



ADVANCING CONSERVATION THROUGH  
**EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE™**

# **Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network Empathy Adoption Self-Assessment Rubric**

Created by the Steering Committee with guidance from Catalyze Evaluation

*Updated: June 2025*

## **PURPOSE**

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE for Wildlife) Network’s vision is a “conservation-minded society motivated by empathy for animals and the environment that sustains them.” Through achieving our mission of facilitating “the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and data to drive conservation change through fostering empathy for animals and the environment that sustains them” Network Partners can: foster empathy, promote conservation missions, and motivate their visitors to take conservation action. The ACE for Wildlife Network Empathy Self-Assessment Rubric, developed by the Steering Committee, is a tool for organizations or departments to reflect on the progress of empathy infusion. Created within a growth mindset, the goal of this tool is to provide individuals and organizations with a framework to support internal, reflective discussions among your teams to better understand areas of progress and areas for improvement. The Steering Committee recommends that organizations or departments utilize this tool annually or before/after a significant change. In addition, we hope this tool will enhance our collective understanding of how empathy practices are currently implemented throughout the Network.

Sharing your reflections that result from the use of this rubric with the Advancing Empathy Team at Woodland Park Zoo will help us all understand the Network’s collective impact. However, sharing your reflections is not required and can be shared back anonymously if you prefer. This rubric should **not** be used to assess other zoos and aquariums within the Network and **will not** be used to determine eligibility for Woodland Park Zoo’s Advancing Empathy Grant program funding allocations.

## **MAKING SENSE OF THE RUBRIC**

Most rows in the rubric follow a “some, many, most” model through the phases as empathy practices become more infused into organizational practices as you progress from left to right. This measurement method was chosen for the following reasons:

- Achievement of a number or percentage would require substantially different lifts depending on the organization (e.g., implementation in 25% of social media posts for an organization that posts 2x a month looks different from an organization that posts 6x a week).
- The Steering Committee felt that it was more appropriate for the phases to reflect overall growth in a category.
- Departmental organization looks different across our Network. Predetermined categories or variables may not have been widely applicable.



Few rows within the rubric do not utilize the “some, many, most” model and have specific milestones and achievements. This decision was made to reflect the diversity in capacities and organizational structures throughout our Network.

Some rows of the rubric may have time frames associated with them, while others do not. If there is no explicit time frame listed within a row, there is no need to assign a time frame unless there is already one in place at your organization. Any time frame mentioned in a row of the rubric should be referenced from the time the rubric is being used. For example, if you are using the rubric in July and referencing a row with a 12 month time frame, that 12 month time frame refers to the previous July to present, not a calendar year.

At the bottom of each page, you’ll find a space to write down the phrase that resonates with you. If you would like to submit your reflections that will be reviewed by the Advancing Empathy Team and Steering Committee, [you can do so here](#). Submitting reflections is not required, but is greatly appreciated as they allow the Advancing Empathy Team and Steering Committee to track the use and impact of the rubric over time. This reflection is not related to the Advancing Empathy Grant Program. If you have any questions or concerns about any part of this rubric, including the reflections, please reach out to us at [empathy@zoo.org](mailto:empathy@zoo.org). If you have questions about the Advancing Empathy Grant Program and the use of the rubric, please email [empathygrants@zoo.org](mailto:empathygrants@zoo.org).



	Phase 0	Phase I	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Examples, if applicable
<b>Category: Implementation of Empathy Work</b>						
<b>Department Involvement</b>	No departments or teams are involved in implementing empathy projects.	Some departments or teams are actively involved in implementing empathy projects.	Many departments or teams are actively involved in implementing empathy projects.	Most departments or teams are actively involved in implementing empathy projects.	All departments or teams are actively involved in implementing empathy projects.	
<b>Category: Organization's Use of Effective Empathy Practices</b>						
<b>Learning &amp; Public Programs</b>	No intentional effective empathy practices in these programs.	Effective empathy practices are intentionally incorporated into some of these programs.	Effective empathy practices are intentionally incorporated into many of these programs.	Effective empathy practices are intentionally incorporated into most of these programs.	Effective empathy practices are intentionally incorporated consistently into all of these programs.	
<b>Signage &amp; Static Interpretation</b>	No effective empathy practices are present on signs in animal exhibits.	Some animal exhibits include signs with effective empathy practices intentionally incorporated.	Many animal exhibits include signs with effective empathy practices intentionally incorporated.	Most animal exhibits include signs with effective empathy practices intentionally incorporated.	All animal exhibits include signs with effective empathy practices intentionally incorporated.	<b>Empathy practices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Framing</li> <li>□ Modeling</li> <li>□ Increase knowledge</li> <li>□ Provide experiences</li> <li>□ Activate imagination</li> <li>□ Practice</li> </ul>
Department Involvement phase:		Learning & Public Programs phase:		Signage & Static Interpretation phase:		



	Phase 0	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Examples, if applicable
<b>Digital Marketing &amp; Outreach Communication</b>	No social media posts or other digital media outreach intentionally incorporate effective empathy practices.	Effective empathy practices are beginning to be incorporated into social media posts and other digital media outreach.	Effective empathy practices are incorporated into some social media posts and other digital media outreach.	Effective empathy practices are incorporated into many social media posts and other digital media outreach.	Effective empathy practices are regularly incorporated into social media posts and digital media across all platforms.	<b>Empathy practices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Framing</li> <li>□ Modeling</li> <li>□ Increase knowledge</li> <li>□ Provide experiences</li> <li>□ Activate imagination</li> <li>□ Practice</li> </ul>
<b>Category: Contributing to a Community of Practice</b>						
<b>Participation in the ACE for Wildlife Network</b>	Organization has not joined as a Partner Organization.	Organization has joined as a Partner Organization, but has not participated in Network activities, as outlined in the “Examples” column on the right.	Organization has joined as a Partner Organization, and has participated in <b>one or two</b> Network activities outlined in the “Examples” column.	Organization has joined as a Partner Organization, and has participated in <b>three</b> Network activities outlined in the “Examples” column.	Organization has joined as a Partner Organization, and has participated in <b>four or more</b> Network activities outlined in the “Examples” column.	<b>Examples</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Fall all-Network meeting</li> <li>□ Empathy Summit</li> <li>□ Learning Group</li> <li>□ Served on a committee</li> <li>□ Shared learnings/resources (e.g., webinar, discussion board post) with the Network</li> </ul>
Digital Marketing & Outreach Communication phase:				Participation in the ACE for Wildlife Network phase:		



	Phase 0	Phase I	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Examples, if applicable
<b>Partnerships &amp; Collaboration</b>	Organization does not seek input or collaboration with other Network organizations on empathy-based work.	Organization is seeking input or collaboration with other Network organizations on empathy-based work.	Organization has received input or collaborated with <b>one</b> Network organization on empathy-based work.	Organization has received input or collaborated with <b>at least two</b> Network organizations on empathy-based work.	Organization has established a partnership with other Network organization(s) to collaborate on empathy-based work.	
<b>External Communication of Empathy Work</b>	Organization does not communicate efforts to raise awareness of empathy-based work, and is not planning to do so.	Organization is planning external communications to talk about its empathy-based work.	Organization occasionally communicates about empathy-based work externally.	Organization frequently communicates about empathy-based work externally.	Organization regularly communicates about empathy-based work externally, and engages in discussion about this work externally.	<b>Examples</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Press release</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Live interview (radio or television)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Zoo blog</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Print interview</li> </ul>
<b>Category: Building Capacity</b>						
<b>Training in Empathy &amp; Empathy Practices</b>	No training is provided to staff or volunteers on effective empathy practices.	One instance of training on effective empathy practices is provided to some staff.	One instance of training on effective empathy practices is provided to most or all staff.	Regular training on effective empathy practices is provided to most staff.	Regular training on effective empathy practices is provided to <b>all</b> teams or departments.	
Partnerships & Collaboration phase:		External Communication of Empathy Work phase:		Training in Empathy & Empathy Practices phase:		



	Phase 0	Phase I	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Examples, if applicable
<b>Securing Funding</b>	Organization has no dedicated funding allocated to support empathy work.	Organization has secured <b>one</b> grant through the Advancing empathy Grant Program to start empathy work.	Organization has secured funding through multiple Advancing Empathy Grants to scale up empathy work.	Organization has secured funding from multiple sources in addition to funding from the Advancing Empathy Grant Program. .	Organization has sustainable funding to maintain or continuously improve their empathy work.	
<b>Category: Evaluation &amp; Continuous Improvement at the Organization</b>						
<b>Program Measurement &amp; Continuous Improvement</b>	Organization does not identify program indicators of success.	The z/a has identified clear indicators of success for their empathy-based programs.	The z/a has identified clear indicators of success for their empathy-based programs and implement a single process to collect feedback.	The z/a has clear indicators of success for each empathy-based program, implements a single process to collect feedback and has used results to make program improvements.	The z/a has clear indicators of success for each empathy-based program, implements multiple processes to collect feedback, and has used collective results to make program improvements.	<b>Examples</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Surveys</li> <li>□ Audience and/or program observations</li> </ul>
Securing Funding phase:			Program Measurement & Continuous Improvement phase:			



	Phase 0	Phase I	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Examples if applicable
<b>Empathy Training Evaluation</b>	No training is provided to staff or volunteers on effective empathy practices.	Empathy training is provided but the training is not evaluated.	Empathy training is provided, and the evaluation of the training is beginning to be implemented.	Empathy training is provided. Training feedback is collected (e.g., surveys), the training is intermittently evaluated and improved based on results.	Empathy training is provided. Training feedback is collected, the training is consistently evaluated and improved based on results.	
<b>Program Evaluation</b>	Organization is not aware of effective ways to evaluate empathy programs, does not conduct any program evaluation activities to measure the success of their programs and is not planning on doing so.	Organization is aware of effective ways to evaluate empathy in programs, but has not implemented evaluation activities.	Organization has begun to implement empathy evaluation activities.	Organization has implemented evaluation activities intermittently.	Organization regularly implements evaluation activities.	<b>Examples of awareness:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of the MECAP tool</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Contacted Evaluation Strategist on the Advancing Empathy team</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Contacted other Z/As doing empathy evaluation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Program evaluators are trained in empathy practices</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Use evaluation tools in Network Resource Library</li> </ul>
Empathy Training Evaluation phase:			Program Evaluation Phase:			



	Phase 0	Phase I	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Examples if applicable
<b>Category: Organizational Buy-In</b>						
<b>Leadership Buy-In</b>	Organization's leadership has not done any of the following listed in the "Examples" column.	Organization's leadership has done some of the following listed in the "Examples" column.	Organization's leadership has done many of the following listed in the "Examples" column.	Organization's leadership has done most of the following listed in the "Examples" column.	Organization's leadership is fully committed to the ongoing implementation of empathy, doing all of the following listed in the "Examples" column.	<b>Buy-In Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Internally and/or publicly voice support for empathy exploration</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Committed staff time to empathy work</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Committed budget funding to empathy work</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Factored empathy into operational, strategic or master plan</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other</li> </ul>
<b>Staff &amp; Volunteer Buy-In</b>	Staff and volunteers are unaware of the effective empathy practices and how to utilize them.	Staff from some departments are aware of effective empathy practices, but have not committed time to implement them into departmental efforts.	Staff from many departments are aware of effective empathy practices, and have begun to commit time and resources to implementing them into departmental efforts.	Staff from most departments are aware of effective empathy practices, and have begun to commit time and resources to implementing them into <b>at least one</b> departmental effort.	Staff from all departments are aware of effective empathy practices, and have begun to commit time and resources to implementing them into <b>two or more</b> departmental efforts.	
Leadership Buy-In phase:			Staff & Volunteer Buy-In phase:			



## **DEVELOPMENT PROCESS**

After several months of discussion, the first draft of this rubric was presented to the Network at the 2023 Empathy Summit. During the Summit, Network Members had the opportunity to review the rubric and provide feedback for committee consideration. All feedback was carefully [OBJ]considered by both the Steering Committee and the [OBJ] Advancing Empathy Team staff at WPZ. Discussions around the feedback occurred throughout March-April with the Steering Committee, Catalyze Evaluation and Network Support Staff. In May 2023, a new version of the rubric was sent back out to the Network for Members to bring to staff at their organizations to determine the document's applicability in practice. Network Members had one month to trial run the rubric and submit their feedback to the Steering Committee, who then reviewed that feedback in July 2023. Committee members incorporated productive feedback into the final edition of the rubric, which was released to the Network in October 2023.

In Round 5 of the Advancing Empathy Grant Program, the Empathy Self-Assessment Rubric was included in the application process as a reflection tool to identify how proposed projects would support growth across organizations and alignment with up to three subcategories as recommended by the Round 1-3 Cumulative Report.

Applicants were asked to indicate their organization's current phase in each selected area and where they intended to grow during the grant period. Two subcategories, "Participation in the ACE for Wildlife Network" and "Securing Funding," were not eligible for selection, and applicants were not required to submit the organization reflection questions included in the 2023 version of the rubric document.

An organization's starting and ending phases within the rubric did not impact eligibility or funding decisions. The rubric was used to encourage thoughtful, sustained growth over the extended grant periods and progress was expected to vary across organizations and categories. A post-application survey was conducted, and among the 12 participants, no negative feedback was received regarding the rubric's integration in the application process.



Revisions to the resource were made in 2025 to reflect changes to verbiage used to refer to organizational participation in the Network, update the Network's mission and vision statement reflected in the document, and to ensure evergreen use of the resource in its continued supplementary role in the Advancing Empathy Grant Program.

## **DEFINITIONS**

**Affiliate:** Individuals not employed by an ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organization that are engaged with the Network.

**Buy-in:** A belief in, and agreement to support empathy work at a zoo or aquarium. Partner Organizations demonstrate this by signing institutional documents and supporting their staff in attending Network events in addition to engaging in empathy work.

**Department or team:** A group of staff at a zoo or aquarium that are working under a shared direction.

**Effective empathy practices:** The six practice categories described in the "[Best Practices in Developing Empathy toward Wildlife](#)" by the Seattle Aquarium, in addition to including connecting to caring and/or conservation action.

**Empathy work:** An umbrella term referring to empathy infusion at a Partner Organization. Projects that are occurring (or have occurred) at a zoo or an aquarium where incorporating effective empathy practices is fundamental are considered empathy work. These projects do not have to be funded by the Advancing Empathy Grant Program.

**Institutional documents:** Documents that all Partners have completed as part of their involvement in the Network such as their Letter of Commitment or any grant paperwork.

**Leadership:** Decision makers at an organization; individuals who are able to allocate resources and prioritize staff time to empathy work. What is considered a leadership role will likely differ between organizations based on their size and structure.

**Master plan:** A written long-range plan that provides an organization with direction to develop or improve land, facilities, a building complex, etc. (from The Guide to Accreditation of Zoological Parks and Aquariums 2023).

**Partner Organization (or Partner):** Zoos and aquariums accredited by the Association for Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) in the ACE for Wildlife Network.



**Strategic plan:** A written plan defining an organization's strategy or direction, including defining sources of funding and allocation of resources needed to pursue this strategy (from The Guide to Accreditation of Zoological Parks and Aquariums 2023).

**Z/As:** Shorthand for zoos and aquariums.

