



ADVANCING CONSERVATION THROUGH
EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE

Quarter 1 Committee Updates

Communications Committee

Chairs: Delanie Jellison (Santa Barbara Zoo), Leanne Schuh (Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center)

Representatives: Natalie Stier (Utah's Hogle Zoo), Brent Weston (Dakota Zoo), Cher Vatalaro (Lehigh Valley Zoo), Liz Hines (Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium), Lucas Novello (Calgary Zoo Wilder Institute), Helena Echenique (Conservation Society of California Oakland Zoo), Ashley Bonen (Roosevelt Park Zoo), Mandy Kirchgessner (Nonprofit GrowthGen LLC), Jenna Brown (Seattle Aquarium)

The committee launched the newsletter submission platform (see here) at the virtual Empathy Summit and are eagerly awaiting contributions from the Network. They are also in discussions about how to breathe life and conversation into Network communication platforms such as our discussion board and welcome emails that new Members and Affiliates receive.

Conservation Action Committee

Chairs: Toby Seegert (Zoological Society of Milwaukee), Kelsey Raffel (Como Park Zoo & Conservatory)

Representatives: Bethanie West (Idaho Falls Zoo), Brooke Tucker (ZooMontana), Erin Tone (Lake Superior Zoo), Meagan Ashton (Seattle Aquarium), Rachael Robinson (Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden), Allison Kaufman (Roger Williams Park Zoo), Ellie Cherry (Calgary Zoo Wilder Institute), Erica Carnes (Blank Park Zoo)

Using insight from the 2025 Member and Affiliate survey, this committee is discussing how to best understand the benefits that users of committee-created resources experience after engaging with resource content. Instead of creating new resources, this committee is focused on how they can increase awareness of existing resources that they know people have found helpful.

DEAI Committee

Chairs: Crystal Fox (Lake Superior Zoo), Abigail Flores (Racine Zoo)

Representatives: Alejandra Medina (Minnesota Zoo), Sharon Spencer (Jacksonville Zoo & Gardens), Julie Pickard (Zoological Society of Milwaukee), Kirinne Slaughter (Visitor Studies Association), Allison Menelli (Conservation Society of California Oakland Zoo), Jess Ryans (Red River Zoo), Erin Shofstall (Lincoln Park Zoo), Abigayle Lista (Audubon Zoo)

This committee has noticed an increasing interest in our community for conversations focusing on accessibility and inclusion - particularly for sensory sensitive and/or neurodivergent individuals. They aim to approach this topic through an empathy lens and facilitate spaces where folks can share helpful insight and knowledge, and are in the final stages of discussing how they will do so in 2026 for the Network.



Quarter 1 Committee Updates

Membership Committee

Chair: Isabelle Bieser (Zoological Society of Milwaukee), Nicole Hodur (Lincoln Park Zoo)

Representatives: Sara Winch (Red River Zoo), Kent Chapple (Woodland Park Zoo), Jennifer Drayna (International Crane Foundation), Autumn Russell (Akron Zoo)

Following a successful panel at the 2026 Empathy Summit, this committee hosted its first Partner Organization application office hours ahead of the spring application deadline. They are currently reviewing the Network's Code of Conduct (see here) and will be reviewing any Partner applications in April.

Steering Committee

Chairs: Brian Priesman (Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium), Liz Gilles (Minnesota Zoo)

Representatives: Austin Reich (Zoo Boise), Courtney Cordova (Henry Vilas Zoo), Courtney McNulty (Fresno Chaffee Zoo), Natalie Stier (Utah's Hogle Zoo), Kathy Kiser (Lincoln Park Zoo), Randy Mosley (Conservation Society of California Oakland Zoo), Philina Richardson (Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium), Shana Kent (Alaska SeaLife Center)

In addition to prepping for the strategic planning retreat in April, this committee has finalized discussions regarding the processes for enacting various components of the Network bylaws (see here). This processes will ensure consistent adherence with various bylaw items. They have also just begun discussions focused on parameters for artificial intelligence (AI) usage within Network spaces and resources.

Strategic Learning Committee

Chair: Jessica Schellhorn (Blank Park Zoo), Jennifer Gauble (Saint Louis Zoo)

Representatives: Cam Whitley (Western Washington University), Dani Ford (ZooMontana), Bryan Nichols (Florida Atlantic University), Randolph Oudemans (Taman Safari Indonesia), Jaimee Lafleur (San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance), Sam Bellis (Zoo Boise), Avrille Aiello (Calgary Zoo Wilder Institute), Chris Schmitz (Utah's Hogle Zoo)

Following a successful session at the Empathy Summit that focused on fostering empathy for plants, this committee identified how they will summarize all of the Network knowledge they received as well as how they will continue to build on the momentum of interest in this - and new - topics. Stay tuned for a fostering empathy for plants recommendations document!