



ADVANCING
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**EMPATHY FOR
WILDLIFE™**

Empathy Practices & Key Themes Represented in the Mission Statements of ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organizations

2025

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Introduction

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network's vision is a "conservation-minded community, motivated by empathy for animals and the environment that sustains them." Through achieving our mission of "sharing knowledge, experiences, and data to drive conservation change" we can: foster empathy for wildlife, promote conservation missions, and motivate their visitors to take conservation action. This resource, created in 2024–2025 by the Strategic Learning Committee, aims to address one of the Network's learning questions; "How does implementing empathy practices into a zoo or aquarium advance organizational missions and commitments to animal wellbeing?" To do so, the Strategic Learning Committee coded the mission statements of the 27 Network Partner Organizations at the time.

The ACE for Wildlife Network defines empathy as "a stimulated emotional state that relies on the ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal" (Young et al. 2018). To learn more about the effective empathy practices, we recommend familiarizing yourself with the following resources on the [ACE for Wildlife Network's Resource Library](#):

- Akerman, S. (2019). Best Practices for Building Empathy Through Live Animal Encounters. *Journal of Museum Education*, 44(1), 89–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2018.1496388>
- [Empathy Primer](#), Woodland Park Zoo
- [Empathy Wheel Handout](#), Woodland Park Zoo
- Young, A., Khalil, K. A., & Wharton, J. (2018). Empathy for Animals: A Review of the Existing Literature. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 61(2), 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12257>

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Strategic Learning Question #1

The Strategic Learning Committee helps the ACE for Wildlife Network's collective learning journey. This includes contributing to the ongoing ACE for Wildlife Network's learning agenda as well as determining and working towards answering, strategic learning questions in the Network. In early 2024, the Strategic Learning Committee created two new strategic learning questions for the Network based on shifts in Network priorities and learnings. They are:

1 *How does implementing empathy practices into a zoo or aquarium advance organizational missions and commitments to animal wellbeing?*

2 *What does culturally relevant conservation action look like?*

To help answer the first strategic learning question, the committee coded the mission statements of the current 27 ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organizations* (28 including the Milwaukee County Zoo's mission) for general themes and instances of effective empathy practices. Through coding these missions, the committee hopes to demonstrate that effective empathy practices are mission-aligned, to help those in the Network struggling to cultivate buy-in for empathy practices at their organizations. The committee also hopes to provide recommendations for seamlessly incorporating practices into a mission statement.

Coding Explained

The Strategic Learning Committee coded the mission statements for effective empathy practices as well as other themes of interest. The effective empathy practices coded for are as follows:

- **Activating imagination:** Facilitating opportunities for guests to take the perspectives of others.
- **Framing:** Presenting animals to audiences as individuals with names, personalities and preferences. This includes the words chosen by the interpreter or on the signage, the physical setting, and how interpreters are interacting with an animal.
- **Increasing knowledge:** Sharing accurate information about animals in an organization's care.
- **Modeling:** Acting as role models for guests by serving as examples of how to demonstrate empathy skills and encouraging caregivers to do so as well.
- **Practice:** Providing a variety of opportunities for guests to exercise empathy skills and receive positive feedback for doing so.
- **Providing experiences:** Giving guests opportunities to interact with animals and/or the environment. This can be directly through animal ambassador programs or animal encounters, or indirectly through interactive signage or enrichment creation activities.

*Organizations in the ACE for Wildlife Network at the time of coding included: Akron Zoo, Alaska SeaLife Center, Blank Park Zoo, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, Conservation Society of California Oakland Zoo, Dakota Zoo, Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center, Henry Vilas Zoo, Idaho Falls Zoo, International Crane Foundation, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, Lake Superior Zoo, Minnesota Zoo, Northeast Wisconsin (NEW) Zoo & Adventure Park, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, Racine Zoo, Red River Zoo, Roosevelt Park Zoo, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, Seattle Aquarium, Utah's Hogle Zoo, Woodland Park Zoo, Zoo Boise, Zoological Society of Milwaukee, and ZooMontana.



Please see [Young, A., Khalil, K. A., & Wharton, J. \(2018\). *Empathy for Animals: A Review of the Existing Literature*](#) or the Seattle Aquarium's [Best Practices in Developing Empathy toward Wildlife briefing](#) for more information on effective empathy practices.

In addition to effective empathy practices, the committee also coded for the following key themes:

- **Animal wellbeing:** A state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy; achieved by AZA facilities giving animals lifelong opportunities to thrive ([see AZA's definition of animal wellbeing](#)).
- **Connection to nature:** The extent to which someone includes nature or the natural world as a part of their identity.
- **Conservation of wildlife:** The act of protecting wild species and their habitats to maintain sustainable populations.
- **Human wellbeing:** A positive state experienced by individuals and societies that encompasses quality of life and the ability to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose ([see the World Health Organization's page on the topic](#)).
- **Increase public access to nature or wildlife:** The ability and ease with which communities can access natural or green spaces provided by the organization. This theme was discarded midway through coding due to difficulties effectively assigning it to mission statements.
- **Public education:** Providing educational opportunities to large numbers of individuals.
- **Research:** Investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts ([see Merriam-Webster](#)). This theme was added during coding.

These themes were chosen after examining a subset of Partner Organization mission statements and working through them as a committee during practice coding. During the coding process, each committee representative was responsible for coding a subset of Partner Organization missions. Each coded mission was then reviewed and discussed by all committee representatives before coming to a unanimous conclusion on the coding. After the missions were coded, the committee chair and Empathy Network Specialist consolidated and analyzed the data.

Throughout the coding process, the committee added and removed various codes. "Increasing public access to nature" was removed as a theme due to its absence from mission statements, while "research" was added due to its presence in more mission statements than originally anticipated. During the review process, it became clear that the word "inspire" was present in many mission statements and did not fit easily into one of the predetermined coding categories. The use and impact of the word differed across mission statements, causing some committee representatives to initially code it under the "activating imagination" effective empathy practice while others coded it under the "increasing knowledge" practice.

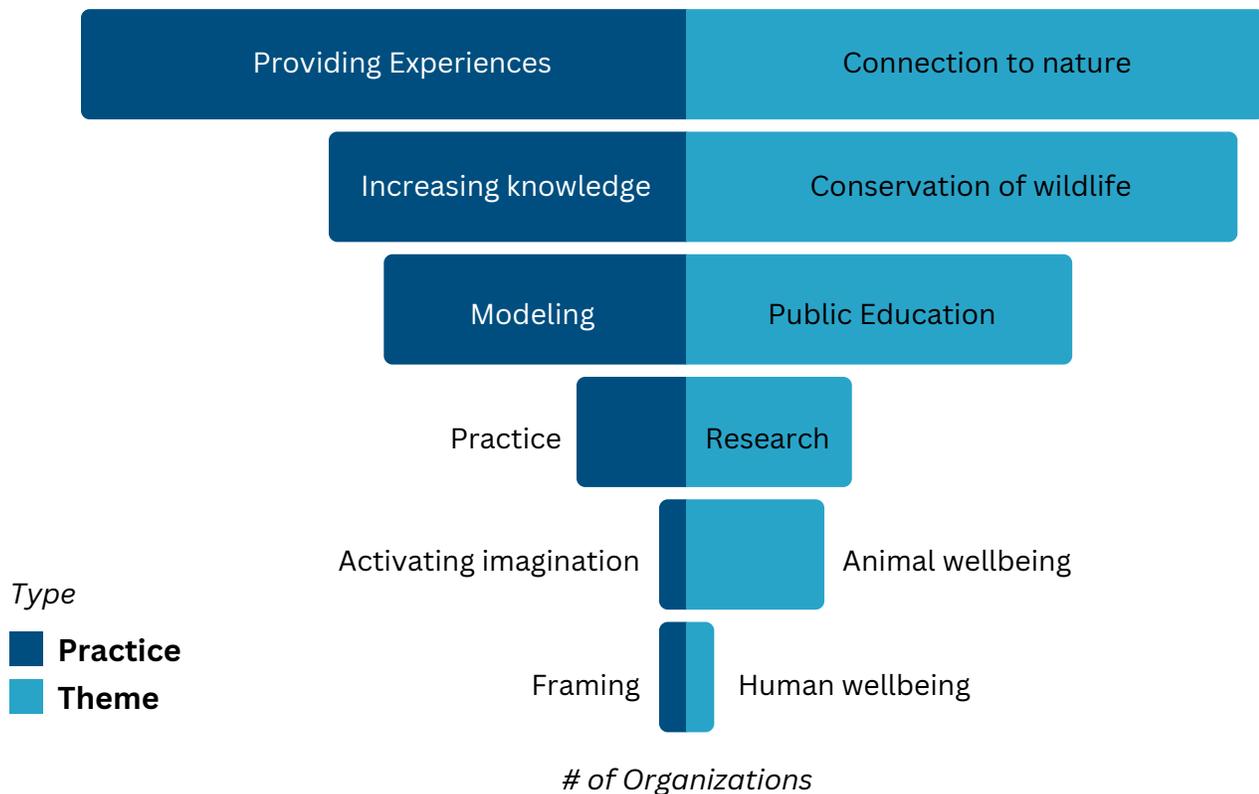


Findings

Summary

Across all coded mission statements, “providing experiences” was the most commonly represented empathy practice, while “framing” was the least represented. “Connection to nature” was the most commonly represented key theme, while “human wellbeing” was the least represented (Figure 1). While the committee was not surprised at the top three most common empathy practices and key themes, they are curious how susceptible the mission statements are to changing as priorities and emphases within Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the ACE for Wildlife Network evolve.

Figure 1: A comparison of themes and empathy practices represented in ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organizations



Additionally, while it was not coded for by the committee, they did notice that three organization’s mission statements explicitly mentioned plants in addition to animals and/or habitats (Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, and ZooMontana). Providing exceptional care to plants or dedication to plant wellbeing was mentioned in the mission statements of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory and ZooMontana, while San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance’s mission mentioned the conservation of plants. In addition to fostering empathy for animals, there has been recurring, but less examined, interest in the ACE for Wildlife Network on how to foster empathy for plants. Plants were likely included in these organizations’ missions because they either have dedicated plant conservatory or garden space(s), or want to acknowledge that the conservation success of animal species relies on the health and conservation of an entire ecosystem (including plants). However, because of the recurring interest in expanding empathy practices beyond animals, the committee felt it important to note where plants were included in the mission statements of Network Partner Organizations.

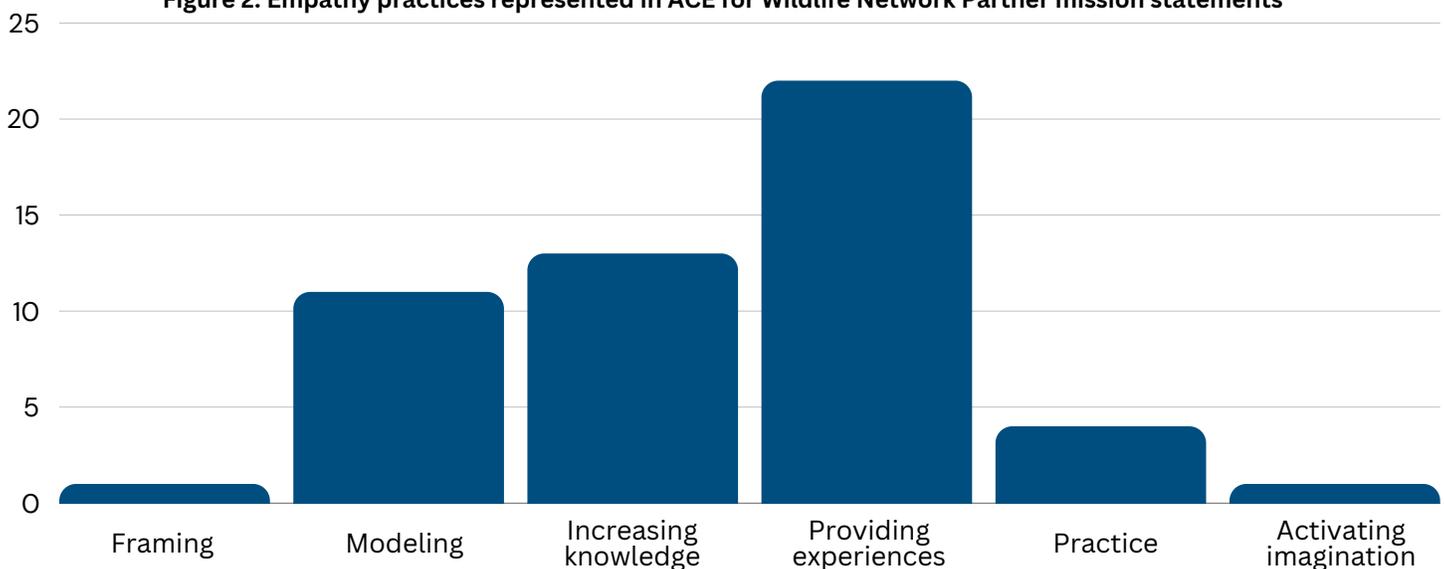


Empathy Practices

The majority of Network Partner Organizations (n=18) had at least two effective empathy practices represented in their mission statements (see Appendix 1, Table 1). Only two organizations did not have any effective empathy practices present in their mission. All of the mission statements coded were created before the establishment of the ACE for Wildlife Network. Thus, the correlation of an organization's mission statement having empathy practices represented within it is not related to the organization's presence or duration within the ACE for Wildlife Network. Across the 28 missions coded by the committee, "providing experiences" was the most commonly represented empathy practice (n=22), while "framing" and "activating imagination" were the least represented practices (n=1). "Increasing knowledge" and "modeling" were similarly represented across the statements (n=13 and n=11, respectively) (see Figure 2).

As zoos and aquariums are place-based, and originally entertainment-focused organizations, it makes sense that "providing experiences" is the most commonly represented empathy practice across our Partner Organizations. However, it is important to note that it is highly likely that the mission statements were not created with the effective empathy practices in mind. Thus, the committee cannot fully ascribe the original intent of instances that were coded for "providing experiences" in the statements to align with empathy practices, although many of the experiences provided nowadays may foster empathy. Additionally, along with "increasing knowledge", "providing experiences" is less of an abstract concept than some of the other effective empathy practices (e.g., activating imagination) and lends itself well to inclusion in a short statement that summarizes organizational responsibilities and intentions.

Figure 2: Empathy practices represented in ACE for Wildlife Network Partner mission statements



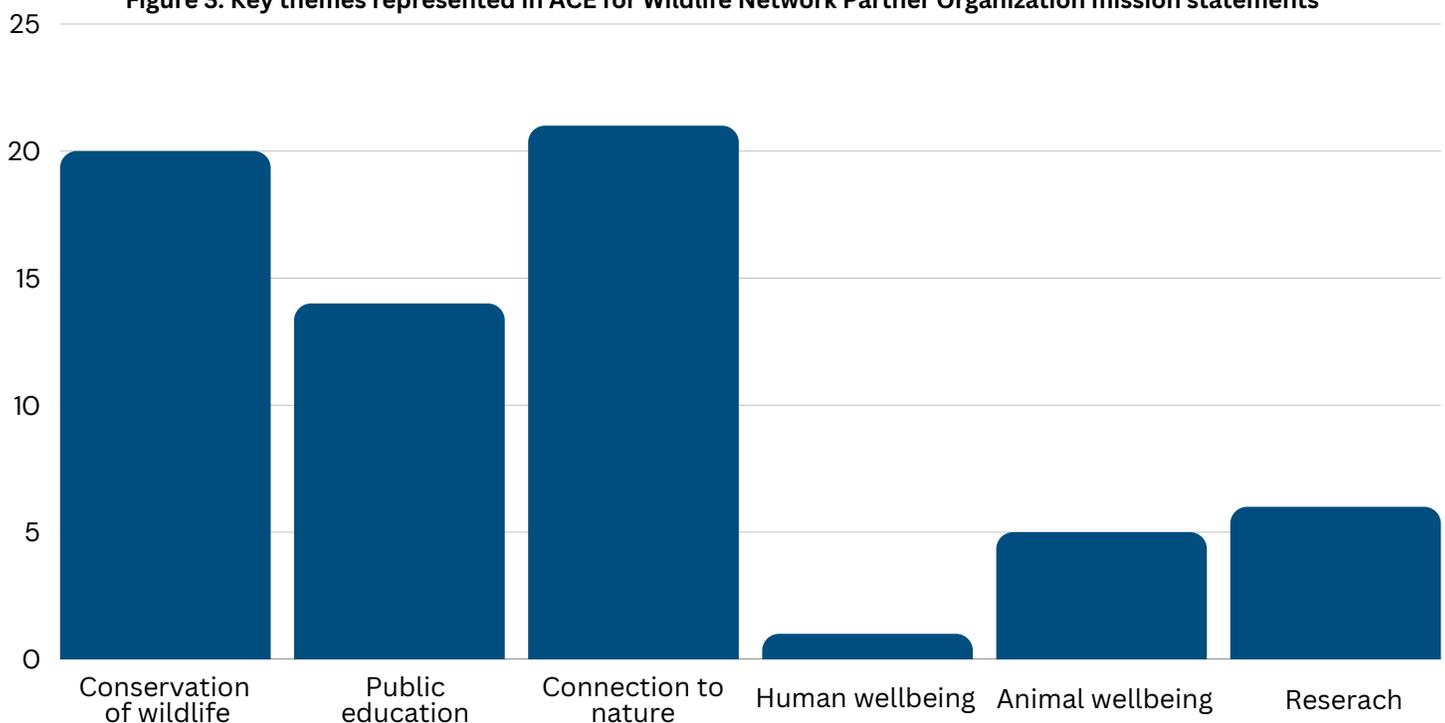
Additionally, "providing experience" and "increasing knowledge" differ from the remaining empathy practices in that they can act as high-level organizational goals and techniques for fostering empathy for wildlife. They also can be broad enough concepts to encompass a variety of different activities or experiences at the organization. In contrast, "practice", "activating imagination", and "framing" are techniques staff at the organization use to provide meaningful guest and animal experiences and educate the public on conservation. The application of those practices often look different depending on the staff member using them, the programs they are applied in, and the species or topics being covered in the educational programming. As a result, they are more abstract concepts to encapsulate in a short, broad-reaching statement.



Key Themes

While not every mission statement coded had empathy practices in it, every statement had at least one key theme represented (see Appendix 1, Table 2). The most commonly represented key theme was “connection to nature” (n=21), followed closely by “conservation of wildlife” (n=20) (Figure 3). “Human wellbeing” was the least represented theme, only appearing in the mission statement of the Milwaukee County Zoo. While the Milwaukee County Zoo is not a Partner Organization, their mission was included in coding because they are supported by the Zoological Society of Milwaukee, which is a Partner Organization. Thus, the Zoological Society of Milwaukee is influenced by and helps enact the mission of the zoo. However, it should still be noted that human wellbeing was not represented in the mission statements of official Partner Organizations.

Figure 3: Key themes represented in ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organization mission statements



While the committee expected “human wellbeing” to be less represented than “animal wellbeing” in mission statements, they were surprised to find that “animal wellbeing” only showed up five times across all coded statements. While animal wellbeing has been a focus of AZA-accredited institutions for a long time, it is only recently that an initiative regarding animal wellbeing was created for the field. In 2023, AZA released the [Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals](#). This document “defines AZA’s ‘animal wellbeing identity’ and aspirational goals to continue to promote the wellbeing of animals and be a globally trusted leader in this space”. The framework it outlines aims to: 1) “enhance the wellbeing of animals”, 2) “provide additional tools and resources to AZA member facilities to contribute to their overall success; and” 3) “elevate AZA’s impact and reputation as a leader in animal care and wellbeing” (Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals, 2023). Additionally, the field changed the standard phrasing of “animal welfare” to refer to the health and comfort of animals in human care, to “animal wellbeing”. As AZA continues to make animal wellbeing a pillar of zoo and aquarium identity, the committee is curious if that change will become apparent in the mission statements of AZA-accredited institutions.



How to use this data to make the case for empathy at your organization

The committee found that empathy practices are present in multiple mission statements of Partner Organizations in the ACE for Wildlife Network. The most common empathy practice in the mission statements was “providing experiences”, while the least common practices were “framing” and “activating imagination”. The presence of empathy practices in organizational missions is a good indicator that not only is empathy mission-aligned, but empathy practices may already be a part of programs or guest experiences. If you need to make the case for embedding empathy practices into programs, guest experiences, or organizational framework the committee recommends the following:

- Identify which empathy practices are already represented in your organization’s mission statement.
 - Describe the connections between empathy and conservation and/or caring actions. We recommend the following resources for reference.
 - [AZA Conference: Bridging Science & Social-Emotional Learning in Education for the Benefit of Communities & Nature](#)
 - [Building Empathy for Wildlife in Zoos and Aquariums: What We Know About Inspiring Conservation Action and Caring](#)
 - [Conservation Caring: Measuring the Influence of Zoo Visitors’ Connection to Wildlife on Pro-Conservation Behaviors](#)
 - [Dispositional Empathy with Nature](#)
 - [Grant Presentation: ROADMAP to Empathy](#)
 - [Related: What’s in a name? Caring vs. conservation action](#)
 - [Learning Group: Conservation Action](#)
 - [The Prosocial Driver of Ecological Behavior: The Need for an Integrated Approach to Prosocial and Environmental Education](#)
 - Highlight instances where your organization or your team already use empathy practices very well.
 - Approach the conversation through the lens of improving animal wellbeing, if you believe that that will be a more convincing angle for your audience. In 2023, AZA released the [Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals](#). This framework uses language such as “the use of a term like “happiness” is appropriate for professionals working with and caring for animals based on science, morals, and logic...It may be difficult/impossible to describe or scientifically understand how a sea star shows us that it is “happy,” but it is within the expertise of aquarium professionals to understand the physical environment, water quality, and health parameters that should allow that animal to experience a positive state of wellbeing.” Thus, this framework takes an industry-wide stance on the presence of emotions or inner states in animals. Part of empathy work is recognizing and interpreting the inner lives of the animals in our care, relaying those experiences to the public, and doing all we can to facilitate an environment in which the animal – and our guests – can thrive.
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- A common concern is that using empathy practices makes one come off as “less scientific”. While the body of supporting research is still growing, empathy work is based in social science!
- Identify where empathy practices may intersect with common values held between your organization and your community that are included in the current mission statement (e.g., appreciation of nature).
- For more information on the importance of museums considering shared values in their messaging, see [Susie Wilkening’s keynote speech from the 2025 Empathy Summit](#).
- Frame your pitch or your ideas through a growth-as opposed to deficit-mindset. For example, you could approach the conversation by going through the following steps.
 - Relate the organization’s mission statement back to the work that you and your team do.
 - Highlight how that mission statement connects to fostering empathy for wildlife.
 - Showcase the current work being done at the organization by you/your team that connects fostering empathy for wildlife/effective empathy practices with mission-aligned work.
 - Identify areas of opportunity where you/your team could continue to make the empathy-mission alignment connection in your work.

Depending on your situation, a single recommendation or multiple recommendations combined may work best for you. Additionally, if you have success pitching empathy practices and fostering empathy for wildlife as being mission aligned at your organization, we would love to include case studies for future readers. Please reach out to empathy@zoo.org to start the conversation.

