

THE POWER OF PERSPECTIVE: A LOOK INTO THE EMPATHY MOVEMENT

A mirror typically reflects the face in front of it. In a Zoo Class, children often look into mirrors and see a fish, a zebra, an alligator or some other animal looking back! This fun activity called perspective-taking, which involves children making animal costumes and reflecting on their reflection, is one of the ways the Zoological Society helps young people look at the world through the eyes of an animal. It also reflects the recent shift to empathy-centric education that's becoming increasingly common across the country.

Empathy, or the ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences of another, is one of the most impactful ways humans develop connections to animals. But how influential can the power of sharing an animal's perspective be? In 2015, an anonymous donor funded a collaborative project between three Pacific Northwest

organizations (Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium, Seattle Aquarium and Woodland Park Zoo) to help answer this question.

The funding was specifically intended to explore the use of empathy to inspire conservation action. "Getting people to the point of taking conservation action is a complex process," says Darcie Larson, the senior manager of community engagement and inclusion at Seattle Aquarium. "We know it's not as simple as 'knowing, caring, doing'. It requires many internal and external motivations. We believe that the intentional use of empathy can be a foundational piece of the conservation work we do."

The premise is simple. The more empathy a person feels toward a specific animal, the higher chance they will support conservation on behalf of that



animal's wild counterparts at some point in their life. The three organizations put this theory into practice through the Measuring Empathy Collaborative Assessment Project (2015-2018). During this time, the organizations developed questionnaires, observation tools, and gamified assessments that could be used to collect data on the impact of intentional empathy education.

The Seattle Aquarium identified six best practices for fostering empathy: framing, sharing knowledge, modeling, activating imagination, direct experience and practice. Instead of saying the species name, staff called an animal by its given name. Instead of explaining a certain behavior, they asked their audience to think about why the animal made that choice and what it was feeling in that moment. Instead of listing a species' IUCN conservation status and moving on, they explained what everyday decisions people can make to help save that species.

The data was powerful. "Evidence strongly suggests that when empathy strategies are intentionally used, participants showed a greater frequency and intensity of empathy-related outcomes," says Sarah Brenkert, principle evaluator at Seattle Aquarium. "Informal learning experiences, like at a zoo, aquarium or nature center, can offer powerful experiences that inspire feelings of connection and motivate people to take action for conservation."

Research also demonstrated how empathy is a cognitive ability that can be strengthened. "I really love to think about zoos and aquariums as empathy gyms," says Larson. "They're places where people can go to strengthen their empathy muscles." In 2018, encouraged by MECAP's positive data, the Pacific Northwest empathy contingent set out to create more "empathy gyms" across the country, and in 2022, the Zoological Society was awarded a grant from the Woodland Park Zoo to infuse more intentional empathy education into its programming.

Lessons learned in Zoo Classes will hopefully help create a generation of youth who spend more time thinking about an animal's experience, and more time thinking about how they can help those species persevere in the wild. While the Zoological Society is just one of a handful of organizations doing this work, the movement is continuing to grow. This past February, the Association of Zoos & Aquariums featured a module about empathy in its yearly conservation education training for the first time ever. "This is a significant milestone," says Larson. "It's really growing in acceptance and popularity, and it's popular because the research has shown how effective it is."

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5 WAYS TO BUILD EMPATHY AT THE ZOO

1. **Read a Habitat Sign** – Almost every animal at the Zoo is featured on an informational sign near their habitat. These signs typically share where the species is from, their conservation status, what they eat and more.
2. **Learn About Animal Care** – Zookeepers work hard to maintain the wellness of their animals and keep them engaged. See if you can spot some examples of their work!
3. **Act Out an Adaptation** – Flap your arms like a bird! Waddle like a penguin! Mimicking an animal can help you see the world through their eyes.
4. **Watch an Animals in Action Talk** – Zoo Pride volunteers hold daily talks during the summer season at select habitats to discuss animal care, personalities, species conservation and more.
5. **Ponder an Animal's Behavior** – Whether they're looking for food or lying down, Zoo animals are always making an intentional choice. Spend some time observing an animal and think about why it has chosen to behave in a specific way in a given moment.

