

# ACE for Wildlife Network

## Message Framework – Updated May 2026

### Key Messages

1	Feeling empathy for animals and wildlife can motivate people to take conservation action that sustains the environment we all depend on.
2	The wellbeing of people and animals depends on our ability to coexist in a shared environment that human beings care for and protect.
3	The word ‘empathy’ is often used to describe a variety of emotions, but it means something specific. Empathy is a stimulated emotional state that relies on our ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal. NOTE: We are in the process of reviewing updates to the definition that would broaden the ability to feel empathy towards all living beings rather than just animals and people.
<i>Alt: Zoos and aquariums inspire visitors to feel empathy when they perceive, understand, and care about the lived experiences and perspectives of animals.</i>	
4	Zoos and aquariums help millions of visitors develop empathy skills through connection with animals, nature, and each other.

### Sub Messages

<b>For zoo and aquarium professionals (ZAP) – staff, volunteers, and leadership</b>	
<u>Why empathy matters to our mission</u>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Zoos and aquariums care for animals and create experiences that meet our visitors’ need for connection in a way few other organizations can.</li></ul>	

- We have the opportunity to use our expertise as zoo and aquarium professionals to tap into the emotions our guests already feel when they visit, through evidence-based practices that align with our conservation mission.
- Learning about animals is just the start of motivating zoo and aquarium visitors to make conservation action a priority in their lives.
- Research spanning over 30 studies strongly links empathy for wildlife and nature to a range of conservation behaviors. Individuals with higher empathy for wildlife may be more likely to donate to conservation efforts, make wildlife-friendly consumer choices, and support conservation policies (Ardoin et al., 2025). This connection is not limited to a single demographic or context; its influence holds true across diverse cultures (Ardoin et al., 2025).
- When we are consistent and intentional about combining knowledge and emotion during a visitor experience, we can more effectively inspire our guests to change their views and how they behave towards animals in human care and in the wild.
- Through fostering empathy for wildlife - and each other - we create space for our visitors to connect across the differences that divide them and work together towards a positive future where people, animals, and our shared environment can thrive.

#### About the ACE for Wildlife Network

- The ACE for Wildlife Network has developed materials and resources – vetted by dozens of zoos and aquariums of different sizes and across multiple states – that make it easy to add empathy practices into your toolkit for visitor experiences.
- We all benefit from the experiences of Network participants who try new things and share lessons learned in a highly collaborative community.
- Joining our Network is an opportunity to share knowledge, build professional skills, and work in coordination with peers who are also engaged in empathy work.
- We provide a platform for zoos and aquariums of all sizes to influence their field through the innovative work that they are piloting.
- We provide support and training for your professional growth, from networking and relationship building to public speaking and program development.

#### Addressing common concerns

- *Critical anthropomorphism is an effective tool to engage visitors:*
  - Research has demonstrated that a technique called “critical anthropomorphism” is an effective tool for sharing scientific facts with visitors in an accessible and relatable way, without misleading or misinforming them.
  - Highlighting similarities between human and animal experiences can increase the effectiveness of how we educate our guests.
  - When people have an emotional experience that connects them with an animal’s perspective, it is more likely they will retain information about that animal.

- Critical anthropomorphism isn't a standalone approach; it is one of many available tools that can be used to help visitors learn about and connect with animals in zoos and aquariums.
- As experts in their field, staff can choose to use critical anthropomorphism when it is accurate and appropriate to do so.
- 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.
  
- *We can help decrease exotic pet ownership:*
  - Analysis of multiple peer-reviewed research studies has not shown a connection between visitor experiences at zoos and increased motivation to own exotic pets.
  - Zoos and aquariums can actively discourage exotic pet ownership through empathy practices that help visitors connect with animal perspectives and needs while increasing understanding of the high level of resources and effort needed to support exotic animal welfare.
  
- *Honesty and transparency are central to empathy work:*
  - Empathy practices can connect visitors more closely with the experiences animals have in zoos and aquariums.
  - Empathy practices give staff the tools to be more transparent about how our institutions address animal welfare challenges and work to increase animal wellbeing.
  - When we help visitors build their empathy skills, we are increasing their understanding of the animals in our care and their support for our conservation mission.
  
- *Behavior change is possible:*
  - Using empathy practices can influence how people interact with and behave toward animals when visiting zoos and aquariums and help them develop empathy for other animals, from pets at home to encounters with wildlife.
  - Introducing the importance of caring action towards animals that live in zoos and aquariums (such as using quiet voices or not banging on glass) is a starting point to increase visitor understanding that people and animals are connected through the environments we share.
  - The more zoos and aquariums adopt empathy practices, the greater the ripple effect will be for our society's understanding of how animal and human wellbeing are connected.
  - By increasing our visitors' understanding of animals and helping them build empathy skills, we are creating a foundation to support conservation behavior change over time.

Connecting with leaders and decision makers

- Empathy for wildlife practices serve our conservation mission, build visitor and donor relationships, and sustain attendance – and they can be implemented easily through vetted, ready-to-use materials and resources.
- It's possible to start incorporating empathy practices in small, flexible, and cost-effective ways that allow time to assess their value.
- The transformation of zoos and aquariums over time from entertainment venues to environmental stewards has helped build and maintain community support for our work. Empathy practices are another potential inflection point in our evolution.
  - Through empathy work we can inspire our visitors to join us in conservation action and help them build more meaningful and sustainable connections with animals, nature, and each other.

#### Connecting with peers in keeper roles

- We want our colleagues and visitors to learn about animals and take action to protect them. Evolving behavioral science is showing that feeling empathy may be an important motivator for people to move from “learning” to “doing.”
- Starting empathy practices often involves realizing that the expert animal knowledge we can share with our colleagues and guests at zoos and aquariums includes both scientific facts and individual animal perspective and preferences.
  - The choice and control we are able to give animals as part of high-quality care is one expression of empathy; we understand that individual animals have their own perspective and preferences within their species' typical behaviors.
- Using empathy practices includes thinking expansively about the animal expertise we have to offer and finding new ways to communicate that knowledge to others.
- Many zoo and aquarium visitors are learning about many animals for the first time. It can be useful to think about how their starting point for learning is not so dissimilar to our own when we first entered our profession: feeling awe and curiosity, which can lead to a desire to understand and connect.
- Using empathy practices is often as straightforward as sharing our own experiences and emotional connection with the animals in our care as context for the scientific facts we are also sharing. Think of it as training our guests for the desired behavioral outcome of joining us in our conservation mission.

#### **For prospective learning collaborations**

- Empathy skills can be developed and strengthened throughout our lives. Zoos and aquariums provide a space for millions of people to develop empathy skills in a way few other places can.
- Previous research has shown that empathy can drive conservation action, by prompting people to connect their concern for the well-being of animals to the importance of preserving an environment where they can survive.

- We know many zoo and aquarium visitors connect more closely with nature as the result of their visit, but we need better information on how to translate their experience with us into active conservation behaviors.
- The ACE for Wildlife Network offers the opportunity to collaborate with multiple zoos and aquariums that are working together to encourage conservation action by studying the connection between empathy practices and our visitors' behavioral outcomes.
- Your engagement and expertise as a research collaborator can help to discover and demonstrate the value of empathy in supporting animal wellbeing and engaging people to create positive social change.
- Access to millions of curious and highly engaged visitors to zoos and aquariums, often a cross-section of different demographic groups, are what make our institutions a useful setting for gathering data and answering questions about how behavior change begins.

#### **For prospective funders**

- The ACE for Wildlife Network supports animal wellbeing and environmental conservation through the creation, use, and evaluation of practices and programs that are designed to foster empathy for wildlife at accredited zoos and aquariums.
- Existing research on empathy for wildlife practices shows strong potential to inspire conservation action, but zoos and aquariums need better information on how to effectively translate visitor experiences into active conservation behaviors in their unique settings.
- New collaborations with behavioral scientists can expand our existing evaluation of visitor experiences to learn exactly how developing empathy leads to individual action.
- Investment in the ACE for Wildlife Network amplifies the transformative potential of building empathy for wildlife to more effectively and consistently inspire conservation awareness and action.
- Programs designed with fostering empathy for wildlife in mind enrich the lives of our visitors: boosting their science learning, building social emotional skills, and connecting people with each other across social, racial, and economic boundaries to work towards a positive future where people, animals, and their shared environment can thrive.