



We're on the same side: How to talk to those who are anti-zoo

Presented by Aszya Summers

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE) for Wildlife Network's vision is a "conservation-minded society motivated by empathy towards all life." Through achieving our mission of "creating and sharing effective practices to foster empathy for animals and people," Network Partners can: foster empathy, promote conservation missions, and motivate visitors to take conservation action. We pride ourselves in being Member-driven.

This is a follow up document to the [September 27, 2023 learning group](#) that addresses participants questions and includes resources mentioned from the presentation: "We're on the same side: How to talk to those who are anti-zoo". Answers were provided by Aszya Summers.

Aszya Summers has been in the zoo and aquarium field for over ten years. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with degrees in zoology and environmental studies, she spent time working at aquariums in North and South Carolina and with the International Crane Foundation, before spending six years at the Racine Zoo overseeing the education and animal care departments. She now works as the Grant Writer at Lincoln Park Zoo.



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Questions from participants:

“We have a decent amount of guests who are frustrated by animal choice and feel like - what’s the point of having a zoo if the animals can’t be seen?”

- In this situation, explain how your zoo is putting animals first because you want them to have a choice. Emphasize with your guest that you know they are coming to enjoy themselves, but that they’re also supporting a conservation organization. Use this opportunity to teach how zoos aren’t just for entertainment anymore. Welfare comes first.
- Redirect the question by asking what animals they have seen, and which animals they enjoyed during their visit to highlight a positive moment.

“How do you address situations where the zoo is making changes because it’s a poor situation for the species? E.g. phasing a species out because the zoo doesn’t have adequate space or habitat options.”

- Sometimes with these situations, honesty is the best policy! First, reassure your guest that the animal in question has all their welfare needs met. However, if the animal needs a change to their current situation, acknowledge that the zoo is doing everything they can to better accommodate the animal, and let them know when and how these changes will be addressed.
- Remember that if zoos become too prideful and pretend that everything is always perfect in the zoo world, they lose authenticity and trust with the public.



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“How do you respond to criticism that AZA is made of ‘industry insiders’ and therefore accreditation isn’t as meaningful?”

- This can be a good time to remind guests that there are teams of people in AZA, not just one person who makes all of the decisions.
- You can also acknowledge how AZA shouldn’t be the only standard that a zoo holds themselves to.
- Remind the guest that zoos can and do lose accreditation, and that AZA isn’t just a rubber stamp.

“Should zoos be speaking louder about the contributions they make to conservation and overall animal well-being?”

- In general, zoos are doing a much better job of making behind-the-scenes programming more visible which is a positive thing! Zoos should be adding training demonstrations to their programs, and explaining what happens in the day to day of a zoo.
- As educators, we should be building scientific literacy so people can think critically and do their own research about the benefits of zoos.

“We recently had a muskox calf born and many people have started asking the question: Will baby stay here with parents forever? How do you approach these kinds of questions?”

- This is a great time to talk about species survival programs and how critical they are for populations in the wild. Prep your guests about these situations beforehand by providing them with this kind of information.
- You can also tell your guest that eventually a baby will grow out of being cared for by their mother and is all ready to be an adult on their own.



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“How can you approach a conversation when someone gives you a negative example of zoos that you believe is false information?”

- To avoid being polarizing, listen to what your guest has to say and don't just shut them down.
- Next, focus on telling your guest about factual information about zoos. For example, if someone claims they heard that a particular AZA zoo doesn't give their animal enrichment, you could tell them how surprising that would be considering enrichment is a requirement for AZA accredited zoos.
- With this approach, you are not putting someone down, but you are still giving them reasons why what they're saying may not be true.

“How does one best address questions and concerns about animal escapes (such as bird fly offs). This is especially hard because those situations don't always end well.”

- With this situation, you can explain that many times an animal accidentally escapes and is often found in neighboring trees or bushes near their enclosure. These kinds of situations affirm that animals are happy in their habitats.
- In fly off situations, you can tell your guest that many times a bird will fly away when it is spooked from another raptor flying overhead.
- You can compare an animal escape to your pets trying to run outside. This doesn't mean that they want to leave forever, they are just curious about the outside world.



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“When it comes to giving examples of animal care and wellbeing, do you ever use comparisons to domestic animals or pets to help people understand?”

- This can be a good approach when you are talking with someone who is anti-zoo.
- For this comparison, you can talk about how your pet at home sees the vet just like animals at zoos see the vet and receive exceptional care. Zoo animals also see highly trained keepers almost every day that provide constant support and care for the animal.
- You can also bring up how our zoo animals get enrichment just like pets at home do.
- Be sure to read the audience- if someone disagrees with the idea of even keeping pets, this is not a good person to use this comparison with.

“How can you better communicate that an animal prefers solitude?”

- First, consider the animal that they are talking about. If it is a social animal, maybe you can help the guest find an additional animal in the enclosure that may just be hiding. If the animal is truly alone, offer explanations such as how your zoo may be waiting to receive another animal, or perhaps that individual truly does prefer solitude even if its species normally wouldn't.
- When talking about species that prefer solitude, connect what your guest is seeing in the zoo to what they would see in nature. For example, you could tell your guest how they would typically see a tiger alone in the wild.



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“How do you respond to conversations about birth control or using dummy eggs for birds?”

- For this situation, you can explain to a guest that dummy eggs are good because birds tend to re-clutch. When something happens to a female's eggs, they will typically lay more. If a bird is constantly laying eggs, the female could get a calcium deficiency or become egg bound which requires an emergency procedure. This is why dummy eggs can be a good option for birds, so they can focus their attention on caring for an egg rather than producing a replacement egg.
- You can also describe that birth control helps to minimize genetic problems with inbreeding.

“I've had people who insist zoos shouldn't exist and animals should go to a sanctuary instead. How do I convince them that is essentially what zoos do even if they insist sanctuaries are different/better?”

- A good way to go about this question is to explain USDA requirements versus accreditation requirements for zoos and aquariums. Tell your guest that there are excellent standards for AZA zoos, which are generally above USDA (which is what a sanctuary must adhere to).
- This is a great moment to tell your guest how zoos give back to the environment, promote empathy towards animals, and provide top notch care for animals.
- Ask your guest, “what is the difference between a sanctuary and a zoo”? That might help you hone in on what the person asking the question thinks the difference might be. Then you can begin to break down common misconceptions about zoos.



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Mentioned Resources

FrameWorks Institute

[How to Talk about Climate Change and the Ocean: Prepared for the National Network and Climate Change Interpretation with Support from the National Science Foundation | FrameWorks Institute](#)

This resource “synthesizes multiple studies and outlines a communications strategy for building public understanding of climate change and its effects.”

Woodland Park Zoo

[Words That Matter](#)

This resource “provides alternatives for some more commonly used words in the zoo lexicon that have become outdated or do not fully express the thoughtfulness and professionalism of our (animal) care program.”

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)

[Visitor Demographics](#)



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Why Zoos & Aquariums Matter (WZAM)

[General Research Project Information Page](#)

[WZAM Resources](#)

WZAM Wave 1: [Assessing the Impact of a Visit to a Zoo or Aquarium](#)

WZAM Wave 2: [Why Zoos & Aquariums Matter Handbook](#)

Why Zoos and Aquariums Matter (WZAM) is a long-term research initiative designed to understand how zoos and aquariums contribute to American society.

National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation (NNOCCI)

[Tools & Trainings](#)

This resource includes trainings and tools for those interested in learning more about climate change interpretation.