



ACE for Wildlife Network

Peer Outreach FAQs – May 2024

Introduction

This document contains a summary of frequently asked questions and answers related to the empathy work done by accredited zoos and aquariums. These FAQs are intended to support peer-to-peer outreach on empathy practices. We've compiled these FAQs to support ACE for Wildlife Network Members and Affiliates who are engaging with individuals on empathy practices, either at their own institution or with others in places such as professional conferences and networking meetings. FAQs can be used as a resource when you are communicating with peers who have questions about the Network and what it does.

What is empathy?

Empathy is a stimulated emotional state that relies on the ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal.

How does empathy relate to wildlife?

Experiences that connect people with animals and animal perspectives can foster feelings of empathy, which can motivate people to take positive action on behalf of animals in human care and in the wild, and work to sustain the environment we all depend on.

What does empathy have to do with zoos and aquariums?

Every year accredited zoos and aquariums connect millions of people with animals, nature, and each other. By providing close encounters with animals, our institutions are uniquely positioned to help visitors feel empathy for wildlife, increase understanding of how animals are cared for, and encourage visitors to actively participate in our conservation efforts.

Why should zoos and aquariums use empathy?

Emerging behavioral science is showing that there are social and emotional components to changing our behaviors. Feeling empathy is an often overlooked but necessary step between learning about the need for change and taking action on behalf of another. Empathy allows people to connect their concern for the wellbeing of animals to the importance of acting in caring ways, including conserving the environment that both people and animals depend on.

What are empathy practices?

Empathy practices are ways to deliver educational information in a zoo or aquarium that encourages visitors to go beyond their own experience and try to understand the perspective of animals. Through specific, research-informed practices such as talking

about animals as unique individuals or modeling caring behavior through choice and control handling and presentation techniques, zoos and aquariums can help visitors develop empathy for wildlife. Practices that foster empathy development are often used in combination with other interpretive or educational techniques.

What are the benefits of using empathy practices in zoos and aquariums?

Empathy practices can inspire visitors to actively support our conservation missions. These practices can improve how people interact with and behave toward animals when visiting zoos and aquariums and can also positively influence how people behave in relation to animals outside of a zoo or aquarium setting. Empathy practices also help us build more meaningful relationships with our visitors, helping to sustain attendance and donations, as well as overall community support for our work as conservation organizations.

In addition, using empathy practices directly benefits visitors themselves by helping develop their empathy skills and abilities through connections with animals, nature, and each other. Ultimately, people can use empathy skills to connect across the differences that divide them and work together towards a positive future where people, animals, and our shared environment can thrive.

What does empathy have to do with conservation?

Advancing conservation requires behavior change at all levels, from individuals and groups to organizations and whole societies. Feeling empathy for wildlife can be an important motivator for individuals to learn about and act in support of conservation efforts. Over time, individual support for conservation can create a ripple effect that leads to positive change on a bigger scale.

What does empathy have to do with teaching animal natural history?

Sharing natural history is a core empathy practice, which is best used in combination with other practices such as sharing individual animal stories. Empathy practices help educators convey factual information in accessible, approachable ways that engage learners in understanding and retaining what's being shared.

How do empathy practices directly impact my job / role?

Every position within a zoo or aquarium, from volunteers to executive leadership, contributes to both the welfare of animals and the fulfillment of the organization's mission. No matter your role, there are opportunities to think differently about the expertise you can offer and find new ways to communicate your knowledge to others in ways that inspire empathy. In many cases, practicing empathy is something we are already doing, and is often as straightforward as sharing our own knowledge of and connection to the animals in our care as context for other information we are sharing. Incorporating proven empathy practices helps us be more intentional and effective when fostering empathy for wildlife.

How do I know that doing empathy work is effective and worth the time / effort / cost it takes?

Since 2019, a learning community of AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums called the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network has been developing and incorporating empathy practices into visitor engagement efforts. Dozens of zoos and aquariums of different sizes and across multiple states have developed, tested, and vetted effective empathy practices, including re-usable materials and resources. Hundreds of zoo and aquarium staff and volunteers have used empathy practices and shared learnings about their effectiveness in supporting visitor engagement with animal wellbeing and environmental conservation. You can explore some of the ways these zoos and aquariums have employed these practices and their impact on our website.

Will empathy practices distract from educating visitors about animals?

The purpose of using empathy practices is to support zoo and aquarium missions of education and conservation. Empathy practices do not distract from education goals; on the contrary, they are an opportunity to enhance the impact of our interpretative programs.

Shouldn't we avoid encouraging anthropomorphism

Research has shown that a technique called “critical anthropomorphism” can help zoo and aquarium staff provide scientific facts in an accessible and relatable way that makes it easier for visitors to relate to the animals they are learning about, without misleading or misinforming them. Often, this can look like using familiar and approachable language while providing context on an animal’s natural history and behavioral preferences. Critical anthropomorphism isn’t a standalone approach, nor does it take the place of existing education efforts. It is one of many available techniques that can be used to help visitors learn about and connect with animals in zoos and aquariums.

Does using empathy mean I have to teach visitors to anthropomorphize with our animals in ways that I think are wrong?

As experts in their field, any zoo or aquarium staff member can choose to use critical anthropomorphism when it is accurate and appropriate to do so, often in combination with other education techniques and empathy practices. Critical anthropomorphism is often useful when educating visitors about animals with characteristics that make it more difficult for people to relate to them, such as animals with cultural stigmas, minimal movement, or hard-to-identify facial features. Using critical anthropomorphism does not take the place of teaching natural history, nor does it mean glossing over animal welfare challenges – in addition, it is not mandatory to use this technique.

Does using empathy practices mean not being completely transparent with visitors about resident animals or what our institution does?

Using empathy practices often means sharing more information with zoo and aquarium visitors about animals, not less, as these practices provide additional context about animals’ experiences, perspectives, and preferences. For example, empathy practices can

be a useful way to educate visitors on animal welfare challenges and how zoos and aquariums provide care to meet animal needs.

Does using empathy practices mean we are only trying to make our visitors have ‘warm and fuzzy’ feelings about animals?

Visitors to zoos and aquariums often have complex emotional experiences during their visit. Empathy practices help visitors engage with their emotions and deepen connections as they learn about the natural history of resident animals and seek to understand animal experiences and perspectives. The goal of practicing empathy is not simply to generate warm and fuzzy feelings, it is to increase visitors’ feelings of connection and increase understanding in a way that can motivate deeper engagement and inspire positive action.

Humans empathize with animals from our own point of view; empathy practices can be a way to correct misinformed empathy, redirecting guests by providing accurate information on animal behavior and the norms of their species. In addition, empathy practices give staff the tools to be more transparent with guests about how our institutions address animal welfare challenges and work to increase animal wellbeing.

Will empathy practices encourage visitors to want to own wildlife as exotic pets?

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network funded a scientific literature review to assess whether empathy practices at zoos and aquariums have a connection to exotic pet ownership. An analysis of 57 peer-reviewed research studies did not show a connection between visitor experiences and increased motivation to own exotic pets. In fact, the analysis revealed potential opportunities to employ empathy practices as a strategy to actively discourage exotic pet ownership by emphasizing the animal's perspective and highlighting the significant level of care these animals require. This is an area of opportunity for further research and exploration.

Will empathy practices make it more likely that people will behave in ways that are dangerous or harmful to wild animals or themselves?

Empathy practices aim to enhance people's understanding of animals' needs and perspectives while promoting respectful behavior towards them. By integrating empathy practices, zoos and aquariums foster caring actions, such as keeping a safe distance and speaking softly, that prioritize animal welfare and perspective while educating visitors on what interactions can be dangerous or harmful.

My organization/team has limited time and funding for new programs. Is it expensive and time consuming to use empathy practices?

It’s possible to start incorporating empathy practices in small, flexible, and cost-effective ways that allow time to assess their impact and value. It can be as simple as starting to use animal names in keeper chats or adding animal mimicry to a preschool program. The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network is free to join and provides scalable practices, resources, and tools to utilize and learn from – including training videos to engage multiple staff members.

Can I access any funding support to start practicing empathy at my institution?

Zoos and aquariums based in Alaska, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin are eligible to apply for privately-funded Advancing Empathy Grants, offered by Woodland Park Zoo, to plan, build, and/or expand empathy projects. The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network does not offer grant funding, but it provides Network participants with access to a variety of scalable empathy practices, resources, and tools at no extra cost. Please review more information about benefits of joining the Network on our website at <https://www.aceforwildlife.org/how-to-join/>.

What does the ACE for Wildlife Network do?

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network brings together hundreds of zoos and aquarium professionals to learn, create, and share effective practices that promote empathy for animals and people. We do this through community building, resource sharing, and professional development opportunities.

Why was the ACE for Wildlife Network created?

As zoos and aquariums seek to motivate our visitors to act in ways that benefit animals in human care and in the wild, we are learning through emerging behavioral science that feeling empathy may be a necessary step between learning and taking action.

From 2015-2017, Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ), Seattle Aquarium, and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium partnered through the [Measuring Empathy Collaborative Assessment Project](#) (MECAP) to define empathy for wildlife and develop tools to measure it.

While implementing empathy practices over the next four years, Woodland Park Zoo recognized how much there still was to learn. WPZ saw an opportunity for sector-wide growth by convening organizations that were working to achieve their missions through empathy practice.

A needs assessment identified learning and collaboration opportunities that became the foundation of the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network, launched in 2019 with the support of private funding. Today, 27 US-based zoos and aquariums (Network Partner Organizations) and a global network of more than 450 Members and Affiliates continue to learn together, creating and sharing effective practices that promote empathy for animals and people.

Who can join the ACE for Wildlife Network?

Both organizations and individuals can participate in the Network. We encourage individuals to start their journey by applying to be an Affiliate. Please visit our website for more information on who may join the ACE for Wildlife Network:

<https://www.aceforwildlife.org/how-to-join/>

What are the benefits to me of joining the ACE for Wildlife Network as an individual?

If you are passionate about implementing empathy for wildlife practices at your organization, joining the Network as a Member or Affiliate gives you complimentary access to the tools, materials, and resources we've developed over the past decade. This includes access to support and training for your professional growth, from networking and relationship building to public speaking and program development.

Staff and volunteers at a Partner Organization who join as a Member can serve on Network committees and may apply for scholarships to attend professional conferences to present on empathy practices at their zoo or aquarium. Individuals who join as Affiliates can also serve on Network committees. Learn more about the individual Network application process on our website at <https://www.aceforwildlife.org/how-to-join/>.

If I join the ACE for Wildlife Network as a Member/Affiliate, what am I required to do?

Individuals joining the Network should have a desire to learn, participate, and engage in empathy practices with the global Network community, but there are no formal requirements for participation. We encourage active engagement with our website and events to make the most of your participation.

How do I join the ACE for Wildlife Network?

Please visit our website for more information on how to join the Network:

<https://www.aceforwildlife.org/how-to-join/>.

Who can I contact for more information about the ACE for Wildlife Network, or for empathy practices in general?

You can contact the Advancing Empathy team, based at Woodland Park Zoo, for more information about empathy practices or the ACE for Wildlife Network: empathy@zoo.org.