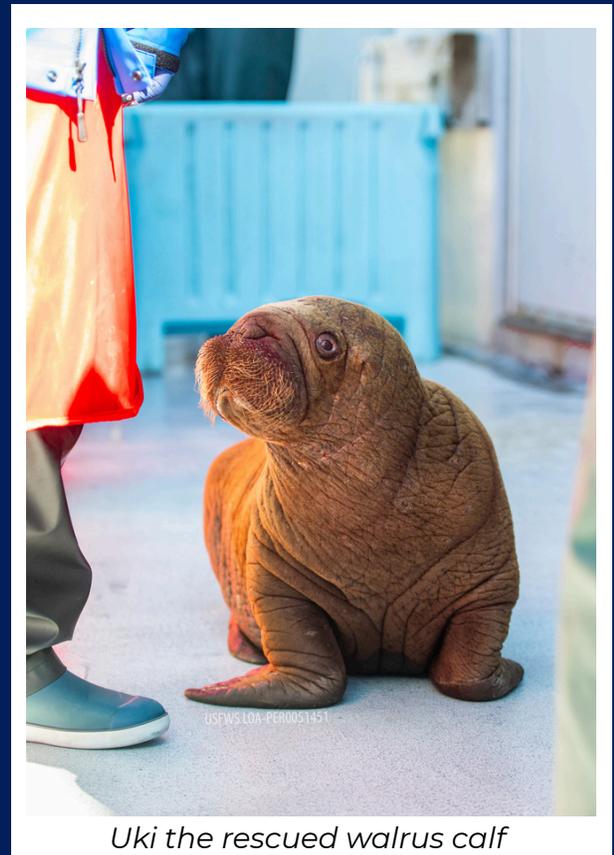
A defining strength of ASLC's outreach is their deliberate, narrative-driven social media strategy. Instead of posting brief, intermittent updates on many animals, the Center focuses on following the journey of just a few wildlife response patients in depth. This long-arc approach gives audiences the chance to understand not only what an animal has experienced, but why their care matters, what conservation issues surround their species, and how staff support their recovery day by day.

Ukiaq (Uki for short, pronounced "Ookie"), a rescued walrus calf, became the clearest example of this shift. Through daily updates, behind-the-scenes access, and transparent explanations of veterinary decisions, ASLC built a community of hundreds of thousands of followers—despite Uki never being visible to the public onsite. Her story demonstrated that animals can become powerful ambassadors even from afar, and that sustained, open storytelling encourages people to not only care but to advocate. Many social media fans even corrected inaccurate or disproving comments in real time, showing how closely they followed Uki's journey.

ASLC also makes a point to highlight the work of its in-house research teams. Their weekly updates from the Chiswell Island Steller sea lion Remote Video Monitoring research program are a standout example. Through remote cameras, the team highlights individual wild sea lions such as "Turtle," whose birth video continues to trend months later and uses those individuals as conduits to discuss population challenges, research goals, and the conservation status of the species.

When we asked Kaiti Grant, Media & Communications Manager at ASLC, what has made their communications strategy successful, her message was clear: transparency, individual-centered narratives, and building trust with teams across the organization. She also emphasized that everyone has a story, and while the stories belong to animal care teams and researchers themselves, we have the power to give those stories voice and recognition through various forms of media.

If you have further questions about ASLC's social media strategy, you can reach out to [**Kaiti Grant here.**](#)



Uki the rescued walrus calf

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

NOVEMBER 2025



Hello friends,

Big news—we've officially passed 1,000 members in the ACE for Wildlife Network! This milestone is a reflection of your shared commitment to empathy and conservation, and we couldn't have done it without you. To celebrate, our team created this [brief video](#) filled with gratitude, highlights, and a few memorable moments from our journey so far.

We're also excited to announce that Lincoln Park Zoo and the Endangered Wolf Center are our newest Partner Organizations. We're looking forward to growing alongside these inspiring organizations and continuing to foster empathy for wildlife together.



Announcements:

2026 Virtual Empathy Summit - Call for Proposals: We are now accepting proposals for our Virtual Empathy Summit. Proposals must be submitted by 11:45 pm on December 4th for consideration.

Member and Affiliate Survey: If you haven't done so already, please fill out our annual survey (delivered from noreply@alchemer.com). Your feedback plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of our Network. If you don't see this in your primary inbox, check your spam.

Words that Matter Survey: We are looking to refresh our "words that matter" document by gathering feedback on 11 commonly used words or phrases in the zoo and aquarium lexicon. If you would like to contribute your thoughts on these words to help us create a final document that represents the thoughtfulness and professionalism of animal care programs, you can fill out this [short survey here](#).

Empathy Excellence Awards: In our recent Fall Network Meeting, we shared the winners from our Empathy Excellence Program. To learn more about this award and the recipients, you can visit the [page here](#).

Committee Updates

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

November 12 @ 12 pm - 1:30 pm | Learning Group: Fostering Empathy for Plants

November 18 @ 11 am - 12 pm | Coffee Chat | Pathways to an Advanced Degree

December 3 @ 11 am - 12 pm | Learning Group: Using empathy to tell better conservation focused stories

February 10 - 12, 2026 | Virtual Empathy Summit

Measuring the Power of Storytelling at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo



Storytelling: we have so much anecdotal evidence that this practice is effective and truly works. But what if it could be measured and proven? That was the question behind a unique collaboration between Colorado State University (CSU) student Cammie Murtha and Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, exploring how storytelling can deepen guest connection to animals. For her graduate capstone, Cammie set out to test whether story-based keeper talks could inspire stronger emotional engagement—and perhaps even greater conservation action—than traditional fact-based presentations.

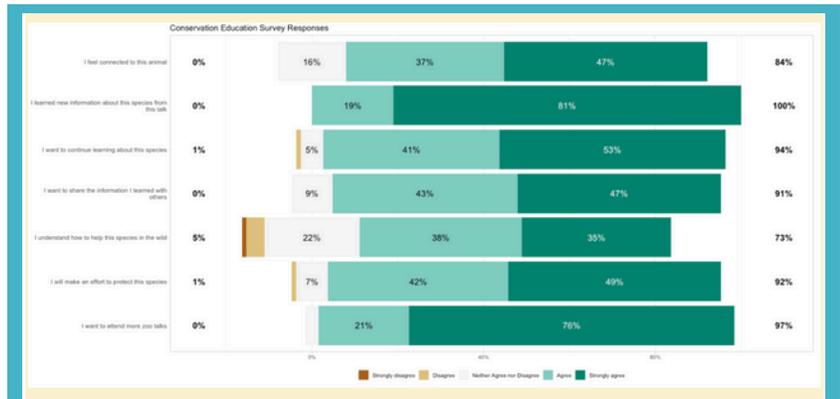
The idea first came from Basha Dann, a lead keeper at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo with a background in storytelling and interpretation from her time at Disney. Her creative approach resonated deeply with Cammie, who had witnessed the power of stories firsthand while working in an afterschool zoo program at Henry Vilas Zoo. There, she saw that generating empathy for an animal could be the first step toward deeper learning and conservation action. “When kids connected emotionally, they became so much more open to learning—and caring,” she recalled.

To determine whether storytelling truly makes a difference in interpretation, Cammie’s research compared story-based versus fact-based talks on three endangered species: red pandas, Mexican gray wolves, and African penguins. To prepare for the study—and generate buy-in—Cheyenne Mountain Zoo hosted several Lunch and Learns, where Basha led sessions on transforming facts into stories. Meanwhile, Cammie introduced the project and its goals, inspired by the enthusiastic participation of keepers who attended voluntarily.

Once the talks were ready, the team put them to the test. Talks were standardized across keepers so that the only variable was storytelling itself. After each presentation, visitors completed a short survey with seven statements measuring engagement, empathy, learning, and motivation—rating their agreement with items such as “I feel connected to this animal.”

The results were clear: story-based talks scored higher across every measure, including emotional connection, learning, motivation, and social sharing. Storytelling not only held guests’ attention longer (with an average of five more people staying until the end), but also encouraged them to share what they learned beyond the zoo. “That social sharing piece is what excites me most,” said Cammie. “It suggests storytelling can extend conservation conversations far beyond the people standing in front of us.” Keepers were equally inspired. Many asked to see their individual data, eager to apply storytelling to their own talks after witnessing guests’ reactions firsthand.

Looking ahead, Cammie hopes to expand this work to less traditionally charismatic species, such as reptiles or insects, and to explore the long-term effects of storytelling on conservation behavior and information retention. If you’d like to learn more about this project, you can contact [Cammie here](#).

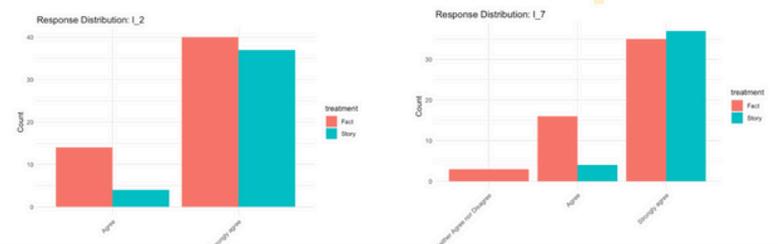


Interpretation of Effects: A “+1 point effect” represents movement from one response category to the next on the 5-point scale - for example, from “Agree” (4) to “Strongly Agree” (5). This magnitude of change indicates that stories moved participants from moderate to strong endorsement of conservation attitudes. While limited comparative data exists in zoo-based conservation education research, effect sizes of 0.5-1.0 points on Likert scales are generally considered moderate to large effects in behavioral interventions, suggesting these findings represent meaningful practical differences rather than merely statistical artifacts.

Analytical Insights

The analysis revealed sophisticated patterns beyond simple median differences. For questions with significant p-values but zero median effects (cognitive learning and continued engagement), stories created **distributional shifts** rather than central tendency changes:

- **Cognitive Learning:** Stories moved participants from “Agree” (26% facts) to “Strongly Agree” (90% stories) without changing the median
- **Continued Engagement:** Stories eliminated neutral responses entirely (6% facts → 0% stories) and increased strong agreement by 25 percentage points



Results from Cammie's study.

Measuring Connection through Simple Tools at Utah's Hogle Zoo



Within the ACE for Wildlife Network, empathy evaluation plays a central role in understanding whether connection-based experiences truly inspire conservation action. Utah's Hogle Zoo recently explored an approachable way to measure empathy and connection among zoo visitors—particularly for those who may not have the time or interest to engage with a lengthy written survey.

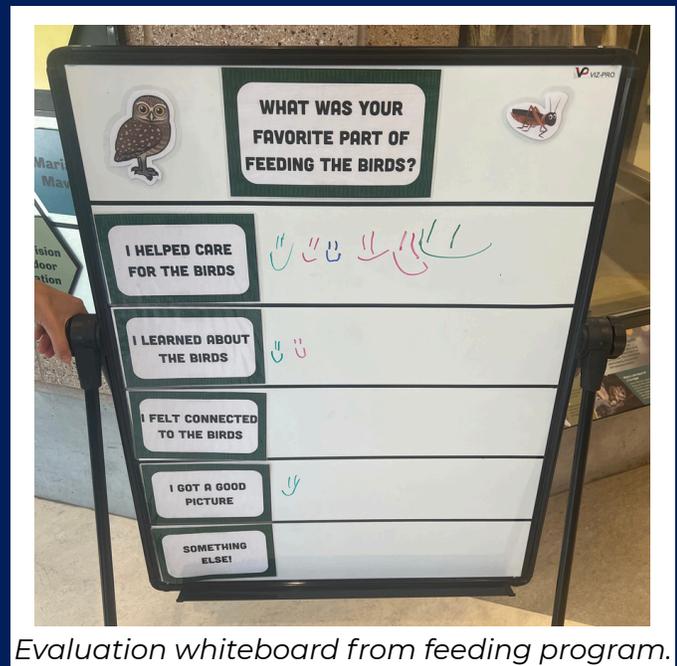
This past summer, Senior Manager of Education Angelina Kump was tasked with evaluating the zoo's on-grounds programming. While classroom programs are easier to measure due to their structured audiences, it can be much harder to gauge visitor impact during open, public experiences. Kump and her team wanted to know: What are people really taking away from their time at the zoo?

To find out, they focused on two popular interactive programs—the public giraffe feedings and visitor-led bug tosses for species such as meerkats and birds. Near these programs, zoo staff set up a large whiteboard on an easel that asked the simple question: “What was your favorite part of the feeding?” After participating, visitors could mark what resonated most with them from the following options:

- I learned about the animal
- I helped care for the animal
- I felt connected to the animal
- I got a good picture
- Something else

Guests could draw tally marks, hearts, or smiley faces—whatever felt natural. This casual, visual approach proved inviting for guests of all ages and yielded meaningful results.

The zoo framed these encounters around animal care and welfare, helping visitors understand that feeding programs reflect real aspects of daily animal care. Simple messages—like “everyone needs to eat”—helped reinforce empathy and investment in animal well-being.



Evaluation whiteboard from feeding program.

When results came in, the team was pleasantly surprised. For giraffe feedings, 30% of participants said their favorite part was helping to care for the animal, followed by 24% who said they learned something new. Only 20% cited getting a good picture as their highlight. For the bug tosses, the top responses again centered on caring for and learning about the animals—clear evidence that guests were connecting with conservation messages.

Kump noted that evaluating public programs can feel intimidating, but creative, low-pressure methods like this help normalize data collection as an evolving process. The results are now shaping how Hogle Zoo frames future programming and communication—grounded in what truly resonates with guests: the joy of caring, learning, and connecting. If you'd like to learn more about this project, you can contact [Angelina here](#).

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

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ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

OCTOBER 2025



Hello everyone,

Spooky season is finally here, and we are reflecting on a successful AZA conference. It was wonderful seeing so many friends from the Network - we are proud of the way you represent our community! Learn more about how empathy was showcased at the conference on page 3.

Announcements:

Introducing our Empathy Champions Cohort: Our new Empathy Champions program is in full swing, and we are excited to share [our 2025 cohort](#) - congratulations!

New Empathy Training Videos: We have recently revamped our Empathy Training Videos. Be sure to check them out on page 4 of our [Empathy Training Toolkit](#) to explore intros to topics from empathy best practices to critical anthropomorphism.

Resource feature: [Comparing Empathy for Wildlife Across the Animal Kingdom](#)

This review explores how human empathy for animals varies across different groups of animals and what factors and strategies influence these empathy responses.

Most Valuable Network Resource: The Network has voted, and the results are in for the most valuable resources:

1. [Anthropomorphism's Role in Fostering Empathy for Wildlife Literature Review](#)
2. [Best Practices in Developing Empathy Toward Wildlife](#)
3. [Wildlife Trafficking and Biofact Literature Review](#)

Empathy Photo Contest: Last call to [submit photos](#) until the end of October. [Learn more here.](#)

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

October 8 @ 10 am – 11:30 am | ACE for Wildlife Network Welcome Session

October 14 @ 11:00 am – 1:00 pm | ACE for Wildlife Network Annual Fall Meeting

October 30 @ 10:30am - 12:00pm | Learning Group: Using Effective Empathy Practices to Promote Wildlife Coexistence

November 12 @ 12:00 pm - 1:30 pm | Learning Group: Fostering Empathy for Plants

November 18 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm Coffee Chat | Pathways to an Advanced Degree

Teddy Bear Clinics Bring Empathy and Animal Care to Life at Lincoln Park Zoo



Since 2022, Lincoln Park Zoo has been hosting an imaginative and heartwarming program: the Teddy Bear Clinic. The program invites children to bring their favorite plush animals to the zoo for a veterinary “checkup,” giving young learners the chance to practice empathy as they experience what it’s like to care for an animal. This month, we spoke with Nicole Hodur, Manager of Child and Family Learning, to find out more about this charming initiative.

The Teddy Bear Clinic was first introduced through member-focused events. At its core, the program is simple: tables are stocked with toy stethoscopes, bandages, and other supplies, and kids bring their plushies for an exam with zoo staff. Each visit includes typical doctor-style questions—What’s their name? How are they feeling? What seems to be wrong? You may be surprised to learn that plushies can have all sorts of ailments, from upset stomachs to broken tails—it’s really up to their owners’ imagination. And the treatment plans given by zoo staff are just as creative. A favorite example: a prescription for more movie time with snacks alongside their owner!



Teddy bear clinic pop up at Lincoln Park Zoo.

What looks like simple play is actually a powerful tool for connection. The clinic helps children draw parallels between their own doctor visits and the veterinary care zoo animals receive, building a human-animal bridge while fostering empathy for wildlife. Some children even bring the same plush animal back for repeat visits, explaining that their toy “wasn’t feeling well” or “needed another checkup.” These return appointments highlight both the popularity of the program and the lasting impact it has on children’s empathy through play.

Given the success of the program, the Teddy Bear Clinic expanded in the summer of 2024 into a mobile cart run by teen interns. The roaming setup provides surprise encounters for families while giving interns valuable experience in public engagement and storytelling. Training new interpreters to answer challenging questions—such as why a bird’s wing might be bandaged—has opened up meaningful conversations about veterinary care and animal welfare.



For zoos interested in starting their own Teddy Bear Clinic, Hodur suggests a few key considerations: partner with animal care teams to ensure staff are equipped with real stories and knowledge, train facilitators to remain flexible so the interaction centers on the child’s connection rather than completing every step of the exam, and adapt the setup to fit available space and resources.

Though it may appear adorable on the surface, the Teddy Bear Clinic carries a deeper message and has

been a powerful way for Lincoln Park Zoo to introduce the concept of animal well-being to young guests. Interested in learning more about this program? You [can contact Nicole Hodur here](#).

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you’d like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

ACE for Wildlife at the 2025 AZA Annual Conference



The ACE for Wildlife team is back after another inspiring AZA Annual Conference, held in Tampa last month. While many themes surfaced throughout the week, one stood out everywhere we turned: empathy. From storytelling to exhibit design, from animal welfare to people-centered conservation, empathy was woven into conversations across the entire conference.

We kicked things off with our annual business session, where we welcomed over 100 attendees to learn more about empathy for wildlife, the ACE network, and engage in meaningful roundtable discussions. Topics included:

- *Building Empathy Using a Constructivist Pedagogy* – Shana Kent
- *Critical Anthropomorphism* – Marta Burnet
- *Empathy Integration into Exhibit Design* – Tierney Ball
- *Infusing Empathy into Adult-Focused Programming* – Sharon Spencer
- *Sharing Animal Stories for Conservation* – Sarah Panciroli
- *Training Resources for Empathy Interpretation* – Isabelle Bieser

This was our most well-attended business session yet, and we loved connecting with new colleagues while sparking fresh ideas and inspiration. Thank you to everyone who helped facilitate these incredible conversations!

Once the main sessions began, it was nearly impossible to keep up with the number of presentations from Network folks sharing empathy-driven work. A few highlights include:



Toxic Positivity? Aquarium and Zoo Educators Can Better Meet the Urgency of the Moment

With our own Marta Burnet on the panel, this session explored how conservation messaging can acknowledge eco-anxiety, avoid overly simplistic positivity, and ground communication in empathy for people and wildlife.

WildTech: The Digital Evolution of Zoo Research and Welfare

Abigail Flores (Racine Zoo) shared how their Advancing Empathy grant-funded QR code ethogram project has already gathered 800+ guest responses in less than a year—boosting welfare monitoring while deepening guest-animal connections. You can [dive deeper into this project here](#).

Beyond Cute: Building Empathy for Less Charismatic Animals

This panel comprising 100% of ACE Network powerhouses highlighted innovative strategies to foster empathy for animals that don't always steal the spotlight. Using tactics like creative storytelling, interactive interpretation, and hands-on engagement, they demonstrated that empathy isn't limited to "cute and cuddly" species—it can be cultivated for every animal when people are given the right entry point. The energy in the room made it clear that this is an area of growing interest and momentum across the field, supported by our newest resource mentioned above.

In Memoriam: Navigating Communications Around Animal Loss

This session emphasized honoring animals as unique individuals through more authentic, compassionate communications when they pass—recognizing that their stories matter deeply to both staff and guests.

Buzz Talk: What's in a Name? Building Empathy One Sign at a Time

Courtney Cordova (Henry Vilas Zoo) shared how support from the Advancing Empathy grant allowed her team to add animal names to interpretive signage, strengthening guest empathy and connection, particularly for less-celebrated species. You can [learn more about this project here](#).

ACE for Wildlife at the 2025 AZA Annual Conference



Empathy was even front and center during poster sessions, with powerful contributions such as:

- All Tapped Out: Empathy Based Educational Interpretives, Guest Experience, and Animal Welfare
- Animal Biographies: Measuring the Efficacy of Empathy Adjacent Language
- Caring Until It Hurts: Compassion Fatigue and Moral Injury Among Animal Caregivers
- From Habitat to Hand: Understanding the Impact of Educational Programming on Ambassador Snake Welfare
- Increasing Positive Perceptions of Disability Through Depictions of Animals with Disabilities
- The Cost of Caring: Community Approaches to Compassion Fatigue and Resilient Healing
- Wild Words: Celebrating Students and Culture Through Language at the Zoo

Beyond the sessions, one of the best parts of AZA is always the chance to connect in person with our incredible Network. From the welcome icebreaker to lunch meet-ups, our ACE-hosted dinner, and time spent together at ZooTampa and Busch Gardens, these moments reminded us that this Network is built not just on shared professional goals but also on genuine friendships.

Thank you to every presenter, attendee, and supporter who helped spread the word about empathy at this year's conference. You make this work possible, and we couldn't be prouder to be in community with you. If you'd like to learn more about any of the sessions or be connected with a speaker, reach out anytime at empathy@zoo.org.



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ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

SEPTEMBER 2025



Hello friends,

As many of your summer programs come to an end, we hope everyone has a moment to reflect on a meaningful summer season. Here at the ACE for Wildlife Network, we are celebrating the news of our [Introduction to Empathy](#) website winning a Certificate of Excellence from the [Public Relations Society of America](#): Puget Sound Chapter. It's neat to see the power of empathy for wildlife spreading far and wide!

Announcements:

Empathy Photo Contest: The 2025 Empathy Photo Contest kicked off in July and we hope you will submit entries to share what empathy looks like in your organization! [Learn more](#) and [submit your photos here](#) up until the end of October. Want to help spread the word? Feel free to [post this flyer](#) around your organization.

Resource features:

[ACE for Wildlife Network Brand Guide](#): We are pleased to share a new comprehensive brand and style guide to help Members and Affiliates with creating ACE for Wildlife Network related materials and publicizing Network involvement.

[2025 Animal Care Play Spaces Young Learners Toolkit](#): This new grant toolkit explores grant projects that created spaces designed for free-play and experiential learning, giving children and/or their caretakers the opportunity to practice caring for animals, practicing empathy skills, or engaging in of nature play.

Committee updates: [See what our committees have been working on.](#)

Upcoming Events

September 11 @ 11:00 am – 12:00 pm | Coffee Chat: Bridging Resistance - Connecting with Those Who Don't Agree

Continuing the discussion from Susie Wilkening's "Radical Curiosity and Courageous Empathy" keynote from the 2025 Empathy Summit, participants will learn strategies to reach across disagreements and approach conversations with empathy. [Register here.](#)

September 30 @ 9:30 am – 11:00 am | Coffee Chat: Empathy in Conservation – Community Science Programs

Join the Conservation Action Committee to learn about how wildlife monitoring and community science programs - of any size - can build empathy. [Register here.](#)

October 8 @ 10 am – 11:30 am | ACE for Wildlife Network Welcome Session

This introductory event to empathy work and the ACE for Wildlife Network will help you gain an understanding of the following: the Network's shared definition of empathy, the three types of empathy, and why empathy is an emotion worth fostering in a zoo or aquarium setting. [Register here.](#)

October 14 @ 11:00 am – 1:00 pm | ACE for Wildlife Network Annual Fall Meeting

Join us for our annual all-Network fall meeting! More details will be added to the event description as the event draws closer. [Register here.](#)

Wild Wonders: Using Empathy to Create Meaningful Zoo Experiences for Memory Care Patients



At Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens, a new program called Wild Wonders is creating powerful connections between people, animals, and memories. Inspired by the “Artful Moments” program at the Cummer Museum, which uses art to engage individuals with dementia and other memory impairments, Wild Wonders adapts that approach to the vibrant, sensory-rich environment of the zoo.

Developed in partnership with [Mayo Clinic Jacksonville](#), [ElderSource](#), and the [Alzheimer’s Association](#), the program is offered free to participants experiencing memory impairment and their caregivers, with zoo staff trained by the Alzheimer’s Association to better understand memory-related behaviors and properly serve these communities. The goal: to create intentional, joyful, and accessible experiences tailored to both the needs of participants and their caregivers. Each 90-minute session begins with hands-on engagement, such as exploring biofacts, conservation displays, or sensory prompts. Remember Wild Kingdom? A short clip from this nostalgic show is also shown to spark memories before the group heads into a selected area of the zoo. To keep mobility needs in mind and avoid sensory overload, only a small section is explored, allowing for deep, unrushed connections.

During a recent pilot, the group visited the Jaguar habitat, where facilitators used storytelling to immerse participants in the lives of jaguars, anteaters, and even plants. Instead of the lecture-style format often used in other programs, this approach encouraged organic conversations. While in the space, participants were invited to reflect on prompts such as: *What stood out to you? Did this experience bring up a memory? Have you ever encountered this animal before?* These open-ended questions sparked reflection, emotional expression, and the sharing of personal stories.

When asked what leaves the strongest impression, Sharon Spencer, Adult Education Specialist/AIP Advisor and Facilitator, points to the animal encounters—whether feeding giraffes, touching stingrays, or meeting ambassador animals. Even for participants who are non-speaking, moments of joy and connection are evident through expressions, gestures, and engagement. Caregivers benefit from this program as well, finding a welcoming environment where their loved ones are supported and where they can share meaningful experiences alongside others who understand their journey.



Adult programming event at Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens.

For Spencer, the program is also a reminder of the value of listening first and building programming from community needs rather than assumptions. “One of our biggest takeaways,” she reflects, “is that none of us can do this work in isolation. It’s all about bringing community together.”

With plans to offer Wild Wonders quarterly and adapt it for other specialized populations, Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens is demonstrating how empathy-infused programming can open the door to meaningful, memory-rich experiences for all. If you would like to learn more about this meaningful program, you can reach out to Sharon Spencer [here](#).

The ACE for Wildlife Network is Seeking New Committee Representatives!



Our ACE for Wildlife Network committees are currently seeking innovative, creative, and curious individuals! Network committees support our Network's vision and mission in various ways. Through their work, committees create the resources, events, structures, and/or processes necessary to address the needs of the Network. Serving on a committee is a great way to connect with other conservation professionals, gain leadership experience, and grow your understanding of fostering empathy for wildlife. **You can learn more about each committee, term requirements, and how to get involved, here.**

If you are interested in joining a committee, we would love to have you! We encourage you to attend an upcoming open meeting. Below are the dates of each committee's open meeting:

Communications Committee: September 23rd, 11:30 am - 12:45 pm PST

Conservation Action Committee: October 1st, 11:30 am - 12:45 pm PST

DEAI Committee: September 25th, 11:30 am - 12:45 pm PST

Membership Committee: September 10th, 11:30 am - 12:45 pm PST

Steering Committee: September 26th, 1:45 pm - 3:00 pm PST

Strategic Learning Committee: September 24th, 12:00 pm - 1:15 pm PST

Committees are filled on a first-come-first-serve basis and the call for service closes at 11:59 pm on October 21st.



Courtney Cordova, a current Steering Committee representative, facilitating a table at the 2025 Empathy Summit

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

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ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

AUGUST 2025



Greetings friends!

We can't believe it is already August. We're looking forward to seeing many of you at the upcoming AZA conference. If you are attending, be sure to swing by our booth during the exhibitor sessions or join us for any of the ACE for Wildlife Network related events at AZA (see upcoming events section).

Announcements:

Most Valuable Resource: Last month, we asked you to nominate a Network resource that has been valuable to you or your organization. Our nominations are in - help us recognize your favorite resource!

[Cast your vote for the MVR here!](#)

Photo Contest: The 2025 Empathy Photo Contest kicked off in July and hope you will submit entries to share what empathy looks like in your organization! [Learn more](#) and [submit your photos here](#) up until the end of October.

Committee updates: [See what our committees have been working on.](#)

Resource feature: [Increasing Positive Perception of Disability Through Depictions of Animals with Disabilities](#)

This study looked at whether using simple, narrative signs could help the public connect with these animals and develop more understanding attitudes toward people with disabilities. There will be a poster on this at the AZA conference, so check it out if you are going!

Upcoming Events

August 11 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm: Coffee Chat: Empathy for the Unseen

Join us for a casual coffee chat as we explore the lives of the secret zoo and aquarium animals that are hiding or are off habitat. We'll discuss how we can build empathy for these hidden residents and reflect on the vital roles these animals play in conservation and education. [Register here.](#)

September 3 @ 12:00 pm - 1:00 pm: Learning Group: Lessons from Empathy-Informed Evaluation Projects

Hear about the experiences and lessons learned from individuals who were a part of evaluation projects that looked at everything from the perceptions associated with an animal's name, to conservation calls to action, and collaboratively designed signage. [Register here.](#)

September 11 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm Coffee Chat: Bridging Resistance - Connecting with Those Who Don't Agree

Continuing the discussion from Susie Wilkening's "Radical Curiosity and Courageous Empathy" keynote from the 2025 Empathy Summit, participants will learn strategies to reach across disagreements and approach conversations with empathy. [Register here.](#)

2025 AZA Conference - ACE for Wildlife Network Events

September 14 @ 4:00 pm - 5:00 pm EST:
ACE for Wildlife Network Business Session

September 15 @ 12:30 pm - 1:30 pm EST: Casual Lunch
Looking for some friends to have lunch with? Come hang out with us in the [Sparkman Wharf Dining Garden.](#)

September 16 @ 7:00 pm EST: ACE for Wildlife Network Hosted Dinner

We will be hosting a dinner for current ACE for Wildlife Network Members & Affiliates at American Social in Tampa, FL from 7:00 pm - 9:30 pm. [Complete this brief form](#) to confirm your RSVP.

Email empathy@zoo.org to join our WhatsApp chat for event reminders and a way to stay in contact with Network folks during the conference.

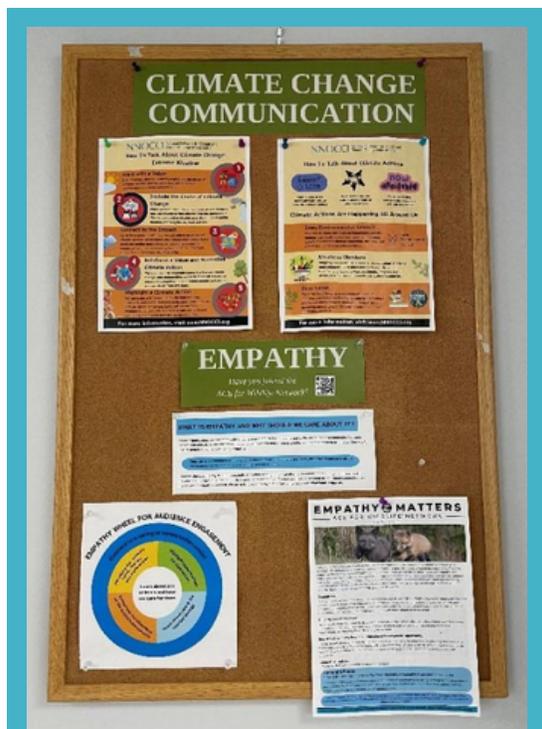
Highlighting Empathy in Action: How Blank Park Zoo is Growing with the Network and an update on Hope for the Wild



Blank Park Zoo (BPZ) is making meaningful strides in empathy-centered programming, and we're thrilled to share their latest efforts with you this month. We recently spoke with Erica Carnes, Volunteer and Conservation Engagement Manager at BPZ, to learn how their team has been weaving empathy-based practices into their work. She also shared updates on BPZ's [Hope for the Wild series](#)—a compelling video program featured at the Empathy Summit that highlights the conservation stories of different species under the zoo's care.

Spreading Empathy Internally

Erica emphasized the importance of intentionality, collaboration, and internal storytelling when introducing empathy work to the wider zoo. Although empathy practices had already been gaining traction at BPZ, a key milestone took place this spring: a formal introduction of their empathy-focused efforts at an all-staff meeting. Their presentation included an “ACE 101” overview and an interactive discussion to help staff recognize that empathy wasn't a new concept—they were already practicing it. The session covered topics like empathetic interpretation, anthropomorphism, and practical applications, creating space for questions and reflection. The aim? To help staff feel empowered to intentionally integrate empathy into their work—not as an extra task, but as something that's already part of what they do.



Blank Park Zoo's bulletin board featuring empathy resources.

To keep the momentum going, the team has implemented low-barrier, creative strategies: they installed an empathy-themed bulletin board in the staff breakroom featuring ACE materials like the empathy wheel and monthly newsletters. Empathy-related updates are now regularly included in weekly staff notes, and empathetic language is embedded into seasonal training and volunteer resources. Thanks to BPZ's integrated structure—where education, conservation, and volunteer teams collaborate closely—these efforts have taken root quickly and organically. Erica noted that by framing empathy as a valuable tool rather than an obligation, staff have embraced the approach with enthusiasm.

Hope for the Wild Goes In-Person

That spirit of collaboration also shines through in BPZ's Hope for the Wild program. The zoo recently hosted their first in-person event in the series since 2020, focusing on coral conservation. The evening featured a short film, popcorn, and a panel discussion with BPZ aquatics staff and a guest from the National Mississippi River Museum, a close partner

in the conservation work. Over 40 community members attended, underscoring how even a landlocked zoo in Iowa can play a meaningful role in ocean conservation—illustrating the powerful connection between local action and global impact.

Want to learn more about BPZ's empathy work or Hope for the Wild? You can [contact Erica Carnes here](#).

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.pancirolino@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

Woodland Park Zoo's Reptile Realm: New Programs, New Perspectives



This past November, Woodland Park Zoo unveiled their newest immersive experience—**Reptile Realm**, an Indo-Pacific island forest habitat crafted by our in-house exhibits and design team. This stunning new gallery invites budding herpetologists to explore the vibrant biodiversity of Southeast Asia and Oceania—from the mangrove swamps of Indonesia to the treetops of the Solomon Islands.

Built to reflect the rich and varied ecosystems of these tropical conservation hotspots, Reptile Realm showcases a dazzling range of reptiles and amphibians. Each habitat was custom-designed for comfort, animal welfare, and visual storytelling. Real plants, natural rock, soil, water features, and even a hand-painted mural by a local artist bring these archipelagoes of habitats to life. From humidity to lighting, every detail was carefully tailored to create ideal conditions for the animals—and guests have already noticed how seamlessly the reptiles blend into their new homes.



A model habitat built by a visitor participating in the designed to scale drop-in program

Reptile Realm is more than just beautiful—it's interactive and educational. Interpretive signage throughout the space invites visitors to slow down and think critically about the life of amphibians and reptiles. Life-sized models allow guests to compare the smallest amphibians to the largest reptiles, while large infographics help visitors explore the vast differences in adaptations, habitats, and behaviors across species. Interactive prompts ask thought-provoking questions about climate change, biodiversity, and conservation, encouraging people of all ages to connect their personal choices to global impacts. Uplifting messaging highlights success stories and conservation efforts, helping visitors feel hopeful and inspired to take action. Each sign is designed not just to inform, but to spark empathy and curiosity—encouraging guests to see these animals not as distant or fearsome, but as resilient, adaptable, and worth protecting.

Just within the space, guests can take a deeper dive through “Designed to Scale,” a hands-on drop-in program that invites visitors to imagine life as a reptile. Participants step into the role of habitat designers, using model materials like rocks, branches, plants, and water features to build a habitat for a reptile of their choosing. As they plan for warmth, shelter, and safety, they consider what it would take to make their animal feel secure and thrive. These conversations invite empathy and perspective-taking, asking questions like: Where would your animal hide? How would they stay warm? What might they need to feel safe? It's a playful yet powerful way to understand that behind every habitat is careful research, design, and deep respect for the animals who call these spaces home.



A look inside the Reptile Realm: quince monitor habitat

With its immersive design and meaningful experiences, Reptile Realm has quickly become a new fan favorite—inviting all of us to slow down, look closer, and see the world through the eyes of an animal.

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

JULY 2025



With the warmth of July upon us and nature in full bloom, we hope your summer activities are off to a vibrant start. We're looking forward to sharing this month's highlights and new opportunities with you.

Announcements:

Our 2025 Empathy Photo Contest is live!

Open to anyone in our Network, this contest is an opportunity to showcase your unique perspective on empathy between animals and people, and how it plays a role in conservation. You can learn about the [details of this contest here](#). Additionally, you can help us spread the word about this competition by sending [this flyer](#) to your contacts. Submit your photos now through the end of October.

Our [2025 bylaws](#) have been approved along with an exciting new expansion plan. The Network will now welcome applications from U.S.-based, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums interested in becoming a Partner Organization. Applications are reviewed twice a year (October and April) by the Membership Committee, with support from the Steering Committee as necessary to ensure sustainable growth. You can view more details and criteria of the [expansion plan here](#).

Has a resource in the ACE for Wildlife Network library made a meaningful impact on your work? If so, we invite you to nominate it for the [Most Valuable Empathy Resource Award!](#) Whether it was created by your organization, a committee, or another group, any item in our [resource library](#) is eligible. Nominees will be featured in our August newsletter, and you'll have the chance to vote for your favorite. Winners will be announced during the [October 14th All-Network Meeting](#).

[Empathy Excellence Awards!](#) Help us honor innovative, empathy-driven projects at AZA-accredited and conservation-based organizations. Nominations are due July 8th, and you can use a grant report or other award application for our consideration.

Committee Updates: Check out the [Committee Structure section of our bylaws](#) for changes to committee size and structure that will take effect later this year. Thank you to our committee chairs and Steering Committee for kickstarting this process!

Resource Feature: We have a new grant toolkit for you all – the [Infrastructure with Intent toolkit](#) showcases Network grant projects that use new exhibit spaces and habitat expansions to deepen guest connections with animals and support the operational needs of empathy-driven programs.

Upcoming Events

July 23 @ 11:00 am – 11:30 am PST: Empathy Champions Office Hours

Are you interested in the Empathy Champions Program but have questions about the application or whether it is a good fit? Please join us at any point during these office hours to ask questions, talk through concerns, or learn more about the plans for the program. This event will not be recorded – please reach out to marta.burnet@zoo.org for further questions. [Join here](#).

Fostering Empathy for Tapirs Through Storytelling and Science



As part of their growing commitment to empathy-based education, the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center recently launched a new initiative under their Empathy for Wildlife Literacy Program. Titled “Tambo the Tapir Tells His Tale,” the outreach program combined storytelling, science, and hands-on learning to foster empathy for Belize’s national animal—the Central American tapir.

Over the course of four weeks, zoo educators visited four schools bordering the Maya Forest Corridor, reaching 82 students. The program centered on a storybook written by the zoo’s late founder, Sharon Matola, about a real tapir named Tambo, who came to the zoo after his mother was killed. Weekly classroom sessions included read-alouds, discussions, and activities to explore students’ prior knowledge, feelings, and curiosity about tapirs and other local wildlife.

The program culminated in a field trip to the Belize Zoo, where students met Tambo in person. During their visit, they participated in a specially designed “tapir feces lab,” where the students carried out a faux fecal exam using coffee grounds and flour to study the animal’s diet and ecological role as a seed disperser. Students also had the opportunity to feed tapirs and reflect on their experiences through creative projects like illustrations, poems, and informational posters.

Evaluation before and after the program revealed a measurable increase in empathy towards tapirs. Initially, only 40% of students ranked tapirs among their top three favorite animals; by the end, over 50% did. Students also expressed emotional reactions to Tambo’s story and advocated for the respectful treatment of wildlife, with some even correcting peers who had referred to Tambo as “it” rather than “he.”

The program not only aligned with Belize’s national curriculum but was made possible through the support of Inspire Adventures, which funded transportation to the zoo. It represents a promising model for combining empathy, education, and conservation.



Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

Raising Future Storytellers: How Theater Tools Are Inspiring Empathy Across Camps at the Zoological Society of Milwaukee



Theater has long been a powerful medium for storytelling—and at the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM), it's proving to be just as impactful for inspiring empathy for wildlife. Since 2011, Kohl's Wild Theater (KWT), a professional theater company housed at the zoo, has brought conservation-focused performances to audiences across the region. In 2021, ZSM launched their first KWT summer theater camps, with the goal of helping young participants not only explore their creativity, but also learn how to use performance to spark empathy in others.

Now, with a full-time teaching artist on staff, that spark is spreading. Kimberly Giddens, who helped design the first KWT camp, is expanding these creative tools beyond the stage and into ZSM's broader summer camp programs. Working alongside the education team, Kimberly created a binder of 16 innovative games, carefully organized into categories like community building, movement, and empathy activation. This resource helps all camp educators—regardless of theater experience—infuse their programs with new ways to foster connection and empathy.

One standout example is the “Dream Backyard” game. Campers begin by building a frozen picture of their ideal backyard, then reimagine it as a habitat shared with wildlife. What starts as a familiar space becomes an invitation to consider the needs of animals—and a reflection on shared environments. “It gets kids thinking about what matters to them, and then extends that to what might matter to an animal,” Kimberly explains.

By introducing these activities department-wide, Kimberly hopes to make storytelling and empathy-building more accessible across departments. “Even teachers who didn't feel like ‘theater people’ saw how they could adapt the games to their own styles,” she said. And while the rollout is still new, the early response has been enthusiastic.



Photo by Garrett Hopkins, 2022

Campers from KWT “Let's Get Wild” pose with cast as their conservation superhero characters following a performance of *Captain Superfantastic* and *the Coltan Conundrum*

As Kimberly puts it, “We're raising future storytellers—kids who know that engaging others in creative ways makes them more likely to care, to act, and to make a difference.”

To learn more about the KWT-inspired curriculum or bring these tools to your own programs, contact Kimberly Giddens [here](#).

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

JUNE 2025



Hello June! We wish you all well as we dive into the busy summer season. This month's newsletter is packed with updates to support you and your teams—especially those welcoming seasonal staff. We've refreshed three of our core empathy training videos—Intro to ACE for Wildlife, Types of Empathy, and Effective Empathy Practices—all available on page 4 of the [Empathy Training Toolkit](#). We've also updated our [Welcome Guide](#). Additionally, if you or someone you know has experience with strategic planning in zoos, aquariums, or related fields, we're looking for a consultant to help guide the future of the ACE for Wildlife Network. [Learn more](#) and help us spread the word!

Coming soon:

In other news, we're excited to launch our second year of the ACE for Wildlife Network Photo Contest, and we want you to share what empathy in action looks like at your organization. All zoos, aquariums and conservation organizations across the Network are welcome to participate! Stay tuned for the launch of this contest that will be announced next month with more information to come.

Empathy Excellence Award

Help us celebrate all of your hard work! This month we kick off the Empathy Excellence Award to honor innovative, empathy-driven projects at AZA-accredited and conservation-based organizations. Applications are due July 8—click [here](#) to learn more.

Empathy Champions Program: Professional Development Opportunity

This 15-month program supports highly engaged ACE for Wildlife members in growing their empathy-based outreach skills. Ten participants will receive training, a \$1,000 stipend upon completion, and the opportunity to mentor future Champions. Learn more [here](#) or email us at empathy@zoo.org with questions.

Committee Updates

Stay up to date with committee happenings [here](#).

Upcoming Events

June 12 @ 11 am - 12 pm PST: Coffee Chat: Beyond Demographic Questions in Evaluation

Join your colleagues in a conversation about possible alternatives to using demographic questions in evaluations. Whether you're an evaluator, a user of evaluation results, or have ever taken a survey before, we welcome everyone to join! [Register here](#).

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

Sanctuary as a Mindset: Wolf Haven International's New Approach to Fostering Empathy for Wildlife



Since 1982, Wolf Haven International has provided lifelong sanctuary to more than 325 animals. Renowned worldwide for their dedication to wolf welfare, the organization recently introduced a new public offering: Sanctuary as a Mindset—a mindfulness-based experience designed to foster empathy for wildlife. The idea for this program emerged from a growing realization among staff: the occasional silent, unstructured time they spent in the sanctuary could offer profound personal benefits. Wanting visitors to share that sense of connection and reflection, they developed Sanctuary as a Mindset to extend that experience to the public.



This program invites small groups to engage in a quiet, four-hour experience blending mindfulness, reflection, and observation. The visit begins in the education room with a brief behavioral overview of the wolves. From there, guests transition into a silent prairie walk before entering the sanctuary itself. Inside, participants spend two separate, unguided one-hour sessions simply being—with the wolves, with nature, and with themselves. Whether meditating, journaling, sketching, or simply sitting in stillness, guests are encouraged to follow their instincts and settle into the rhythm of the space. Between these sessions, the group regathers for light refreshments and informal discussion, offering an opportunity to share insights.



Unlike traditional educational tours—which remain an important part of Wolf Haven's public offerings—this new format emphasizes quiet presence over information delivery. While education programs often explore weighty topics such as habitat loss, livestock conflict, and the traumatic backgrounds of rescued wolves, Sanctuary as a Mindset gently invites guests to shift their attention to the present. In doing so, they begin to see the wolves not just as conservation symbols, but as individuals. This intentional, present-moment engagement has been a powerful tool for cultivating empathy.

Wolf Haven International sees great potential for this program beyond the current format. They are actively developing a youth mental health learning program in collaboration with local nonprofits and service providers. Designed for older teens and young adults, this version of the program would help participants disconnect from digital distractions and reconnect with themselves, nature, and the animals in a supportive, restorative space. There are also plans to engage local faith-based communities, offering spiritually reflective versions of the experience for groups seeking deeper connection with the natural world and each other.

With its gentle, contemplative approach, *Sanctuary as a Mindset* offers a meaningful new way to engage the public—and expand empathy for wildlife, one quiet moment at a time. If you want to learn more about this project, you can reach out to Geoff Willard, Executive Director, [here](#).



Celebrating Pride Month

June is Pride Month, and a meaningful time for zoos, aquariums, and conservation organizations to reaffirm our commitment to creating inclusive, welcoming spaces for all communities. To help celebrate, we're sharing this [list of resources](#) compiled by Theo Bamberger. We hope they spark new learning or inspire deeper reflection. We'd also love to hear how your organization is honoring Pride this year—share your celebrations in [this discussion post](#) and help us learn from one another!



Photo by: Jess Sheldahl

Drag queen story hour at ZooMontana draws hundreds of kids & supporters.



Woodland Park Zoo



Henry Vilas Zoo

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

MAY 2025



Happy May, everyone!

May is always buzzing with energy—from the pollinators flying through the air to the growing excitement for summer ahead. We hope you're doing well and are looking forward to diving into this month's updates.

Announcements:

Advancing Empathy Grant Program

Woodland Park Zoo is pleased to announce it will distribute \$3.3 million in new empathy for [wildlife project grants](#) to build organizational capacity at 14 zoos and aquariums. Stay tuned for updates as these projects get underway.

Empathy Excellence Award

We would like to announce a new opportunity to recognize the outstanding empathy work underway at zoos and aquariums across the country and beyond. This fall, we will be awarding Empathy Excellence Awards to AZA-accredited and conservation-based organizations who have implemented innovative and impactful projects that help drive conservation change through fostering empathy for animals and the environment that sustains them. Click [here](#) to learn more. Applications are due July 8.

Empathy Champions Program: Professional Development Opportunity

The Empathy Champions program is a 15-month opportunity for highly engaged ACE for Wildlife Network members to grow their skills in outreach and empathy-based engagement. Ten participants will receive training, develop individualized outreach plans, and connect with new partners and audiences to expand empathy for wildlife. Champions will also share their learnings and resources with the broader Network and mentor the next cohort. A \$1,000 stipend is provided to support each participant's time and contributions. You can learn more about the program [here](#) – reach out to empathy@zoo.org with any questions.

We have a new grant toolkit for you all: [Animal Husbandry Toolkit](#)

Upcoming Events

May 13 @ 11:00 am - 12:30 pm: ACE for Wildlife Network Welcome Session

This is an introductory event to empathy work and the ACE for Wildlife Network. [Learn more and register here.](#)

May 13 @ 12:30 pm - 1:30 pm: There's a Time and Place: Using Critical Anthropomorphism to Build Guest Connections with Animals in our Care

This interactive session will unpack what we mean by critical anthropomorphism, talk through colorful examples and share resources for folks to help them determine where their comfort line is with this technique. [Learn more and register here.](#)

May 22 @ 1 pm - 2:00 pm: Coffee Chat: Evaluating Empathy with Early Childhood & Elementary Audiences

Join us for a discussion of the unique challenges and opportunities of conducting evaluation with young learners. Together we'll discuss methods that have worked well, barriers we've struggled with, and ideas we want to try. Register [here](#).

Strengthening Community Through Empathy: Pacific Whale Foundation's Response to Maui Wildfires



In conservation, we often emphasize the importance of empathy for wildlife, but empathy for people and the community is just as vital. When disaster strikes, mobilizing environmental work isn't just about restoring habitats—it's about supporting the people who care for these places and ensuring they remain connected to the land and wildlife around them. At the 2025 ACE for Wildlife Empathy Summit, Lauren Spencer of the Pacific Whale Foundation shared how empathy-driven community engagement became a lifeline in the aftermath of the devastating 2023 Maui wildfires.



In the immediate wake of the fires, Pacific Whale Foundation, alongside its eco-tour branch, PacWhale Eco-Adventures, sprang into action. Their team organized supply collection and delivery, using boats to transport essential resources to displaced residents in Lahaina and other affected areas. But their response didn't stop at emergency relief. Recognizing that true healing comes from a sense of belonging and purpose, they focused on rebuilding community connections—to each other, to the land, and to wildlife.

A key component of this effort was the Mālama Pono Program, which fosters environmental stewardship by connecting community members, visitors, and employees with local organizations engaged in restoration and conservation work. Through this program, participants contribute to efforts such

as native plant restoration, invasive species removal, and cultural knowledge-sharing—not just helping the land heal, but also giving people a way to process their own grief and find purpose in restoration.

Additionally, Pacific Whale Foundation launched For Da Keiki, an education and resource fair that offers Kamali'i (children) a free opportunity to engage with organizations across Maui that are dedicated to protecting the island's ecosystems. The fair also provides a space for child- and family-focused organizations to share their important work and connect families with valuable resources. By ensuring that displaced keiki (children) could continue to learn, explore, and connect with their environment, the organization reinforced that empathy for people and their lived experiences is deeply intertwined with conservation success.



Spencer's presentation illustrated how simple, intentional actions can have a profound impact. By prioritizing empathy—not just for wildlife, but for the people who share and steward these places—Pacific Whale Foundation has not only provided immediate aid but has cultivated lasting connections between communities, nature, and the work of conservation. Their response to the fires serves as a testament to how organizations can integrate compassion into their environmental efforts, strengthening both ecosystems and the people who care for them.

Planting Empathy Connections at Red River Zoo



Simple changes can have a big impact when it comes to sparking empathy for wildlife. At Red River Zoo in North Dakota, a small addition to animal fact sheets is helping keepers and staff foster deeper connections between visitors and the animals they care for.

As part of their commitment to making animals more relatable, the Red River Zoo education department recently introduced a new section on fact sheets titled "Planting an Empathy Connection." These short, engaging statements help visitors see parallels between human and animal behaviors, making it easier for keepers to initiate meaningful conversations. For example, on the hissing cockroach fact sheet, the empathy connection reads: "We use our voices in order to communicate. The cockroaches use their voices, which is hissing, to talk to each other."

This initiative wasn't a top-down directive but instead grew organically from discussions among staff about how to make keeper chats more approachable. Nicole Lee and Sara Winch from Red River Zoo shared that by incorporating empathy-driven content into fact sheets, keepers feel more confident engaging with the public. Rather than memorizing extensive facts, they can focus on simple, personal observations that naturally spark curiosity and connection.

Though still in its early stages, this effort has the potential to create a lasting impact. As the zoo moves into its busier season, keepers will have more opportunities to integrate these insights into their interactions with guests. With small, intentional changes like this, organizations can take meaningful steps toward inspiring empathy for wildlife—one conversation at a time.

Gestation Period	<i>2 months</i>
Time till Independent	<i>5 to 10 months</i>
Time till sexually mature	<i>7 months</i>
Parental Care	<i>Maternal</i>
Other	<i>Complex mating ritual</i>

Planting an Empathy Connection:

We use our voices to communicate: the cockroaches use their "voices", their hissing to talk to each other.

Other Cool Facts:

- *They have hooked toes and padded feet for climbing smooth surfaces*

Sources:

*IUCN Red List
University of Michigan
National Geographic
Rosamond Gifford Zoo*

Resource Feature

Given that we are in the month of May, we thought it was only fitting to feature our [Pollinator Action Toolkit](#). Created by the Conservation Action Committee, this toolkit offers Network messaging and suggested actions to promote conservation actions to benefit pollinators.

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

APRIL 2025



Greetings! Spring has finally arrived, and here in Seattle we are enjoying cherry blossoms, daffodils, and longer days. We have a lot in store for April that we are looking forward to sharing with you all!

Announcements:

New resources! Our committees have been hard at work completing various new toolkits and resources that are now ready to be viewed and, more importantly, used! Click each link to check them out.

- [Advancing Empathy Grant Program Toolkit: Ambassador Animals](#)
- [Empathy Practices & Key Themes Represented in the Mission Statements of ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organizations](#)
- [Anti-Wildlife Trafficking Toolkit](#)
- [Social Media Toolkit](#)
- [Learning Agenda](#)

April Resource Feature

This month we are featuring Minnesota Zoo's wildlife trafficking and biofacts literature review that discusses best practices in using biofacts for learning in zoos and aquariums, best practices in wildlife trafficking education, and culturally responsive approaches for both. Click [here](#) to check out this helpful resource.

Empathy Photo Contest

Are you passionate about photography as an art form? Come be a part of our Empathy Photo Contest Working Group! This group will shape the 2025 Network photography contest, review submissions, and help to disseminate contest information. Our first meeting will be in May, followed by monthly hour-long meetings through September. This working group will dissolve after the contest concludes and requires a minimal time commitment outside of scheduled meetings. Email empathy@zoo.org **before April 30** if you are interested in joining this group.

Upcoming Events

April 8 @ 12:00 pm: Advancing Empathy Grant Share Out: Enhancing Empathy Through Experiences and Encounters

This session highlights the role of engaging spaces, interpretive storytelling, and interactive experiences in fostering empathy for wildlife. Learn more and register [here](#).

April 17 @ 10:30 am: Coffee chat: Embracing queerness by fostering empathy

The animals in our care are biologically, behaviorally, and sexually diverse, often challenging Western heteronormative perspectives. In this session, we will discuss how to talk about this diversity in ways that are safe, informed by empathy practices, scientifically accurate, and identity-affirming for queer-identifying staff, volunteers, and guests. Learn more and register [here](#). Coffee chats are discussion and participation driven; we encourage all attendees to participate in some way.

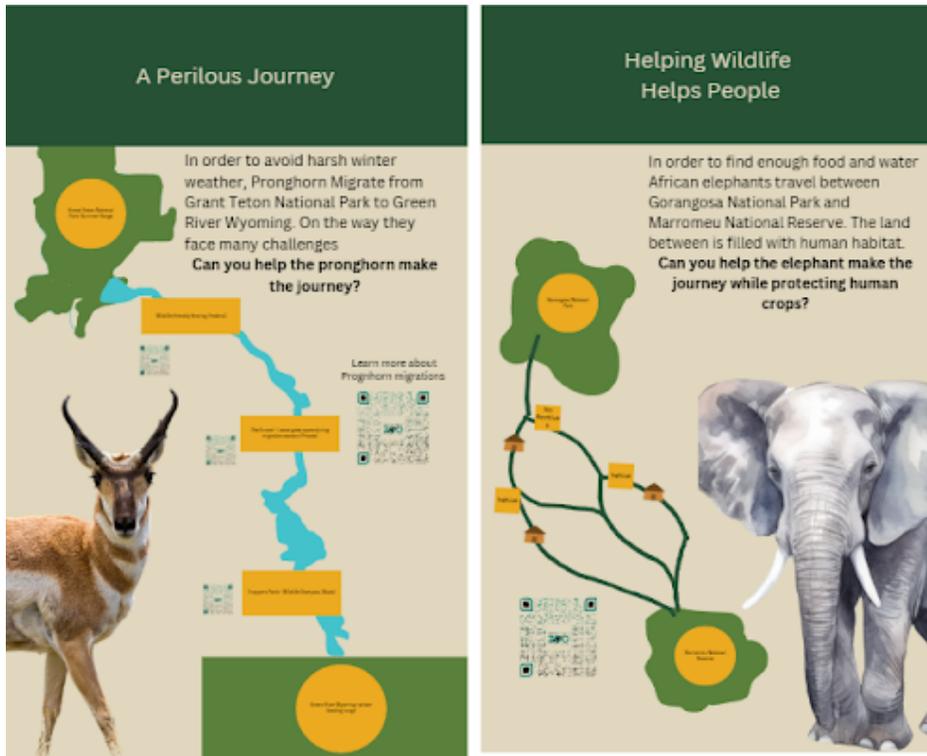
April 28 @ 9:30 am: BioFacts Interpretive Guide

This session showcases the BioFacts Toolkit, an innovative resource designed to train staff and volunteers in using biofacts as tactile tools to foster emotional connections with wildlife. Learn more and register [here](#).

Finding Innovative ways to Promote Empathy for Wildlife in Signage



With new exhibits come new opportunities for innovative signage, and Idaho Falls Zoo is embracing this with their new Adventure Island, set to open in 2025. This exhibit will provide homes for Aldabra tortoises, lemurs, Nene (Hawaiian geese), and other island species from around the world. The exhibit will feature engaging, interactive signage designed to spark curiosity and foster emotional connections while delivering scientifically accurate information.



Animal Migration Signage

To create the most effective signs, Idaho Falls Zoo sought extensive community input. Wildlife biologists, schoolteachers, and guests from diverse backgrounds were involved in the development process to ensure the signage was both informative and accessible. In addition to this consultation, the zoo conducted guest surveys to refine the messaging, format, and design. One key exercise involved showing guests a draft sign for just a few seconds before asking them what they remembered. This approach helped designers ensure that even a quick glance would convey the sign's key message while fostering an emotional connection.

A significant component of the new signage includes QR codes that link visitors to detailed web content about individual animals. Surveys revealed that guests who accessed this web content exhibited greater empathy toward the animals compared to those who did not. The zoo also tested various design elements and discovered that straying too far from their established branding made the signage feel unfamiliar to visitors. This finding helped guide the final design choices, ensuring the new signs remained recognizable while incorporating more engaging elements.

The signs themselves are designed to be interactive and immersive. Some include tactile features, such as sliding panels that reveal answers to questions or spinning cylinders that display information about different lemur species. Other signs incorporate physical engagement, like floor stickers, prompting visitors to mimic animal movements, such as rotating their ankles similar to a fossa. Particularly exciting features include two ball-machine-style interactive signs that simulate an elephant's migration route and a pronghorn migration route, allowing guests to navigate obstacles and better understand the challenges wildlife face in human-dominated landscapes.

As the final designs are being produced, Idaho Falls Zoo looks forward to unveiling this innovative signage and inspiring visitors to develop a deeper, more empathetic connection with the animals in their care. To learn more about this project, interested individuals can contact our contact for this project, Bethanie West, [here](#) for additional information.



The Power of Empathy in Animal Adoptions

At the Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center (GWDC) in West Yellowstone, Montana, animal adoptions go beyond financial contributions—they create meaningful connections between visitors and the wildlife they support. By infusing empathy into their adoption program, GWDC strengthens visitor engagement and conservation efforts.

Unlike traditional adoption models that focus on supporting a general species, GWDC personalizes the process by allowing individuals to sponsor specific animals, from grizzly bears and wolves to otters, birds, and even their infamous ground squirrels. This approach creates a deeper emotional investment, increasing the likelihood of continued support. The adoption program has evolved alongside the facility, offering more options as the center grows. Adoptions also make thoughtful gifts for those who may never visit in person, expanding the program's reach. While virtual adoptions are available, in-person adoptions provide a tangible experience, including a photo, an empathy-focused fact sheet detailing the animal's story, adoption certificates, and at higher tiers, exclusive items like plush animals or unique merchandise. These adoptions are also tax-deductible, making them appealing from both an emotional and financial perspective.



Materials from an adoption package.



Digital display main page for the new app.

The program's impact extends beyond a one-time transaction. Every six months, adopters receive an update with new photos and insights into their animal's life. These updates align with natural seasonal behaviors, such as how grizzly bears experience winter, ensuring adoptees continue to stay connected with the animal they've chosen to adopt. One adopter was so invested in an animal that was adopted for her as a gift, that she visited the center with her adoption folder in hand to search for her animal and observe them in person.

One of the most effective strategies GWDC employs is targeting visitors as they leave encouraging them to adopt an animal they felt connected to during their visit. On their way out, guests will walk by a digital display featuring an animal slideshow and brochures to learn more about the adoption program. The organization is also working on an interactive kiosk that will allow visitors to learn about the personalities and behaviors and stories of individual animals that are up for adoption by clicking on images of the creature they are interested in. Additionally, the organization has been brainstorming new ways to promote adoptions near viewing areas, such as subtle "Adopt Me" signs with QR codes near habitats that may soon inspire spontaneous adoptions.

While this highly personalized approach works well for species that have a longer lifespan, organizations should be mindful of challenges such as handling the passing of adopted animals with sensitivity for species/individual animals that pass unexpectedly or have a shorter lifespan. Nevertheless, this model highlights how empathy-driven adoptions can foster lasting relationships between people and wildlife while supporting conservation.

For those interested in exploring this approach, Leanne Schuh at GWDC welcomes inquiries [here](#). We also encourage you to share how your organization handles adoptions in [this discussion board post](#).

Resource Feature: Empathy Best Practices



Once a quarter, the Communications Committee will spotlight an effective empathy practice and share ways you can utilize it at your organization. This month, we're highlighting the role of providing experiences.

What does it mean to “provide experiences?”

As an empathy best practice, providing experiences refers to creating opportunities for people to interact with the animals in a naturalistic manner. When an animal chooses to interact with a visitor, their agency helps build a deeper connection for the guest with the animal. The more time people spend with animals in these scenarios, the deeper the bond and stronger the connection will likely be. Providing experiences is most effective when it is accompanied with an interpretive experience that explains the intent, motivation and purpose of the animal's behaviors. Aquariums and zoos have a unique opportunity to provide visitors with these experiences in both a responsible and impactful manner.

Examples of providing experiences:

As trusted conservation institutions, aquariums and zoos can involve visitors in building connections with the animals under our care. When our guests get to have a special interaction with an animal displaying natural behaviors, deeper affective connections with that animal will occur. Examples of these experiences can range from watching an animal during a feed to participating in an encounter experience.

Providing experiences is an incredibly useful tool to inspire empathy in our organizations. Is your zoo providing unique experiences that are inspiring empathy? We'd love to hear about it- feel free to tell us about your experience on our [ACE for Wildlife Network Discussion board](#)!

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

MARCH 2025



Happy March, everyone! We're still feeling the energy from the 2025 Empathy Summit and loved reconnecting with so many of you last month. The event was filled with impactful keynotes, insightful panels, and inspiring takeaways. If you haven't already, we encourage you to explore the [resources and recordings](#) from the Summit! Also, please fill out either the [In-Person survey](#) or [Virtual survey](#) if you attended.

Announcements:

Based on input from the 2025 Empathy Summit, we will be hosting learning groups on the following topics: empathy & queer ecology, empathy & critical anthropomorphism, evaluating empathy, empathy for plants, fostering empathy (for wildlife & people) when addressing complex environmental topics, and empathy use in conservation stories. Interested in talking about your work or knowledge related to any of those topics in a learning group? [Fill out this form](#) by Thursday, March 20, and [click here](#) to see our Network Event Interest Board Results.

Advancing Empathy Grant Toolkits:

We are excited to present the rollout of another new Grant Toolkit - a convenient place to learn about the findings and best practices from grant projects by the Advancing Empathy Granting Program. This next [toolkit](#) features grants that relate to interpretive messaging and signage. More will be rolled out in the coming months.

Upcoming Events

March 13 @ 10:00 am PST: AE Grant Share Outs - Community and Cultural Connections

This session highlights the power of community collaboration and cultural inclusion in fostering empathy for wildlife. [Learn more and register here.](#)

March 18 @ 11:00 am PST: AE Grant Share Outs - Animal Behavior and Empathy Training

This session focuses on how animal behavior and ambassador welfare can be leveraged to foster empathy and engagement. [Learn more and register here.](#)

March 19 @ 11:00 am PST: Continuing the Work of Inclusivity in a Changing Political Climate

Hosted by the Network's DEAI Committee, this coffee chat invites an open discussion on how political changes are impacting efforts to foster inclusivity and equality. This event will not be recorded. [Learn more and register here.](#)

Lehigh Valley Zoo: A New Conservation Identity and All-Staff Empathy Training



In a bold step toward integrating empathy into conservation efforts, Lehigh Valley Zoo has launched a comprehensive training program designed to equip every department with the tools to foster conservation awareness through introductory empathy training. A key component of this initiative is a newly developed training program that is designed for all staff members, from guest services to administrative personnel. At the heart of the training is a series of videos that introduce employees to the principles of empathy in conservation. These videos cover foundational topics such as effective interpretation techniques and ways to foster emotional connections between guests and wildlife.

Recognizing the unique responsibilities of different departments, the zoo has tailored additional training materials to meet the specific needs of various teams. For animal keepers, for example, the program emphasizes shifting away from purely factual presentations to storytelling methods that highlight personal connections with individual animals. To support this transition, keepers receive flexible script outlines that guide them in incorporating empathy-driven narratives into their presentations.

LEHIGH VALLEY ZOO Smart Fun!

RACCOON

Updated: 1/5/23

PACTS

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL EMPATHY BUILDING:

- Use names & pronouns
- Provide accurate information
- Model empathy
- Bring attention to the animal's perspective
- Tell a story

TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE THE LVZ'S MISSION A REALITY!

Our zoo relies on the help of individuals like yourself to help spread the story of our animals to our zoo guests. It's your job to provide accurate information while spreading empathy within our zoo community. Every time you connect with a guest, you give an animal one more informed conservation advocate!

EMPATHY IN ACTION

WE ALL LOVE FOOD
Our raccoon enjoys a variety of foods as part of her everyday diet, including different types of vegetables, fruits, greens, and K9 grain. She also gets protein with her diet, which can be different types of fish, worms, chicks, or an egg!

WE ALL GET CHECK-UPS
Just like how we go to the doctor's, our raccoon gets regular check-ups with our veterinary staff to make sure she is staying strong and healthy.

WE ALL LIKE TO PLAY
Meeko receives a variety of enrichment items that help increase fine motor skills, provide mental stimulation, and encourage investigation. These items include: mirror balls, PVC tubes, cardboard boxes, and hanging feeders.

WE ALL LIKE TO BE COMFORTABLE
Meeko stays comfortable by taking naps throughout the day. She has a hide box in the back of her habitat where she can rest in and hide in when it is too cold. If it is warm you can spot her hanging out on top of her hide box or underneath her slide.

BASIC ANIMAL BEHAVIORS:

SLEEPING
I'm primarily a nocturnal animal, which means I may be sleeping a lot during the daytime. If you can't spot me out and about then try looking towards the back of my habitat either in or on top of my hide box. That's where I tend to take my naps!

ANTICIPATING
You may see me at the front of my habitat walking along the barrier. I do this because I am anticipating my keepers are coming with some delicious food for me. I know when they come down to my habitat that there is a chance that I may get to do some training and get snack so I wait by the front for them!

MANIPULATING OBJECTS
As a raccoon, I like to explore things hands first. You might see me manipulating items in my habitat. I am exploring them and trying to figure them out! If it's enrichment then I might be trying to figure out how to get my food out of it. Either way, I am very curious and love checking out various items.

Guest services staff, on the other hand, will receive training on how to effectively answer visitor inquiries, particularly those about animal welfare and habitat accessibility. With Pennsylvania's fluctuating climate, guests often ask why certain animals are not visible. Instead of offering a simple response like "it's too cold," employees are equipped with deeper explanations that help visitors understand the zoo's commitment to animal well-being. The training empowers frontline staff to engage in meaningful conversations, reinforcing the zoo's overarching conservation message.

To ensure that training remains an ongoing process, the zoo is implementing in-person "Lunch and Learn" sessions. These discussions provide opportunities for staff to deepen their understanding of conservation principles and hone their interpretive skills in a collaborative setting. Additionally, a monthly internal newsletter now features an "Empathy Challenge," presenting staff with common guest scenarios and encouraging them to submit their best responses. Departments with the highest participation receive incentives, such as team breakfasts!

Through this initiative, the zoo is setting a new standard for conservation education, ensuring that every interaction—whether between a guest and a keeper, or a visitor and a ticketing agent—reinforces the importance of empathy and environmental stewardship. You can reach out to the Lehigh Valley Zoo [here](#) if you have further questions about this exciting new training.

Saint Louis Zoo's New Destination Discovery



Saint Louis Zoo is embarking on an exciting new chapter with the creation of the Henry A. Jubel Foundation Destination Discovery - a groundbreaking new area for families and children set to open in 2026. This innovative space is designed to foster empathy for wildlife through immersive experiences that connect children and families to animals and nature.

The former Children's Zoo closed in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and from the outset of reimagining the space, empathy emerged as a core theme. The vision for Destination Discovery is to create close, positive encounters with animals and their caretakers, inspiring a deeper understanding and a commitment to conservation action.

Catering primarily to children ages 2-10, Destination Discovery is designed as a family-oriented experience that encourages interaction and engagement for visitors of all ages. The new space will include interactive, nature-based experiences that help children see animals as individuals with family dynamics similar to their own. Key themes include learning how humans and animals share communities and discovering ways to care for wildlife together. Some of the engaging features planned include:

- Larger satellite habitats for various species.
- A two-story Education Building with a preschool on the upper level and an interactive "Nature Nook" below.
- Immersive play experiences, like pretending to be a hellbender, howling with a red wolf, or climbing like a coati.
- A maker space for hands-on conservation projects, such as building bat houses.
- A dig zone near the prairie dog habitat, a splash ground by the otter and flamingo habitats, and a climbing structure near the coati habitat.

One of the most exciting aspects of Destination Discovery is its emphasis on actionable conservation steps for families. The zoo aims to empower visitors with clear, practical ways to make a difference, such as coexisting with local wildlife or creating backyard habitats.

Inclusivity has also been a priority throughout the design process. The zoo collaborated with families of children with disabilities, ensuring the space accommodates a diverse range of needs. These families played an active role in the design and were invited to participate in the groundbreaking ceremony.

With extensive input from the zoo community, local families, and conservation experts, Destination Discovery is poised to be a model for empathy-driven wildlife education. As construction progresses, the Saint Louis Zoo remains committed to creating a space that inspires the next generation of wildlife advocates through meaningful, memorable encounters with nature.

If you have any questions about this new space, you can reach out to Saint Louis Zoo [here](#).



Resource Feature: 2025 Evaluation Toolkit



As participants in the ACE for Wildlife Network, you have access to a myriad of resources that we have developed over the years. These resources span a range of learning group recordings, evaluation resources, toolkits, and so much more. You can find these resources in our [resource library](#) on the website, and filter your searches by keywords, resource type, or organizational contribution. To better disseminate our large arsenal of resources, we have been featuring a new resource in our monthly newsletters, and this month we are presenting the [2025 Empathy Evaluation Toolkit](#). The goal of this toolkit is to serve as a resource for all organizations and individuals interested in evaluating their use of empathy effective practices and/or their impact on audiences' empathy for wildlife, regardless of evaluation capacity or prior experience.

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!



EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

FEBRUARY 2025



February has arrived, and with it comes the excitement of the [2025 Empathy Summit](#)—just around the corner! We're thrilled to welcome so many of you to one of our favorite events of the year. For those unable to join us in person, we're pleased to announce that parts of the Summit will be livestreamed on **February 11** and some February 12 events will be recorded and shared following the Summit. Whether you're attending on-site or tuning in virtually, we can't wait to share this experience with you. We're looking forward to exploring new ideas, growing as a community, and advancing conservation.

Advancing Empathy Grant Program Share Outs

February 26 @ 9:00 am: Empathy-Focused School Outreach and Accessibility

This session explores innovative strategies for fostering empathy in school groups, interns, and young learners through educational programs and interpretive experiences. Learn more and register [here](#).

March 13 @ 10:00 am: Community and Cultural Connections

This session highlights the power of community collaboration and cultural inclusion in fostering empathy for wildlife. Learn more and register [here](#).

Announcements:

We are excited to share the results of our [Member and Affiliate survey](#). This survey is critical to helping us improve Network experiences for everyone and helps us track progress toward [Network outcomes](#). This year's feedback highlights improvements and opportunities in participant experience, Network engagement, organizational buy-in, and the use and understanding of empathy-related practices in our daily work. Thank you to everyone who participated and contributed feedback. Committees will have the opportunity to discuss results with a member of WPZ's Evaluation & Impact during scheduled sessions. In addition, if you have questions or feedback on the survey, please feel free to contact the E&I team directly, zoo.audience@zoo.org.

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

Zoo Boise's Approach to Animal Bereavement and Connection



Zoos have historically avoided public discussions about animal death, but a new era of transparency is fostering empathy and deeper connections with animals. Zoo Boise's Director of Education, Tierney Ball, shared how their team incorporates empathy into conversations about animal grief and bereavement, creating meaningful opportunities for the public to connect with the animals.

One transformative practice is the use of empathetic language to reframe the end of an animal's life. Zoo Boise, a final home for many geriatric animals involved in Species Survival Plans (SSPs), often describes their role as providing a "retirement home." This language has been met with overwhelming public support, allowing visitors to appreciate the care and dignity afforded to animals in their older years. When their snow leopard Kabita developed mouth cancer, the zoo shared updates from diagnosis to treatment, inviting the community to be part of her journey. Visitors responded by sending cards for Kabita and her keepers, demonstrating how sharing stories fosters understanding and compassion.



Kinkajou eating a banana... yum!

To further involve the community, Zoo Boise set up an A-frame station where visitors could share cards honoring animals that passed away. This gesture not only memorialized the animals but also gave visitors a voice in the grieving process. "It's cathartic," said Tierney. "Our keepers and volunteers, who deeply care for these animals, have appreciated the opportunity to share their love and receive support."

In addition to grief-related initiatives, Zoo Boise's adaptive programming opens new pathways for connection. These biannual events, held since 2022, create a welcoming space for individuals with disabilities to experience the zoo on their terms. One attendee, a wheelchair user, expressed how these evenings allowed her to fully enjoy exhibits, like the penguins, without feeling she was obstructing others. Adaptive nights foster a sense of belonging, exemplified by the bond between two mobility device users who explored the zoo together.

By prioritizing transparency, empathy, and inclusion, Zoo Boise is redefining the role of zoos in connecting people with animals. These initiatives demonstrate the power of storytelling and shared experiences to deepen our collective care for wildlife. To continue this conversation within the Network, we invite you to check out this post on our discussion board about how different zoos honor their animals and deal with grief and bereavement surrounding animal death. You can also reach Tierney [here](#) for other inquiries.



Dakota Zoo's Behind-the-Scenes Otter Tour Inspires Empathy and Conservation



At last year's February virtual summit, we learned about an exciting new project from Dakota Zoo—a behind-the-scenes tour featuring their North American river otters. One year later, the program has flourished, creating unique and meaningful connections between guests and these charismatic animals.

The idea was born from the zoo's desire to expand guest experiences and address an aging otter exhibit. A generous donor and grant funding from the Advancing Empathy Grant Program helped bring the vision to life, resulting in an interactive program that highlights otters' natural behaviors and inspires empathy for wildlife.

At the heart of the tour are three engaging obstacle courses that showcase otters' natural abilities—swimming, nesting, and locomotion. Guests begin by selecting a blueprint for an obstacle course and helping to assemble it, giving them an active role in the experience. Once constructed, the otters demonstrate their agility and adaptability, navigating the courses with enthusiasm and often without prompts.

The courses are designed to highlight key adaptations: webbed feet for swimming, dexterity for climbing, and behaviors for nesting. Through these “defining moments,” participants witness the otters' playful energy while learning about their ecological importance. Brent Weston, who oversees the program, emphasizes that it's less about facts and more about creating a memorable connection. However, they take the opportunity of having an engaged audience to share conservation messaging, such as Leave No Trace principles, riparian clean up, otter spotting for the state Game and Fish Department, and other opportunities to support local wildlife.

Building the program was no small feat. Designing and testing the PVC obstacle courses required time, effort, and repeated trial runs to ensure they were safe and engaging for the otters. Additionally, creating user-friendly blueprints for guests and training staff to facilitate the program required careful planning. Promoting the event amidst a busy calendar of activities also presented hurdles, but the team continues to refine their approach.

Despite these challenges, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Guests leave with a deeper appreciation for otters and an understanding of how their actions can support wildlife conservation. This program is a testament to how zoos can blend creativity, education, and empathy to create meaningful wildlife connections. If you want to hear more about this project, you can view Dakota Zoo's presentation on the tour from our [2024 virtual Summit](#) or contact Dakota Zoo [here](#).



Resource Feature: Inclusive Conservation List



As participants in the ACE for Wildlife Network, you have access to a myriad of resources that we have developed over the years. These resources span a range of learning group recordings, evaluation resources, toolkits, and so much more. You can find these resources in our [resource library](#) on the website, and filter your searches by keywords, resource type, or organizational contribution. To better disseminate our large arsenal of resources, we will begin featuring a new resource in our monthly newsletters starting with the [Inclusive Conservation List](#). This resource list, co-created by our Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion (DEAI) Committee and our Strategic Learning Committee, reflects an initial step forward to make conservation initiatives throughout our Network more inclusive and well-rounded.

EMPATHY

PHOTO CONTEST

We launched our first ever ACE for Wildlife Network Photo Contest this past year, and we are excited to announce our winners! Thank you to everyone who submitted beautiful photos, helping us to showcase what empathy for wildlife looks like through your own unique perspectives. You can check out all the submissions [here](#).

Contestants in the photo competition submitted photos to the following categories and further specified their submissions by taxa groups. Please note we did not receive submissions for every taxa group:

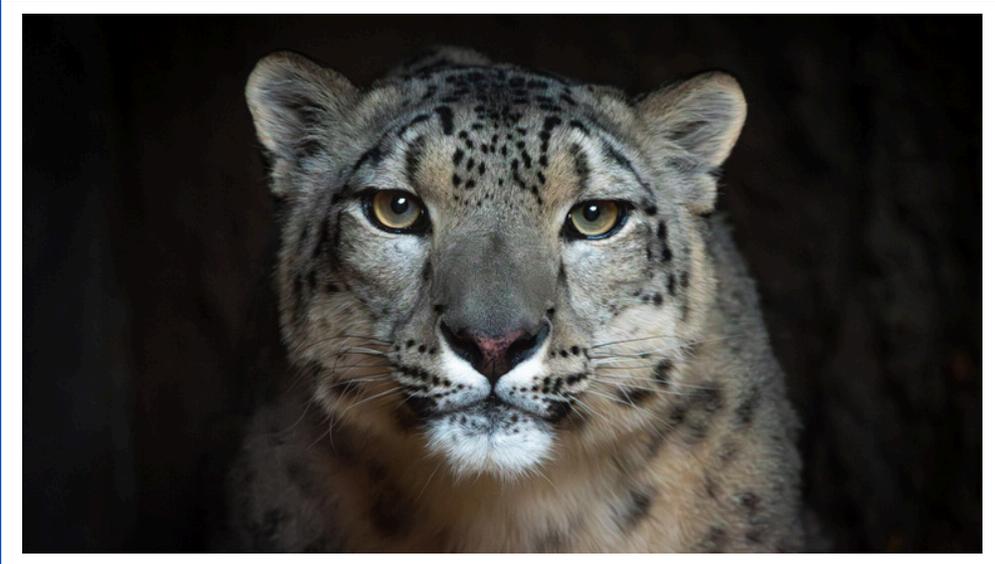
Animal Portrait

Connection & Inclusion

Personality & Behavior

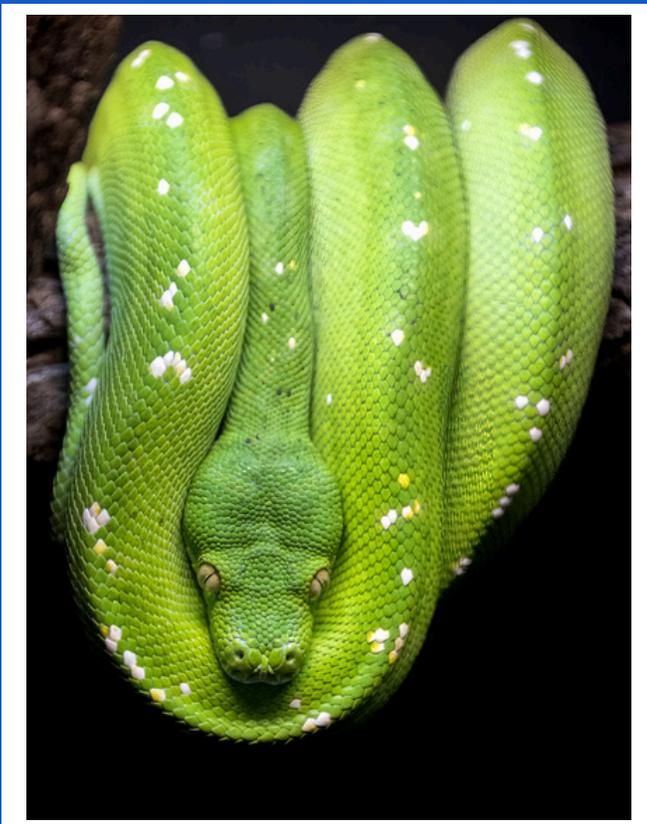
Thank you to everyone for your wonderful submissions, and the Advancing Empathy Photo contest working group: Heather Merewood (Henry Vilas Zoo), Shana Kent (Alaska SeaLife Center), and Benjamin White (Blank Park Zoo).

ANIMAL PORTRAIT WINNERS



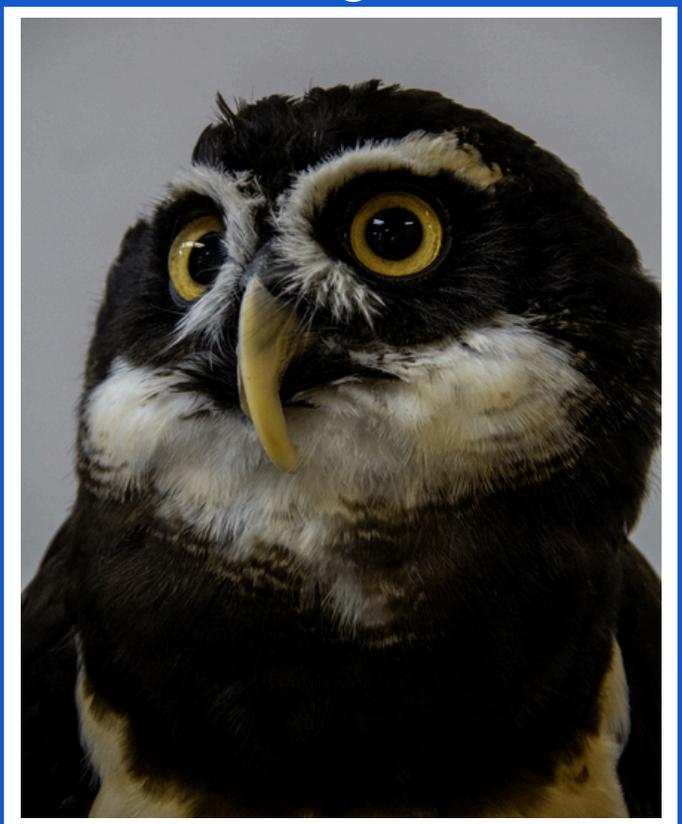
Mammals

Erika Berry
Utah's Hogle Zoo



Reptiles

Jennifer D'Agostino
Oklahoma City Zoo



Birds

Kelley Polowy
Valley Zoo Development Society

PERSONALITY & BEHAVIOR WINNERS



Mammals

Jennifer D'Agostino
Oklahoma City Zoo



Birds

Luke Johnson
International Crane Foundation

CONNECTION & INCLUSION WINNERS

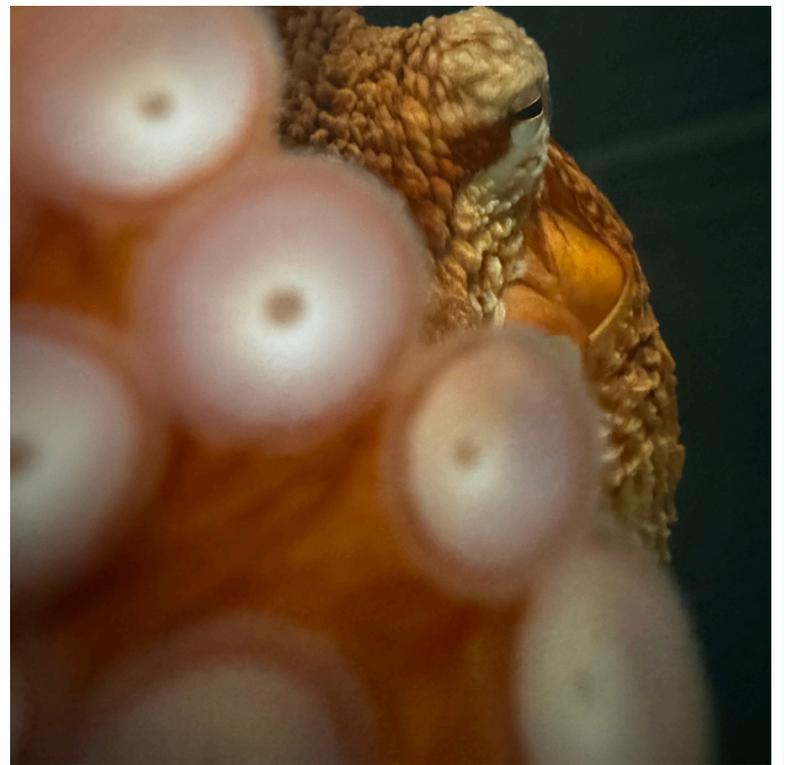


Mammals

Jennifer D'Agostino
Oklahoma City Zoo

Fish & Invertebrates

Abrianna Lance
Alaska SeaLife Center



EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE™ NETWORK

JANUARY 2025



Happy New Year, everyone! We hope you've all had a restful holiday season. Thank you all for contributing to another impactful year of the Network – it's been another successful year of learning, growth, and meaningful collaboration. We can't wait to see what 2025 has in store.

Announcements:

We are thrilled to announce the release of ***Building Empathy for Wildlife in Zoos and Aquariums: What We Know About Inspiring Conservation Action and Caring***. This practitioners' guide was developed by the Social Ecology Lab at Stanford University and Woodland Park Zoo in an effort to understand the most current research on the relationship between empathy and conservation action.

The authors will be joining us for a Learning Group to discuss this resource and answer questions on January 23 @ 10 am – 11 am PST.

Learn more and register [here](#).

Committee Updates

Stay up to date with committee happenings [here](#).

Upcoming Events

January 9 @ 10:00 am – 11:30 am PST: Native Governance Webinar: Partnering with Native Nations in a Good Way

[Learn more and register here.](#)

January 15 @ 9:30 am- 11:00 am PST: Introduction to Empathy & the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife Network

[Learn more and register here.](#)

February 11 @ 9:00 am - 1:00 pm PST: Virtual Empathy Summit

[Learn more and register here.](#)

Are you working on an empathy project at your organization that you'd like to be featured in the newsletter? Submit a short description of your project to sarah.panciroli@zoo.org – we would love to showcase your work!

A Blossoming Partnership with the Nisqually Indian Tribe



We wanted to highlight some incredible work happening at Northwest Trek Wildlife Park, where a growing partnership with the Nisqually Indian Tribe is paving the way for meaningful collaboration. This relationship honors the Tribe's ancestral connection to the lands where Northwest Trek is located while creating opportunities to amplify Indigenous voices and perspectives.

At the heart of this partnership is a shared commitment to building stronger relationships and advancing diversity, equity, access, and inclusion. One key initiative is the Nature Engagement Fellowship, a year-long, paid position designed to incorporate Indigenous heritage into the park's culture while providing professional development. The fellowship is funded by Weaving the Basket: A Collaborative Journey With the Nisqually Indian Tribe, through the Advancing Empathy Grant Program.



Two teens shoveling during a keeper activity of the career shadow program.

This past summer, the collaboration expanded to include teens from the Nisqually Tribe through the Tribe's Summer Youth Employment Program. This program allowed teens to explore careers in wildlife care by working closely with animal keepers and park staff. Highlights included hiding enrichment items for the park's grizzly bears, preparing animal diets, and caring for endangered northern leopard frogs.

By blending cultural heritage with conservation efforts, this partnership offers a unique model for how organizations can honor Indigenous communities while inspiring future generations.

You can find more information about this partnership [here](#).

Effective Empathy Practice Quarterly Feature: Modeling

Once a quarter, the Communications Committee will spotlight an effective empathy practice and share ways you can utilize it at your organization. This month, we're highlighting the role of modeling.

What is modeling? As an empathy best practice, modeling refers to demonstrating empathic or caring language and behaviors for others. Modeling is most effective when it is done by a trusted teacher or role model. Aquariums and zoos have a unique opportunity to both be a direct role model and to inspire our visitors to be role models for others in their lives.

Examples of modeling: As trusted conservation institutions, aquariums and zoos can model behaviors such as excellent animal care, meaningful conservation actions, and sustainable business operations. When parents and caregivers visit our spaces with their young ones, we can encourage them to model empathic behaviors for their children and to reinforce positive behaviors. For example, at an aquarium touch pool, a staff or volunteer may demonstrate how to gently touch a tide pool animal with one wet finger and encourage a caregiver to do so as well.

Modeling is an incredibly useful tool to inspire empathy in our organizations without requiring a huge lift. Is your zoo using creative ways to model empathy? We'd love to hear about it—feel free to share your experience on our ACE for Wildlife Network Discussion Board!

Disney's Animal Kingdom: The Magic of Storytelling



Storytelling has become a powerful tool in conservation, and this month, we're spotlighting how Disney's Animal Kingdom uses it to foster empathy for animals and inspire conservation action. They are extending Disney's storytelling magic beyond screens to create meaningful real-world connections between guests and wildlife.

Disney's Animal Kingdom has the unique opportunity to prioritize face-to-face interpretive storytelling. Each area of their park acts as a "living story," where staff can utilize costumes, props, and narratives to immerse guests in the world of wildlife. To ensure their stories leave a lasting impact, every member of their Animal Science and Environment department takes part in mandatory Storytelling with a Mission training. This training instills a shared understanding of Disney's approach to mission-based storytelling. Participants learn to construct stories that answer: What do you want your audience to know? What do you want them to feel? What do you want them to do? The training also introduces the "Invite, Inform, Inspire" framework—inviting guests into a conversation, informing them with engaging content, and inspiring them to act for conservation.

The program also dives into communication skills, such as emphasizing the importance of knowing your audience and tailoring stories accordingly. For instance, staff learn to adapt stories to their audience, whether they're speaking to a curious child or an experienced conservationist. Staff learn to refine their language, and to structure their stories with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. Positive framing is another key skill—sensitive topics are approached with solutions and hope to leave guests feeling inspired rather than overwhelmed.



Kids engage with a staff member during an Animal Kingdom program.

Empathy is another cornerstone of Disney's storytelling approach. Staff are trained to activate imagination and build emotional connections, whether introducing guests to charismatic animals or helping them see the beauty in less understood species. Techniques such as critical anthropomorphism—making factual comparisons between humans and animals—help bridge gaps of understanding and foster curiosity.

When we asked Bethany Dauner, Education Manager at Disney's Animal Kingdom what other elements they consider in storytelling, they stressed the importance of world-building. For example, their Wilderness Explorers program encourages guests to actively participate by traveling around the park to earn badges in their Wilderness Explorers handbooks. This creates an immersive conservation learning experience which is much more memorable and impactful than a string of scientific facts. Using universal themes like family, love, and celebration can also further strengthen a story.

Disney's Animal Kingdom reminds us that storytelling goes beyond facts; it sparks curiosity, builds empathy, and can create lasting connections to our missions. To learn more about their storytelling techniques, you can reach out to [Bethany via email](mailto:empathy@zoo.org).