

Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Empathy for Wildlife Programs

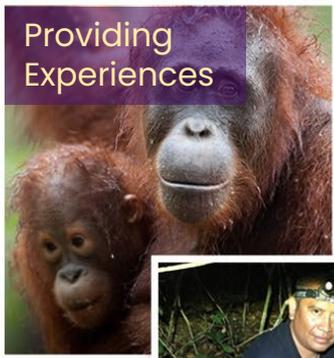
Isabelle Bieser

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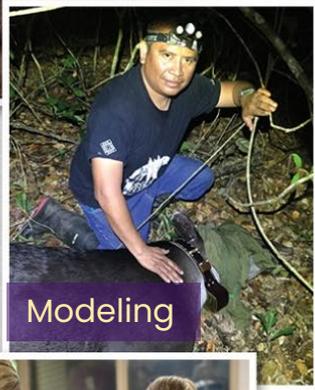


CONSERVE

Providing Experiences



Modeling

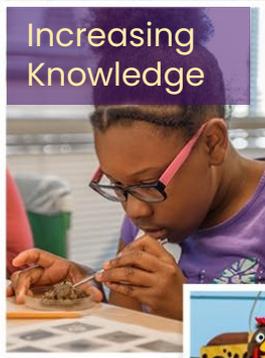


Modeling



EDUCATE

Increasing Knowledge



Activate Imagination



Framing



SUPPORT

Increasing Knowledge



ZOO PASS MEMBER



Opportunities to Practice

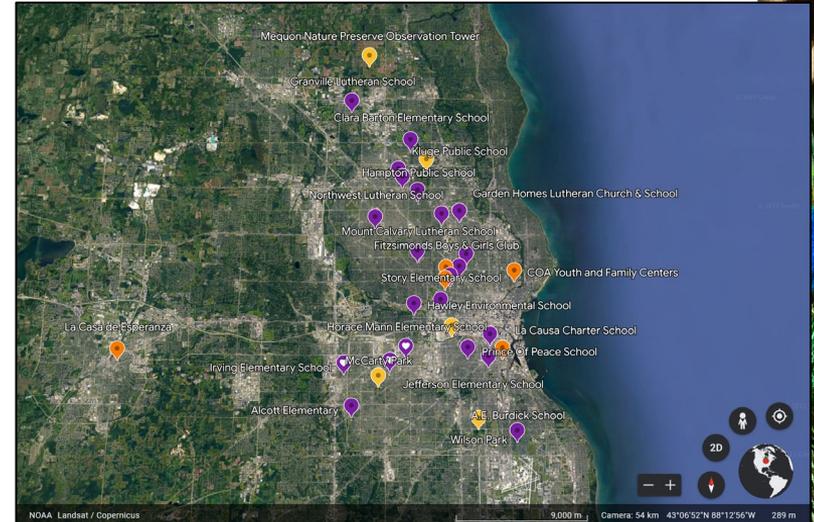
ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE
CONSERVE • EDUCATE • SUPPORT
Milwaukee County Zoo

Providing Experiences



Empathy in Action in Milwaukee

- Staff and volunteer training and support
- Empathy for Wildlife infrastructure
 - Evaluation
 - Empathy-infused operations
- Empathy-based programs



Staff & Volunteer Engagement

- Onboarding
- Continuing Educations
- Empathy office hours
- Empathy Program
Advisory Committee

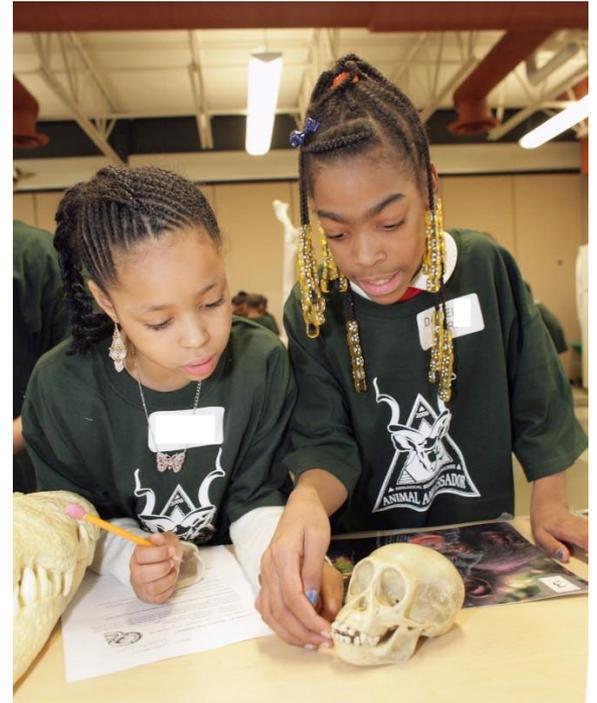




Inspiring New Conservationists

Using empathy with Shawn Miller,
Curator of Reptiles & Aquarium at
the Milwaukee County Zoo

<https://youtu.be/1APwbfNgkVg>



Across the Zoo

Animal Division

- **Modeling** – field research
- **Providing Experiences** – animals in our care



Guest-Facing (ZSM, SSA, MCZ)

- **Framing** – names and pronouns



Operations

- **Increasing knowledge** – special exhibits
- **Opportunities to practice** – giraffe feedings



Grounds

- **Activate imagination** – dragon prints





Infrastructure & Operations

- Facilitation tools
- Biofact management
- Animal ambassador reimaging
- Evaluation



Liked by [missjenamae](#) and **1,834 others**
milwaukeecozoo NEW! We have a Victoria crowned pigeon chick!

The animal care team is human-assisted rearing it after there was difficulty with the egg hatching. The chick required feedings every two hours at first and is now being fed four times a day.

The chick is tube fed a gruel "formula" made up of egg yolk, calcium, and soaked pellets. It's being kept in a brooder box set to 90 degrees to keep it warm.

Victoria crowned pigeons are a near-threatened species. Follow along for updates on the chick!

[#victoriacrownedpigeon](#) [#pigeonchick](#) [#mkezoo](#)

Modeling – transparency around animal care

MCZ & ZSM Social Media



Zoo Pass - Zoological Society of Milwaukee
Mar 31 at 10:03 AM · 🌐

Another day at the Zoo, another morning of Zoo Pride volunteers dedicating their time to the betterment of Zoo animals. This week, a group of volunteers gathered to build birthday boxes! These boxes are filled with treats and given to animals as a form of enrichment on their birthdays. 🎂 [#zoo](#) [#nonprofit](#) [#volunteer](#) [#zoophotography](#) [#ZSMKE](#)

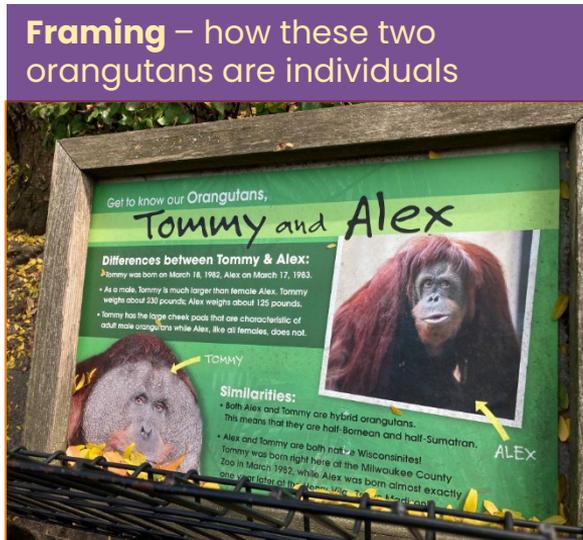
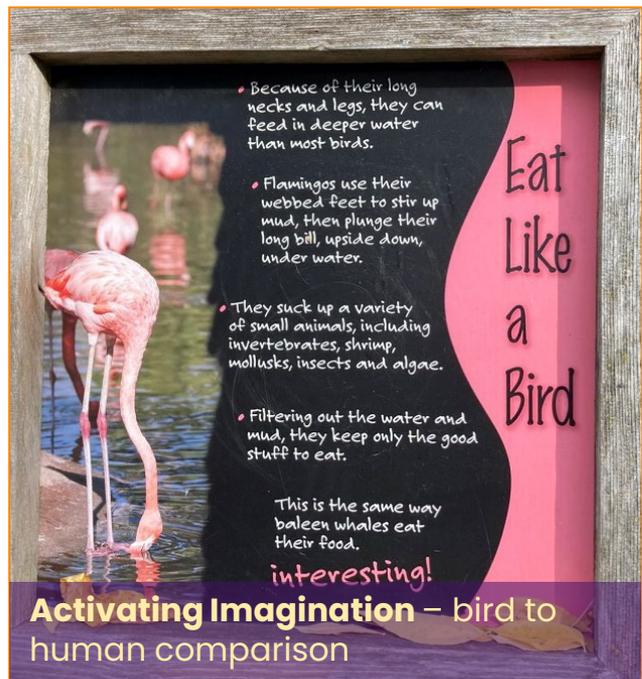


Practice – Zoo Priders preparing enrichment Comment Share

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Creative Signage



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 Darci 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."

[Take our EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE Quiz >](#)



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.



Evaluating Empathy

- Rubrics applied to student projects provide learning outcomes



3 ✓	Students are able to correctly identify a green space in nature (playground, lakefront, backyard, zoo, etc.) and place themselves within the scene.
2	Students are able to identify a green space in nature or mostly in nature but have not placed themselves in the scene.
1	Students were unable to identify a green space in nature and or/ did not place themselves or any other people in the scene.

Evaluation Tool: MECAP resources

- Generated word clouds
- Observational protocol



EMPATHY BINGO

Observe guests around the Zoo and try to spot these behaviors. Each behavior is an example of an empathy indicator- proof that the guests are experiencing empathy.

Play bingo and return to the room for a prize.



Understands the needs of the animal

Talks about the animal's needs

Talks about the animal's emotions

Contrasts self to animal

Compares self to animal

Evaluation Tool: Emotion Wheels

Currently used in Animal Ambassador

Practice: emotional regulation and mindfulness before an animal encounter



Programs

- Best practices embedded across all programs
- Specific empathy-building programs
 - School: Animal Connections Continuum
 - Summer camp: Day in the Paws
- Community Engagement

Cross-Departmental Projects





Opportunity to Practice at Zoo Brew: the tasting packet included notation for drinks with ingredients contributed by pollinators and tabling invited participants to make a pledge to support pollinators this fall.



Perspective taking and framing at the MPS STEM Fair: students learned about decomposers and met and named cockroach at our exhibitor table in 2023.

Opportunity to practice at the MPS STEM Fair: students performed a faux fecal exam on model bear scat in 2023.





Thanks

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