

# Animal Ambassador Learning Group

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo), Alanna Dassoff, Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo), Sarah Wilcox (Lake Superior Zoo), Melanie Michaels

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**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 00:00  
Do you want to give all that? You can do that.

**S** Sarah Wilcox (Lake Superior Zoo) 00:03  
Okay, yeah. Emily, give us a list of questions. So I just started everything my answers to the questions. Yeah, so yeah, a little bit about our zoo. We are small zoo, we have 25 full time staff and about 20 seasonal staff. That's all I'll say for now. And I'll maybe I'll pass it over to Melanie, who's also from our zoo, and she can introduce herself.

**M** Melanie Michaels 00:26  
Hi everyone, my name is Melanie Michaels, my pronouns are she/her. I have been also with the Lake Superior Zoo for about 10 years now in the Education Department in various roles. I'm currently the Education Programs Manager. And my primary role is teaching programs and also working with our Ambassador Animals and doing a lot of their training as well. We have about around 40 Ambassador Animals that we take out for programs. We have, sorry, that was my cat, couple of raptors, as well as like smaller, small mammals, armadillos, hedgehogs, rabbits, and then a lot of snakes and turtles, tortoises and a couple of different species of invertebrates as well. So that's kind of the animals that we'll be talking about today from our zoo.

**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 01:22  
Awesome. Um, Ilana. Why don't you introduce yourself next?

**A** Alanna Dassoff 01:27

Hello, everyone. My name is Alanna Dasso. My pronouns are she/her, I am on the Animal Care staff team and I am also the Conservation Coordinator, coordinator, sorry, at ZooMontana in Billings, Montana. So again, we are also a very small facility. So I'm one of nine full time keepers that we have here. We have about three educators and a handful of Guest Services staff, and a handful of office staff so small but mighty team. So again, being such a small facility, we have around 80 animals. And we try to stick to 45th parallel animals. So these are animals that would live kind of in the similar climate to Montana but elsewhere in the world. So for larger outdoor animals, we have animals like Grizzlies, bison, and talking those are on a larger end. And in fact, we do have some warmer climate animals like a flock that Kookaburra, a lot of reptiles. So we do have a good variety of animals, but we do try to stick to animals that can withstand the very frigid of Montana winters.

**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 02:33

Awesome. And then last but not least, Adam, if you want to introduce yourself.

**A** Adam Winegarten (Racine Zoo) 02:40

My name is Adam Weingarten. I use he/they pronouns. Here at the Racine Zoo. My role is the Empathy Behavioral Coordinator, essentially a behavioral husbandry manager for the entire entire zoo, which means I work from giraffes to Madagascar hissing cockroaches, kind of just coordinating all the training that goes on here with the keepers. And also work with our Ambassador Animals. So our ambassador collection is pretty varied, but involves everything from kookaburras, lots of snakes, mammals, invertebrates, all that kind of good stuff. So pretty pretty varied across the board, I would say.

**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 03:28

Awesome. So to kick us off, and I'll leave this open to anybody who wants to respond right away out of you four. What are the current like empathy practices that you have incorporated into your either Ambassador programs, your outreaches or your keeper talks at your zoos?

**S** Sarah Wilcox (Lake Superior Zoo) 03:51

I can go ahead and start with this one. So it is our education team that is responsible for outreach programs and camps and those sorts of programs. But as a keeper, I do have keeper talks. And then we have an on ground preschool that I will attend as well a couple times a week. And then I will also do birthday parties offering animals to come say hi to the birthday kiddos. So those are the types of programs I do. So our programs are unique because they're very informal. We don't have set times where we will do our keeper talk. We will try to pencil in, "Hey, on Saturday, I am going to try and talk at our flock habitat to chat with the public then". But a lot of the times when I see a crowd at one of the habitats for the animals I'm caring for I just try to pop in and just educate them where I can. So the main focus for me was incorporating empathy is just incorporating the language we are trying to use. So again, staying away from words like cage and moving towards habitat. And again, trying to kind of try to have the proper way to phrase this, if a guest has a misconception about one of our animals,

just try to let them know like, again, it's a great education opportunity. So for example, it might be, "oh, that Kookaburra is calling because she is really upset right now". And so that would be my opportunity to pop in and just say "actually, so this is what we've noticed, she does when she calls." So again, just I'll snag those education opportunities whenever I can.

M

Melanie Michaels 05:43

I can go next. So for our programs, in 2018, 2019, we did Sarah did a lot of empathy training for our full time, year round staff education and keeper staff as well, and office staff, guest experience on empathy. So as far as our organization goes, it's very, we're very onboard with the empathy messages. When we talk to visitors, when we do social media posts, we always try to incorporate that. But I can, in 2020 COVID, our keeper talks were suspended at that point. So I was just starting to work with our keepers on a lot more interpretive techniques for their keeper talks, as well as Sarah was working with them on their empathy techniques to try and take them more from like the technical side of how we used to present animals. But as far as our education programs go, so we have also have a full time preschool who does a lot with empathy. They're part of the empathy network as far as doing a lot of research with empathy for preschool children working with local university. And then, for our programs, we've had really awesome opportunity to incorporate empathy far more intentionally with our Ambassador Animals, we started changing the way that we present them when we came back from the COVID no programming, and we were kind of able to use COVID as a way to let people, people understand why we were changing our programs. So we used to allow a maximum of 150 people in a program with an average of about 50 people, usually per program. And we brought that down to 30. Part of the reason for that is we lost some of our animals, due to old age during 2020. And we also changed the way we presented them from being in hand to more them either voluntarily exiting their carriers, or being presented on the ground no longer in hand. So in order for kids to be able to get a better view of the animals, and get that close experience with them, we did bring it down to 30. So everyone basically can get a front row seat of the animal and have kind of a one on one interaction with the animal. And that has really helped a lot with our empathy. I've noticed the kids in the programs have been making much stronger connections to the animal where before they were watching me. Now they're watching the animal, which I think is really awesome. And they're the same things like "oh my gosh, she's coming over to me, he's looking at me. They used to do a lot of mimicking in our programs, we still do a lot of mimicking having the kids interact, act like the animal, pretend to be a hedgehog curled into a ball, a tortoise in the shell. **But I just noticed that kids really responding more to animals now, especially snakes, because now this snake is choosing to not come up to them.** It's not biting them. It's on the ground. The snake has freedom of movement, and it's not scary. So I've really enjoyed that aspect of empathy of allowing the kids to get a much closer and just adults to a much better experience with the animals a better connection and understanding that the animals are their own entities. **Not an extension of me, which I appreciate.**

A

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 09:15

All right, I'll take the baton. I'll jump right off the bat. Our we have two main departments, we have an Education Department and an Animal Care Department. Asia Summers, who you probably know from the Empathy Network heads up kind of both of those, but started in education. So that has a very deep empathy connection, I would say, and all of our educators

here are pretty well at empathy trained in their language and things, so our ambassador programs benefit greatly from that. In that our educators are really tuned in to what these animals need and what these animals are saying. So I would say a lot of the empathy practices we're incorporated in our programming has to do with the educators and the animals having an open communication. I was just at a conference where Steve Martin said that animals have half of the information in a conversation. And you need to always be listening and looking for that information from them, even though they're not talking to you. And I think our educators are really good at that. Looking for any kind of signal, that the animal might not be having good time, and then knowing how to explain to an audience that this animal has complete control of its environment right now. And as the person responsible for this animal, right now, I'm going to let them go back into their carrier, or we're gonna switch animals because this animal is a little stressed out by what's going on here. So just going to let them have a nice quiet place, things like that. I think our zoo does really, really well. Even before the animals at the program, incorporating choice into coming to the program, or even getting being selected to use that day. Having programs written flexibly where they're not expecting to meet the leopard gecko, today, they are seeing a couple animals, one of them is probably going to be a reptile, one of them is probably going to be a mammal, but giving them information right off the bat that our animals let us know, when they would like to participate on any given day. And setting the expectation right there that our animals have choice. And they might not see the exact animal that nothing's planned, so they're not gonna be disappointed. And we found that really, people enjoy hearing that we have that communication with the animals. They enjoy hearing us say, "Oh, I just saw this rabbit's ear twitch a little bit, or their foot thump. That is the rabbit letting me know that it's time for them to go back in their carrier and have some quiet time." People have really enjoyed that, especially kids, they love talking to their parents about that animal, having so much agency in their life. So I think that's what we do really well here.

E

Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 12:20

Yeah, that's awesome. And both you and Melanie kind of talked about this a little bit that you kind of change how you present your animals in your programs. Can you talk a little bit more about the process of making that shift, and how you present your animals to your audiences?

M

Melanie Michaels 12:40

Yeah, I can talk a little bit about that. So we started kind of working towards voluntary voluntarily entering and exiting the carrier for some of our mammals back in late 2019. And like some of our guinea pigs or rabbits, and our chinchillas had really good carrier entry. Then COVID happened and I, our department was laid off for about a year. And so a lot of our program animals didn't go on programs anymore. So that presented us though with a really unique opportunity, because we were able then to very easily change everything instead of trying to do it like slowly and incrementally and trying to explain to people that already had like, booked programs and had seen us for years doing it one way, why things were changing, or why we needed them to change. It gave us a really unique opportunity where it was like, alright, we're starting from scratch now. We're completely starting over. And so that process was really awesome. We had our senior staff on board, our zookeepers, were on board with the changes. And so I was able to work with the keepers for the ambassador animals on kind of training plans and what working with those animals was going to look like going forward. And it just in the past, you know, we would start to feel like you didn't always hear like, I would feel

bad, bringing some of the animals sometimes to programs. And we wanted to change it to make their welfare better, and make it a more enjoyable experience for them. And so being able to work with them, I can spend a lot more time because we got a grant through Woodland Park Zoo, or through Empathy Network, we're able to spend a lot more time relationship building, which is really important for them for those animals. And so that's kind of how we went about it was we were just like, "hey, we have a fresh start. What do we want to do? What do we want this to look like"? And we kind of looked at what some other zoos did as far as how long their programs were, how many animals they would bring. And we looked at our animal collection and what they were capable of, and what would be comfortable for them. And we were able to make that switch. And then we were able to limit it to 30 people. And people at first, when we were booking it was like, people didn't want big groups anyway, because of COVID. And now it's kind of nice, because we've established our 30 people group, and we're able to keep that moving forward, least for now.

A

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 15:30

I can talk about how we kind of switched, it was not super difficult here, we've got a lot of buy in from all the educators and definitely the keeper staff that do the husbandry for the ambassadors are very open to ideas and suggestions, especially when it involves improving welfare. I mean, they're all in so the examples that I can think of were, we have some rabbits, that it was just clear that they're really not, not really enjoying going on programs, we were seeing signs from them during and afterwards, that were pretty clear communication, that they were not the happiest they could be as ambassadors in their current situations. So what we did for them is we actually just pulled them, we made sure we had backups for mammals, and we were able to fill our programming still with the collection that we had, but we just pulled them and said, we're just gonna give them a break. And we're gonna work on finding a different method before we even put them back on programs. So that we're not just falling into a trap of continuing this and keep saying that we're gonna do it, and we're gonna, we're gonna get better now, and we're gonna fix it next week? Or is that no, we're going to actually fix it right now. And they're not going to go back on programs until they are saying to us, "Hey, I would actually love to go on this program and I think it's fun to be on this program". So we've developed a completely new method for bringing our rabbits onto programs, they don't go outside anymore, we just learned that that's not the car ride is not their favorite thing based on their individual histories so they stay on site. And they're comfortable in a pen meeting groups of people with a clear barrier, that the kids are not going to come into their space, and they have their own little protected area. Yeah, so I think incorporating those kinds of methods into our programs has just been a kind of a species by species basis. And just slowly introducing the ideas to the keepers that are going to both help the animals do better on programs and increase their welfare, and other aspects because a crating behavior for any mammal is going to be useful on an education program and for a variety of Husbandry methods. So if you frame it that way, I think it's pretty easy to get people on board with that sort of thing.

E

Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 18:13

Awesome, thank you. Um, how do you measure the success, the success of like empathy in these programs? Like if you measure it, if you don't? Or like what do you personally consider to be success in these empathy infused programs?

S

Sarah Wilcox (Lake Superior Zoo) 18:36

I can start with that one. We are trying to measure it. So as part of our Woodland Park Zoo Grant Project, we recently developed an observation sheet that a second educator can use while watching the presentation. It's very similar to the MiCAP tool that some of you might be familiar with. And one of the tools that Woodland Park Zoo used for their ambassador animal project. So it allows us to basically we're looking at trying to understand, see the audience's understanding the animals behaviors and the animals needs. And so those are the indicators for success for us with using that observation tool right now is, is the audience interpreting the animal's behaviors correctly? Do they understand what the animal needs in terms of both both in terms of like the habitat needs, and then their needs for choices during the program? And our lesson plans, we're redesigning our lesson plans to incorporate a list of questions that the presenter can ask during the programs in order to elicit those responses from the audience and for us to be able to deserve that level of understanding.

A

Alanna Dassoff 19:55

I can pop in from here. So right now, we don't have a specific way that we measure what we determine success to be. For me personally, again, if I'm doing these keeper talks and it is typically going to be me by myself, kind of the way I gauge is just if I am incorporating certain language, is that audience then when they are responding back to these questions, are they also incorporating that language? So sometimes I will get a question, "hey, so does this animal have this page all to themselves?" So I may respond. "Oh, so, yeah, so Sydney or Cooper, she has her home all to herself." And so if I get a response, "oh, it's nice that she gets her home to herself." So I do measure that as a success that their then kind of using that word as well. And again, I look for an understanding from the audience. So sometimes those impromptu keeper talks will come from me just popping out to check on an animal. So in, for example, in the summer, our porcupines tend to get a little toasty in the summer. So midday, I'll check on them to just see how they're doing. So. So maybe our guests are bummed at first to see that the porcupines are heading back home for the rest of the day. So I'll kind of give those comparisons and say, "Well, I know I get pretty toasty in the summer, and I don't have all this fur on me." So if I get kind of nods like "oh, yeah, like, I get really hot, too. It's pretty hot right now." So just that understanding of, okay, I'm hot, they're probably hot. This makes sense why they're going to go home for the rest of the day. So those are kind of the key things that I will look for and how I measure success.

A

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 21:49

A couple things come to mind. In terms of like a keeper chat situation, we do giraffe feeds all summer here, like four or five times a day. So there's an opportunity for a keeper and educator to be interacting with the public there. And I think a really good sign things that I've seen in the past happen there are an audience member of some age, ask the question like, "Well, why is the draft walking away?" Why won't it come over to me? and another family member of theirs or friend answers their question for them in a way that signals to me that they, they get it and they understand something like well, that animal is making a choice to walk away right now because it doesn't want to be over here or it's full or some something that indicates to me that they have put themselves in that animals shoes or hooves or whatever, and understood that they completely have the choice to do whatever they want in that scenario. I love seeing that

when they're when the teaching is happening. And it's not in my hands anymore. That's like, Alright, cool, we've passed it on. Another method that I can kind of see empathy happening in our education programs. I have a counterpart here, Ryan Stacy has kind of going over all of our programs like every program, and seeing where we can inject the empathy through. But in my kind of animal behavior approach, Success to me is when I watch a program, and I'm not seeing any stress signals from any of the animals, that means that we've had empathy for the animals that we're working with, and out indicate that a success and even seeing behavior that is positive and indicating comfort would be like a roaring success, not just neutral, but like if you have a bird out and it's rousing on a perch or their their head making happy noises or anything like that, where you could check okay, this they're having a good time that that's success to me, I would say. Yeah, Adam, I love that you added the like animal perspective, as part of that success. I think that's really an awesome thing to look at. And like keep in mind when these events are, are occurring. Um, I did have a question that was dropped in in the chat. Kind of going off of what you and Illana have both said, does anyone here use empathy to relate an animal reaction to a human reaction i.e. temper tantrums and overstimulation in humans? And how can that show up sometimes as animals, and then using that as a preparatory talk in case you need to have the animal to take a break? Would anybody like to speak to that question?

M

Melanie Michaels 24:41

Yeah, I can. So I always ask the kids, most of the programs I do are K through third so I often we'll just ask them, sometimes preschool too. Like imagine if you're going to go into a room and meet a whole bunch of people for the very first time. You know, how might you be feeling? How would you feel if they all were yelling your name and screaming and running up to you? And they were strangers? Like, how would that make you feel? So I try and have them picture in their heads, kind of some different scenarios on what would make them feel comfortable or safe, and then relate that back to the animal. So after we go through that, and like, so how can we help our animals feel safe today when they're coming out to meet with us? So I always will do that. And if I noticed an animal, which most of the ones that we bring now, don't actually after that, usually the kids are pretty well behaved, especially with groups of 30, it tends to keep it a little bit more controlled. But if an animal is starting to feel a little bit nervous, I can say, "hey, remember what we need to do to help the animals feel safe, so that they're not coming. They're not feeling scared when they come out". And then they can usually recall back to that conversation that we had at the beginning, where we talk about how they would feel in the same situation.

A

Alanna Dassoff 26:03

Yeah, I completely agree with what Melanie said. I think that it's such a wonderful set up to begin your program. Again, setting those expectations for the kiddos you're going to meet with. So I've done something similar with our preschoolers on grounds, so the best animal that this works with is our turtles, because it's very clear, if they are a little upset or stressed in these situations. They will pull back into their shells so that is a great visual cue for even our three year olds that we're meeting with. So I will try to set that up, like, "Hey, I know if it gets really noisy and loud, I get a little scared. So our turtles do that too. And they may go in our shell, so we want to watch them carefully. And if we see, they're going back into their shell, that means we're just a little bit loud. So if we want to keep seeing our turtle friends, we got to make sure that we're using our inside voices right now".

E

Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 27:05

Awesome, thank you. Um, now I was in a lot of meetings yesterday. And we were talking like constantly about this, like, failing forward, like talking about not only our successes and the great stuff that's kind of come out of them but also recognizing that it's not always success all the time and having a space where it's comfortable to share that, yeah, sometimes things don't work, or they're not kind of going the way that we wanted to, or at least not the level that we envisioned them being at. And this can be a difficult thing to change in your institution, if like, it's not something already incorporated. So I'd be really curious to hear y'all speak on if there were any challenges that you ran into when you were trying to incorporate these practices into your program, either on a personal or like institutional level? And kind of how did you overcome any of those challenges? Or are there still challenges that you're working through? And kind of bring that space forward for folks to think about and collaborate and realize that some of us may be working on a lot of the same stuff.

A

Alanna Dasso 28:26

I can start with this one. So for me personally, again, it absolutely has taken practice to incorporate certain word choice into my keeper talks. Even now, during this, I still have to kind of take a moment to pause and make sure that I am using the language that I would like to use. And again, trying to draw proper examples and make sure that I am using examples that make sense for the kiddos or easier to connect to. And I would say at an institutional level, this definitely is newer for us. Our education team has really been working hard to roll out monthly teachings for our keeper team. Um, so that has had kind of mixed reactions. So we do have a handful of us that so for me prior to coming to ZooMontana, this was something that was incorporated at my last zoo. So this to me was already a habit, but for a lot of our staff, this was totally brand new. So it's definitely taken, again, that getting in the habit of using these practices. And again, with being a small facility, it can get a little hectic here sometimes so some of our keepers have had a little bit more difficulty kind of fitting in those online teaching into their day as well. So it still in works, I believe our education team has seen an increase in participants to start participation in these programs. So again, heading in the right direction, we are still taking baby steps for though.

M

Melanie Michaels 30:23

I can go ahead. So I think for us, a big kind of challenge is that a lot of times our ambassador animals the are often get new keepers. So they usually get new hires often are placed first with the ambassador animal program. And there's not always consistency with the keepers that are in there, we don't have a huge keeper staff but a lot of times will be people that will be in there just a couple times a month, or just newer staff in general and a lot of interns as well that are rotating through every couple of months. So the hardest part for me right now has just been getting, making sure that we're having meetings that we're on the same page for everything as far as husbandry goes. Because we also are having trouble with our rabbits, they're probably our most challenging animal. 2020 did a number on them, they were pretty good with kenneling before. And then they didn't, their area was closed for a year, they didn't see visitors for a year. So they no longer like loud noises, or people that much that aren't, they like me enough, but barely. And they like their keeper enough, but not enough to like go in a carrier

and leave their habitat. So really helping, like working with the keepers on coming up with strategies for how to help them get over their fears or help other animals. So they've been really good about, you know, once for meeting and explaining stuff, getting carriers put into their habitats, so that they're more comfortable with them. But that definitely, oh, it's a lot of communication. Especially with newer staff coming in, because we kind of started everything with an older keeper that had been there and then she moved to a different area and then we got a new per new hire who never had any background and empathy or choice and control really coming from a different zoo that they hadn't started those initiatives yet. So definitely making sure a lot of communication.

A

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 32:40

So, I could mirror a lot of those challenges. On the keeper front, our keepers don't have a lot of time already in their day to just be like super willing to add all this fun new empathy stuff that we're coming up with for them. Like, we can't just give them a list and be like, "You know, it'd be so awesome if you could just do all of this everyday for us. We'd really appreciate it," it's not gonna happen. So we've, we've been actually utilizing our educators to kind of help with some of the training and working with the keepers to save some of the animals' daily diets for the educators so that educators can come work with those animals and try to help develop those behaviors. So it's not on the keepers. And then obviously having open communication between the educators and the keepers, as how the training is going, if the keepers can be doing anything differently to help educators, if the educators can be doing anything differently to make sure they're not getting in keepers way because the keepers are super busy running all over the place, things like that. And we've been having some really good success. I think, with our ambassadors, being trained by the educators every single day, we have a calendar and the keeper staff benefiting from that because the animals are still improving their welfare is still going up but their time needing to be invested hasn't needed to increase that heavily. Well so that was a challenge at first, but I think we've come to a good solution with that. Another challenge I can think of is overlooking some animals because of their size or some of their natural behaviors that they would exhibit. The kind of in the round one look over of what we need to change being looked over is something I guess regret is the right word, but something I've learned from going animal by animal and saying, "what do they need? How can I improve their experience? Is this actually the behavior that we want to be seeing from them? What would this animal will be doing if I hadn't just taken them to an education program? What do they want to be doing right now? And how can I let them be doing that while at this program?", is kind of where my mind has gone. And it has been a challenge in itself to train myself to think like that, instead of some of the more traditional ways that animals are presented, switching to, how can I maximize this animal's comfort? And how can I let this animal display behaviors in a way that would be completely natural for it, and weren't in front of a group of 30 preschoolers? So some of the challenges I face.

E

Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 35:48

Yeah, awesome. Thank you, everybody, for bringing those up. Um, and yeah, I would like to open the next 15 or so minutes to any questions that folks might have. For anybody in this audience with regards to what's been talked about so far, you can either drop them in the chat, or feel free to like unmute yourself and ask but while folks are thinking, I will go ahead and ask one question that was dropped in the chat by Bridget. She asked, have you had to build any

physical structures, special transports, or additions to enclosures to give Ambassador animals more choice when packing them up for programs? And how has that kind of changed or if it has changed your pickup routine for those animals when giving them more choice?

A

Alanna Dassoff 36:47

So, at my previous facility, I actually did see them, because they were very focused on voluntary carrier entry. So they actually did build physical structures to aid in that. So the main animals that they did this for were their three banded armadillos and their chinchillas. So for those habitats, they are actually elevated, so they actually built a platform that would kind of hook over the edge, and you can rest your carrier on there. So that way, you could open the door right in, so then they could enter there so instead of awkwardly needing to hold up the carrier, you could have hands to kind of have reinforcers, or targets, sticks, kind of any other training tools that you need to have. So that's a really great way I have seen that done.

M

Melanie Michaels 37:45

So we haven't had to build any structures for voluntarily removing animals, I use either stations for some of our tortoises, and then hopefully the rest of the tortoises and turtles soon, once they start waking up from hibernation and wanting to eat again, we can work on their training. Luckily for us, our carriers fit into our habitats, which is really helpful. We also, the way our ambassador mammal areas built, we have an island with a hallway in the middle. So we can actually open a lot of the animals doors, and they can leave their habitats, which gives us extra space, which is really nice too that visitors aren't in that area. But I will say I have to bring a significant amount more things with me on programs that I didn't have to before having to bring more things for them to explore. I tried to make it more naturalistic, so different tarps for the different animals, having enough fencing, having rocks and lugs and plants for the different animals that I'm bringing so they're not like the hedgehog and the snake aren't using the same stuff. And having to switch those out in between every single animal can be a little bit more time consuming. So kind of getting in the flow of that. So I have to bring now a huge bit of stuff with me on the programs which and also waiting for them to go into their carrier can take longer, that's going to be hard for our seasonal, we have a summer camp and the summer camp teachers used to get the animals for themselves. But it's a lot more time consuming now, for sure to get a lot of the animals because like the tortoise is really good about stationing but she's a tortoise and she moves kind of slow. So it takes out extra time instead of just grabbing her to wait for her to like come over to you. So that definitely takes more time than it did.

A

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 39:54

I would say I agree with everything. There's definitely way more stuff that you need to be prepared for when you're incorporating these kinds of things. I don't think it's a bad thing, I don't think it's a bad thing that we are having to work so much harder because that means we are caring so much more and that that's a good signal to me. In terms of what we've had to change so far, things like what the crates themselves look like that the animals are entering, modifications being made to those whether it's a different style of door, more of a sliding thing, then, if there was a squeaky noise that the animal didn't like switching the door out. Creating opportunities to reinforce the animal through the side of the crate, if it's a crate that didn't

allow for any food to pass through, making sure there's opportunities to keep positive reinforcement at play, and not any kind of lack of reward for doing what we've requested of the animal. We have different transport containers for select some of our snakes, we have a burrowing snake that we now transport in sand with rocks in it. So at any point in his life, he can decide to burrow again, even if he's not in his habitat, or at the program, there's, there's still sand for him to always be able to do that. Yep, those are, we have a snake board that we use during programs as well, but not not for the burrowing snakes. So the climbing snakes get a big pegboard that they just get to hang out on and do snake things on and then the burrowing snakes get a little sandbag.

**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 41:53

It looks like we have a couple more questions coming in the chat Becca asked, did you develop agreed upon written goals or outcomes or best practices, procedures for building in more choice and control, lists of behaviors to notice etc.?

**A** Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 42:16

So this is something that came up at the symposium weeks ago, that Asia and I have been talking about since then, we're very interested in developing kind of like an empathy. What has worked for us ambassador animal resource, where we could just compile everything, everything we've learned from everybody we know, into one spot that just lists like this is the species and this is what people are doing this is what has worked for them. Not necessarily this is the best way to do this but this is what works at our zoos and this is what we feel like is giving these animals the best welfare at this point in time. We've kind of got that going in our heads or the species that we have here but it is something we are very interested in formalizing moving forward.

**S** Sarah Wilcox (Lake Superior Zoo) 43:27

And then it's, Melanie, I don't want to speak for you. But I mean, I think you mentioned earlier too, that her you wrote training plans for each of the animals and that was sort of your, your way of writing out goals for them. Released as far as creating goals. We're lucky we're a very small zoo so Melanie is our only educator right now. So we're but very, we're having a new educator join us in a couple of weeks. So we have to figure out how to get some of a lot of this stuff into writing and train her and make sure that we're all doing things the same so that's gonna be a challenge for us too.

**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 44:15

Yea and Sarah, Bekah was wondering if you could share an example or two of the questions staff were prompted to ask participants during programs so that you could evaluate empathy.

**S** Sarah Wilcox (Lake Superior Zoo) 44:27

Sure, I have that, I have it here. And Melanie, Melanie, feel free to answer this too, because

sure, I have that, I have it here. And Melanie, Melanie, feel free to answer this too, because she's the one that asks them all the time. So for example, if we're looking for is the audience interpreting the animal's behavior correctly. One of the things we do this for, we evaluate three different animals. We have the snake, the tortoise or the Hedgehog, and those are the folks on for making these observations. So are they interpreting the animal's behavior correctly? The things a presenter might ask are, "what is the snake doing with its tongue? Or why would the hedgehog put its spines up? Or what do you think the tortoise uses its claws for?". So that's one example from that observation. Is the audience predicting or talking about the animals choice or want? So some examples of that might be? "What do you think the tortoise will do when I first set it down? Who thinks the hedgehog will find the bugs that I just hid?". So I'm happy to share those with anyone they like I said, they tie directly to, to a, the observation sheet. And so we mark whether or not the presenter actually gave the prompt or not, and then how the audience responded.

E

Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 45:59

Yeah, that's awesome. I think if you're willing to share, a lot of folks would love to see and use those resources. Great. Sure. Sure. Awesome. We have another question in the chat. Um, have you had any challenges with management and your institutions accepting new practices of empathy and choice for Ambassador animals, especially if certain animals have been heavily relied on in the past or use for particular special events? And are now given the choice to not come out?

M

Melanie Michaels 46:32

Yeah, I can talk on that a little bit. So our CEO is really supportive of our initiatives as far as choice and control, and allowing the animals to come out. I would say the hardest part is special events, and making sure you really communicate that with that team. So for example, I went to our Easter meeting, and there is a note that said rabbits out for visitors all day, so I had to be like, "No, that's not going to happen. I'm so sorry. I know it's Easter." And they used to just put the rabbits in a pen for people to touch and look at for the entire day. And so that was something where I had to be like, "No, I'm so sorry, the rabbits, that's not in their best welfare for them to come out." They're very understanding I offered, I was like, what we can do is take animals out on a schedule for exercising, we have a really nice exercise yard, whether or not we can use it on April 16 in Northern Minnesota is a different question. But I was like, let's set a schedule up, every hour, we'll have animals exercising, that people can come and watch and we can answer questions about them. Instead of it just being like a touching bonanza. So I think, I think getting people to change their mindset. And really thinking about that is difficult. Once you explain it to them, it's, they're on board with it. But getting people out of that mindset can be tricky when they're not the ones who are doing it every day and have to like spend their 40 hours a week thinking about it. So I forget that sometimes other people's don't spend their whole day thinking about choice and control.

A

Alanna Dassoff 48:11

So for us, our management has been very understanding in these situations, I think that helps that just where they're coming from in the first place is they will ask us, or they give us a lot of kind of room to make those decisions as to what animals we want to bring out in the first place.

So for one of our big donor events during the summer, they did ask, "Hey, can we have these keepers, please come bring in the animal", but they didn't designate "Hey, we need to see these animals specifically". So they will give us a lot of choice so they will be totally understanding if we say, "hey, we want to bring our turkey vultures, but he just really wasn't up for it today". So they totally will say, "okay, yep, that's absolutely fine". And they welcome us to just choose an animal that is ready to come out. So I mean, just having that basis is really helpful, because then in those situations, they are very understanding of it.

A

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 49:15

I don't think I have a lot of new comments to add. Just here. It's been all about framing. We have a pretty supportive management team. Anytime you say, "Well, it's actually best for the animals welfare to do it this way or to not do this, or can we suggest doing this instead? Because I think the animal would actually like that a lot more people". People are generally very responsive to that I found. If these individuals are working at a zoo, they have some sort of love for animals, probably, so that you can kind of play into that, I think, in getting people on you.

E

Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 50:04

Awesome. We have about four minutes left, my clock just changed. Um, but we have another question in the chat from Heather, she asked, um, have you had any struggles with volunteer buy in for your docents as you move towards more choice and control practices and more empathy based practices?

A

Alanna Dassoff 50:20

I can start off with this one. So it definitely varies from volunteer to volunteer. So we have had, we have some volunteers that have been here, basically, since the zoo started. So we are a relatively new zoo, we started in 1984, so we've had some long term volunteers. And so with a handful of them, it has been a little more challenging to try and incorporate some of these practices because this is what they have been used to doing for a couple of decades. So to suddenly say, "Hey, this is how we're doing it now", it has been difficult. With newer volunteers, if that is the standard for them coming in, that is very easy to incorporate so again, framing it in that way of, "hey, this is what we've found is best for the animals, animals welfare,", that's kind of a good way to approach it. And even just kind of establishing that, "hey, what you were doing, when you learned it was not wrong, we've just learned something that can further improve their lives". So definitely framing it that way, instead of shaming like, "hey, no, you're not doing it, how we want you to do it". Again, trying to continually when as we love these animals, we want to continually do better and better for them. So that's definitely helped with some of the older, more long term volunteers.

A

Adam Winegarden (Racine Zoo) 52:03

We have a tier system here for the ambassadors and kind of the level of difficulty of them, required from the educator. And we've, we have some volunteers that have been here for a long time and that were checked off on, you know, all the ambassadors. And we've had to

long time, and that were checked on on, you know, all the ambassadors. And we've had to move several of our ambassadors from like a level one scenario to more of like a top level, difficult scenario, because of the addition of positive reinforcement, because of the addition of voluntary creating, looking for a clear yes, before we use them in any programming. And in any case that we've had any resistance to that, or they didn't understand why it had to happen, of course, going to the animal welfare, but also saying, "you know, this is what we're doing that's best for the animal now, we are happy to provide you with the training needed to get you to the point where you can absolutely keep using these animals, we're just doing it in a little bit different way, that gives the animal a little more choice now, but we are happy to invest the time in you, because we appreciate your help as volunteer. And we would love to have you keep working with these animals in the future". Kind of reassuring them that you're still on their side, you're not against them, you're not taking anything from them and they're still human beings that you probably appreciate very much because they're donating their time to you. Again, framing so what we all do 24/7 here in this network, I assume so, utilizing that.

**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 53:40

Yeah, I think that is a wonderful note, to end on that whole empathy for the people on our teams, and kind of the journey that we're all on together as we work for better care of our animals and incorporating empathy into how we interact with the public and these animals and where those two intersect. Yeah, so we are almost out of time. I just wanna say thank you to everybody, not only for attending, but also to our presenters. I think this was fantastic. I learned a lot. I loved kind of chatting and learning from some animal folks now that I spend a lot less time in that animal sector of the zoo. So I really enjoyed this and thank you so much for speaking and attending. But I hope you guys have a wonderful rest of your day. And this will be recorded and posted on the website tomorrow.

**S** Sarah Wilcox (Lake Superior Zoo) 54:36

Thanks, Emily. Thank you.

**E** Emily Bernhardt (Woodland Park Zoo) 54:37

Bye, everybody.