



ADVANCING
CONSERVATION
THROUGH
**EMPATHY FOR
WILDLIFE™**

Examining Empathy in Social Media Posts

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 our visitors to take conservation action. This resource, created in 2024–2025 by the Communications Committee, provides readers with examples and recommendations for incorporating empathy practices into common, but often difficult, topics zoos and aquariums post on social media.

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.”¹ 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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Purpose

This resource serves as a marker in time with regards to how Partner Organizations in the ACE for Wildlife™ are fostering empathy for wildlife in their social media posts. The social media landscape allows zoos and aquariums to engage with people from anywhere, at any time, expanding their conservation missions outside of their physical boundaries. A single post can exponentially boost an organization's following and get upwards of thousands of more people engaged in conservation-focused content. We hope that this resource addresses the need expressed by Network Members and Affiliates for a resource that helps them effectively craft social media posts infused with effective empathy practices. This resource is a compilation of social media posts from [Partner Organizations](#) within the ACE for Wildlife Network that utilize empathy practices, committee insights on the trends they noticed, and next steps for examining the intersection of empathy practices and social media with regards to the zoo and aquarium field.

Goals

We hope that this resource can serve as an introduction to how empathy practices are utilized in the social media space. This resource is not meant to be an exhaustive resource or include all recommendations for utilizing empathy in zoo, aquarium, or conservation-related social media posts. Instead, future work related to this topic should build from this resource as the committee and the Network continue to explore the intersection of empathy practices and social media. As a committee, we hope the first iteration of this resource provides users with:

Examples of and insights from empathy-infused social media posts on difficult topics such as animal deaths, transfers, or medical procedures

Examples and insights from empathy-infused social media posts that focus on the birth of new animals at a zoo or aquarium

Committee insights on why certain empathy practices or components of the Empathy Wheel were more regularly represented in social media posts than others

Zoos and aquariums utilize social media in different ways and have varying policies regarding what is appropriate content to post and when. Transparency with the public around animal births, deaths, medical procedures or transfers in particular can vary organization to organization because of differences in social media policy. This resource is not designed or intended to make recommendations around transparency or social media policies.



Why Social Media?

Social media is a powerful tool in the realm of conservation, wielding significant influence over public awareness, advocacy, and action. As of October 2024, there were 5.22 billion social media users around the world—equating to 63.8 percent of the global population.² Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide a global stage for conservationists to share compelling narratives, captivating images, and urgent calls to action. Through hashtags, viral campaigns, and shared content, social media enables the rapid dissemination of information. This digital landscape can foster unprecedented levels of engagement, mobilize diverse audiences to support conservation efforts, donate to causes, and participate in citizen science initiatives.

Furthermore, social media empowers individuals to amplify their voices, connecting like-minded communities worldwide and pressuring policymakers and corporations to prioritize environmental sustainability. With its unparalleled reach and connectivity, social media continues to shape the conservation movement, driving collective action and fostering a global culture of environmental stewardship.

For nonprofit wildlife organizations, leveraging social media platforms offers a multitude of benefits:

Advocacy and Action

Fundraising Opportunities

Awareness

Partnership and Collaboration

Community Engagement

Real-time Updates

Data and Analytics

Volunteer Recruitment





Types of Social Media Examined

The three most used social media applications³ (excluding Youtube and WhatsApp) are:



Facebook

Founded in 2004, Facebook enables users to connect with friends and family, share updates, and discover content. Facebook acts as a communication center with features like status updates, photo sharing, events, and groups. Over the years, it has expanded to include marketplace functionalities, advertising tools, and messaging services. As the largest global social network with 3.06 billion active users,⁴ Facebook continues to influence online interactions and shape digital communication.



Instagram

Instagram is known for its focus on visual storytelling. Launched in 2010, users share photos and videos in posts with captions and hashtags. The app has multiple modes to share content including posts, Stories, and Reels. Users interact with each other by following, sharing, commenting, liking, tagging, and private messaging. Instagram is also a content hub—providing users with posts and pages showcasing peoples' day-to-day activities, art, fashion, food, travel, politics, transformations, and everything in between. It's a valuable resource to directly stay up to date with news, brands, celebrities, and sports. There are 1.4 billion users on the application as of 2024.⁵



TikTok

Launched in 2016, TikTok is a platform where users create and share short videos and photos. TikTok regarded as a place for sharing knowledge, telling stories, and supporting causes. TikTok features a wide variety of content, including comedy, beauty and fashion, dance challenges, pop culture discussion, and educational videos. One of the key aspects of the platform is accessible content creation and the ability for anyone to "go viral". TikTok's advanced algorithm and user-friendly design make it easy for users to find videos and content they enjoy and continue to see. As of 2023, TikTok has 1.9 billion million users worldwide.⁶

It should be noted that TikTok's operation status in the United States remains in flux as it's currently owned by a Chinese company and the United States government is pushing for a sale of the company to remain in operation.⁷



Social Media Following

Below are the followings for each Partner Organization across three social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. These numbers are as of January 2025.

Organization	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok
Akron Zoo	109K	64.1k	100.2k
Alaska Sealife Center	126k	180k	16.6k
Blank Park Zoo	89k	28.8k	NA
Como Park Zoo and Conservatory	179k	45.5k	NA
Conservation Society of California Oakland Zoo	180k	167k	163.2k
Dakota Zoo	24k	2.3k	1.3k
Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center	31k	5k	NA
Henry Vilas Zoo	153k	43.9k	21
Idaho Falls Zoo	17k	5.6k	NA
International Crane Foundation	104k	16k	1k
Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens	198k	103k	19.9k
Lake Superior Zoo	30k	15.3k	10.7k
Minnesota Zoo	223k	101k	33.8k
NEW Zoo & Adventure Park	57k	7.8k	57.2k
Northwest Trek Wildlife Park	181k	60.6	121.7k
Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium	338k	205k	398.6k
Racine Zoo	46k	6.1k	530
Red River Zoo	19k	2.7k	NA
Roosevelt Park Zoo	35k	2.9k	10.8k
San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance	1.4 million	1 million	2.6 million
Seattle Aquarium	125k	100k	NA
Saint Louis Zoo*	654k	182k	58.6k
Utah's Hogle Zoo	189k	102k	83.4k
Woodland Park Zoo	224k	115k	50.7k
Zoo Boise	52k	30.2k	6.3k
ZooMontana	35k	11k	1.3k
Zoological Society of Milwaukee	18k	8.5k	1k

*Organization joined the Network after social media post collection period



Toolkit Creation Process

A total of 29 social media posts were compiled across Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok in June 2024. Posts were sourced from the social media pages of the ACE for Wildlife Network's 26 Network Partner Organizations* at that time. Posts made by the organizations that dealt with topics of animal birth, deaths, medical procedures or transfers between April 2023–June 2024 were included in the original sourcing. After the posts were compiled, they were coded individually and then collectively reviewed by committee representatives. Once a consensus was reached on how each post was coded, the committee identified trends and areas of note from across the posts. These can be found in the Learnings & Things to Consider section at the end of this resource.

A draft of this resource was shared with in-person attendees at the 2025 Empathy Summit. The 2025 committee co-chairs (Natalie Stier & Delanie Jellison) hosted a World Cafe table to gather feedback on the document. In-person attendees who visited their table were asked the following questions:

1. *What in this resource is helpful to you?*
2. *How would you like to see this topic evolve, if at all?*
3. *Do you know of any organizational guidelines at your workplace around social media posts and utilization of empathy practices?*

Input gathered from these conversations was incorporated into the final version of this resource before sharing it with the ACE for Wildlife Network. If there is a topic you are interested in seeing included in this, or related toolkits, in the future please contact empathy@zoo.org.



*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.



Coding Explained

At the time of coding, the Communications Committee was made up of three individuals. Posts were compiled into three categories: animal births, animal deaths, and animal medical procedures or transfers. Each category was initially reviewed and coded by one committee representative, with the entire committee reviewing each post and its coding to come to a shared consensus.

Posts were coded according to the categories in the Empathy Wheel, a resource developed by Woodland Park Zoo to train their staff on incorporating empathy into any animal-focused interaction with audiences. This resource was chosen over the [Best Practices in Developing Empathy toward Wildlife by the Seattle Aquarium](#) because of the fewer coding categories present in the Empathy Wheel. The four parts of the Empathy Wheel that the committee coded posts for were: Introduce the Animal, Highlight Connection, Teach About Care & Species Biology, and Consider Animal's Perspective. The committee did not code for conservation calls to action. The posts on the following pages are color coded to correspond with the respective portions of the Empathy Wheel.

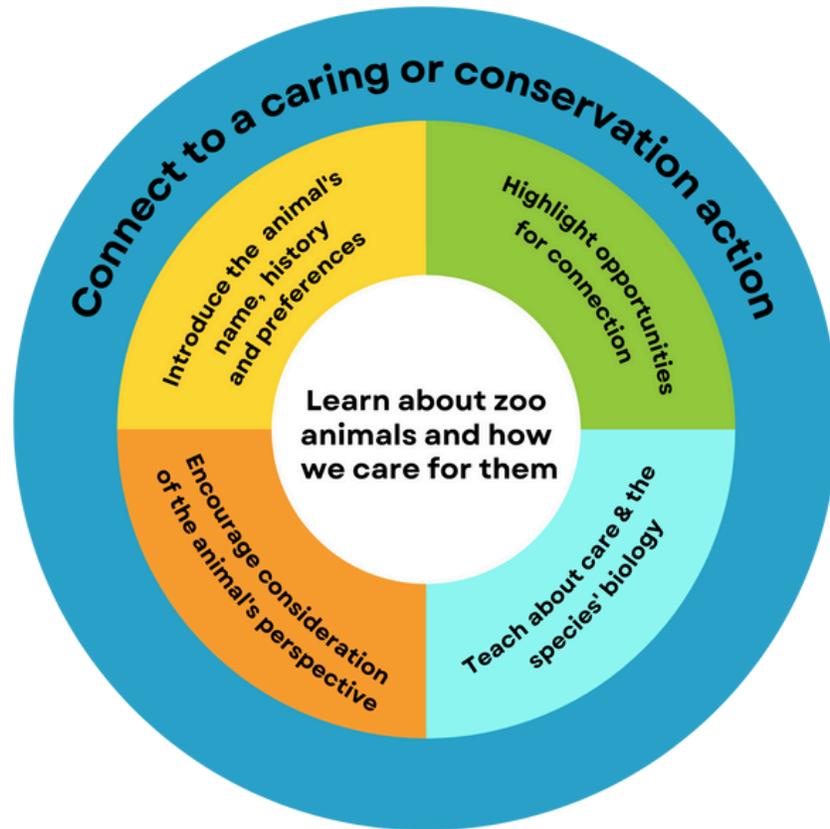
We cannot say with confidence that any or all posts reviewed were intentionally created with the Empathy Wheel or the effective empathy practices in mind. Posts highlighted in this resource were chosen because of the high level of empathy practices identified during the coding process. Any recommendations made in this resource should not be taken to imply that any singular post is "better" than another. Instead, we hope that any relevant recommendations act as guideposts for future social media posts created by the organizations in the ACE for Wildlife Network.

Additionally, while it was not explicitly coded for, ~31% of the total posts examined included instances of modeling or asking viewers for empathy for staff. This was often in response to an animal loss. As empathy for people and acknowledging staff wellbeing become more prominent topics within the field, the committee felt it was appropriate to call out instances where this was demonstrated in the posts they coded.





Empathy Wheel



INTRODUCE THE ANIMAL	<p>Framing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce that animals are individuals with relationships & agency <p>Critical anthropomorphism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight similarities and/or differences with people
HIGHLIGHT CONNECTION	<p>Providing experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage focused observation of the animal(s) • Inform how the zoo supports animal wellbeing • Include appropriate caring or conservation action <p>Modeling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set expectations for audience behavior around animals
TEACH ABOUT CARE & SPECIES BIOLOGY	<p>Increasing knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inform about the animal's needs in the wild • Include appropriate caring or conservation action (if appropriate) <p>Modeling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set expectations for audience behavior around animals (at the zoo and/or in the wild) <p>Providing experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage focused observation of the animal(s)
CONSIDER ANIMAL'S PERSPECTIVE	<p>Activate Imagination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage perspective taking • Inform about animal needs <p>Critical anthropomorphism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight similarities and/or differences with people



Empathy Infused Posts from Partner Organizations

BIRTHS

Conservation Society of California, Oakland Zoo

Time to celebrate! We welcome the arrival of our newest resident, a white-handed gibbon baby, born this past weekend to parents Mei and Rainier. We are happy to report that after giving birth on Sunday evening, Mei immediately began demonstrating excellent maternal care by cradling and nursing her newborn baby.

Mei and Rainier were “matched” as a good breeding pair by the gibbon Species Survival Plan, which helps ensure the sustainability of a healthy, genetically diverse gibbon population. This delivery comes after a four-year-long courtship between the two adult gibbons.

No name or gender yet for this little bundle (we will keep you posted!) In the meantime, Mei and baby are spending lots of time in the trees on Gibbon Island – come visit and you might get a peek at the wee one.

Jacksonville Zoo & Gardens

Introducing our newest Malayan tiger ambassadors! Cinta gave birth to THREE cubs on Sunday, November 5.

The few days after birth are critical as the little family adjusts. Cinta has been very attentive to her babies, grooming and allowing the cubs to nurse, so we are giving them space while they get settled in and bond privately behind the scenes. Our Animal Care staff continue to monitor them to ensure they are eating, sleeping and cuddling as they should. Just like with humans, there are potential risks. We remain cautiously optimistic and look forward to sharing updates. Be sure to follow along!

Tigers play a critical role in their natural habitat by balancing and maintaining a thriving ecosystem. Unfortunately, there are estimated to be fewer than 150 Malayan tigers left in the wild. This pregnancy is a significant addition to the sustainability of the Critically Endangered species, and we are proud of our contribution to ensuring a viable and diverse Malayan tiger population.

Woodland Park Zoo

Otter mom, Valkyrie, has an early Mother’s Day present: her twin pups have opened their eyes!

The North American river otters, a female and male, were born March 29 to mom Valkyrie and dad Ziggy. The new pups currently weigh between 3 and 3½ pounds each.

Otters are born blind and completely helpless, relying solely on mom for care during the first year. “We’re so happy the pups are growing and developing as they should. They’re healthy, wiggly and active pups,” said Pat Owen, an animal care manager at Woodland Park Zoo. “The pups are also beginning to take their first steps, another developmental milestone. It won’t be long before they start venturing out of the nest box.”

Get the scoop on these roly poly river floofs: <https://bit.ly/4bwVnWf>



DEATHS

Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center

There is just no easy way to relay this profoundly sad news. On Sunday, we lost **3 ½-year-old female wolf Meriwether** to what appears to be a tragic accident. The animal staff observed an isolated and unresponsive Meriwether in the late morning. After separating the other four pack members, the staff found that Meriwether had passed. **Immediate x-rays revealed a shattered left leg bone (her femur), and further investigation uncovered a severed artery near the break.** **There was no other trauma discovered during her necropsy.** While we will never know for sure what caused this to happen, we believe that weather and/or a miss-step during one of the pack's play bouts – that often includes mad dashes throughout the habitat could have been contributing factors. **We at the GWDC are still in shock and again are reminded how fragile life can be, even for the hardest individuals in our family.**

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance

The San Diego Zoo family is heartbroken to share the passing of **Mary, a geriatric Asian elephant.** **Mary had been under veterinary care, including hydrotherapy and physical therapy to alleviate age-related joint ailments for some time.**

Unfortunately, despite these therapies, Mary's mobility had declined, affecting her daily activity. After monitoring her closely and evaluating her quality of life, Mary's health and care specialists made the difficult decision to compassionately euthanize her.

Mary arrived at the Zoo in the spring of 2009 from the Safari Park, where she had lived since 1980. At 59 years of age Mary has exceeded the average life expectancy of a female Asian elephant, which is 47 years old. During her time at the Zoo, she resided at the Elephant Odyssey habitat, featuring the **Elephant Care Center, specially equipped to attend to the needs of elderly elephants.**

She was described by wildlife care specialists as having a uniquely dominant personality but also a peaceful presence that was a comfort to other elephants. **As an ambassador for her species, Mary helped educate guests on the difference between Asian and African elephants, the threats they face, and how we adapt our care for aging animals.** **Mary's physical therapy and palliative care also made her a relatable presence for humans experiencing similar ailments.**

After Mary had passed, Shaba, who lived with Mary, had the opportunity to see her and make her goodbyes. Shaba will have her choice to socialize with neighboring elephants Nipho and Sundzu.

Mary's gentle presence will be greatly missed. **Please take a moment to offer your condolences to all who are feeling this loss.** We thank you for your support during this difficult time.

ZooMontana

It is with an extremely heavy heart that we announce the passing of **O.P. the Canada Lynx.** **After several health battles, he was humanely euthanized Friday afternoon in the company of his caregivers and veterinarians.** **O.P was a shy cat, had a stare that could make you freeze, and was typically more low key and calmer than his companion Fierca; but he still had a playful side.** Sometimes, you could see him and Fierca playing together, running and jumping through their habitat. **O.P. came to ZooMontana from the Seneca Park Zoo and was just shy of his 15th birthday.** He will be sorely missed. Our thoughts go out to his caregivers, **whom have showered him with love and attention during his time here.** **RIP O.P. (Short for Optimus Prime)**



MEDICAL PROCEDURES & ANIMAL TRANSFERS

Henry Vilas Zoo

Join us this Sunday, October 8th for a very special Bon Voyage party! Eddie, our male giraffe, will be leaving this fall for his new home at the [@newzoogb](#) and we are sending him off in style! We will have cards that guests can sign, browse enrichment, a giraffe training session, and information about what's next for our giraffe habitat here at the Zoo. Make sure to swing by the Zoo between 10 am - 2 pm to come say "Bon Voyage" to Eddie!

Eddie has been at Henry Vilas Zoo since 2013. He loves to eat sweet potatoes and grain made specifically for giraffes. He loves any type of enrichment that includes his favorite treats! He is the bestest boi when it comes to training! Thanks to the dedication of his keepers, in the last year he has learned how to lift and curl his front feet and place them on a box so we can trim his hooves. He also recently got his first voluntary vaccination (a rabies shot) and he is learning other behaviors that will help keepers get him into a trailer for his upcoming move. Eddie is easy to fall in love with, and we know that his new care team in Green Bay will take excellent care of him. We are so thrilled that he will not be going very far.

Eddie's move comes as we begin to make plans for a new giraffe facility here at Henry Vilas Zoo. The new giraffe facility will showcase the care and bond between animals and their keepers and feature state of the art training equipment that will ensure Henry Vilas Zoo continues to be a leader in animal husbandry. Construction is slated to begin in the spring of 2025. Stay tuned for more information about our new Giraffe Building in the coming months!

Racine Zoo

We are bear-y excited to welcome another new resident to the Racine Zoo family — 28-year-old sun bear, Fong!

Fong joins the Zoo from the Mesker Park Zoo, in Evansville, Indiana. He traveled with his primary keeper as well as one of Mesker Park's vet techs and mammal curators. This allowed for some crucial networking between Racine Zoo Animal Care staff and Mesker Park staff. They were able to go over Fong's trained behaviors, discuss his diet and medications, and his favorite enrichment (he loves peanut butter sandwiches!). As a zookeeper, when you send an animal to a new zoo, it's kind of like dropping a child off at school. If you can impart some of your knowledge about that animal on their new zoo family, then you know that animal will be in good hands.

Fong is still getting used to his new environment and to his new care providers but is quickly making himself comfortable. He is participating in training sessions with his zookeepers and can even be seen checking out the bear habitat on warmer winter days. (He is a tropical species, so you'll see more of him in the spring/summer!)





MEDICAL PROCEDURES & ANIMAL TRANSFERS

Zoo Boise

Zoo Boise Caring For Aging Snow Leopard Diagnosed With Cancer

Zoo Boise, a division of Boise Parks and Recreation, is dedicated to the care of every animal that calls the zoo home. Those efforts become even more important when one of our beloved family members is diagnosed with cancer.

The zoo's 14-year-old female snow leopard named Kabita (pronounced kah-bee-tuh), has been diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma – an oral cancer. As soon as zookeepers noticed something was off, Kabita was given a full examination where a lesion was discovered. Treatment began immediately to make Kabita comfortable, as further testing showed the cancer has spread to her surrounding bones and unfortunately cannot be cured.

In the wild, snow leopards generally have a lifespan of anywhere from 10 to 13 years. Despite her advanced age, zookeepers are committed to giving Kabita the best treatment options available to help her live out her days in comfort. Kabita was born at the Sunset Zoo in Kansas and has been a member of the Zoo Boise family since 2011.

"This update is a difficult one for our entire Zoo Boise team," said Zoo Boise Director Gene Peacock. "However, we remain hopeful for Kabita's future. She is doing well and I'm proud of how our staff is coming together to create a path forward for her."

Zoo Boise's veterinarian staff, animal care managers, administrative team, and an outside oncologist are determining what ongoing treatment plan is best. The good news is there are treatments that may extend and provide a better quality of life for Kabita, which is comforting to staff. Kabita is receiving several rounds of electrochemotherapy to start, with the goal of treating and reducing the size of the tumor in her mouth.

"Animal care is and always will be our top priority," added Boise Parks and Recreation Director Doug Holloway. "We will continue to prioritize the health of every animal, along with the wellbeing of the team members who care for them, especially when an animal receives a difficult diagnosis."

The Zoo Boise team would like to thank the community, our guests, and committed animal care partners for their support and well wishes during this difficult time. The zoo will be posting regular updates about Kabita on its social media platforms and on the Zoo Boise website. Kabita will remain on exhibit for the foreseeable future and community members are welcome to stop by Zoo Boise and see her.

Zoo Boise has turned the act of visiting the zoo into a conservation action. Since 2007, visits to Zoo Boise have generated more than \$4 million towards the conservation of animals in the wild, redefining why we have a zoo. Zoo Boise is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, a national organization that supports excellence in animal care, conservation, education, and science.



Learnings & Things To Consider

Learnings

Empathy Across All Platforms

When posts were being sourced across the ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organizations, there was an effort to pull an equal number of empathy-infused posts from Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok for consideration. Twelve of the posts coded across the three categories were from TikTok (41.3% of total posts sourced). However, after coding was done, none of the TikTok posts stood out as being empathy-rich when compared to posts sourced from Facebook and Instagram. Thus, no TikTok posts were included in this toolkit.

There may be a few reasons for this:

- 1. Trends:** While trends exist across all social media platforms, in 2024 it was trends that originated on TikTok that trickled down onto other social media platforms (e.g., “very demure, very mindful” from Jools Lebron, “when Gen-Z writes the marketing script” videos) and into popular culture. Posting trend-aligned content during the peak of the trend increases the chances the post gets prioritized across algorithms and can dramatically increase the reach of a post or a page. The specific parameters within each trend may make the degree of customization required to seamlessly incorporate empathy practices into a post difficult.
- 2. Preference for short-form content:** To maximize reach, TikTok recommends videos should be between 21-34 seconds⁸ and users have a preference for videos under one minute.⁹ Many of us have likely experienced the challenge of incorporating empathy practices into in-person guest interactions that last less than one minute. Creating an empathy “hook” to keep someone from scrolling while also keeping the video under 60 seconds may be a challenging balance.
- 3. Primarily visual content:** As Instagram and Facebook keep captions as a main way of engaging with a post’s content, TikTok’s infinite scroll function makes captions a compliment to the visual content. Captions on TikTok are often short, reducing the chances that multiple empathy practices are represented.

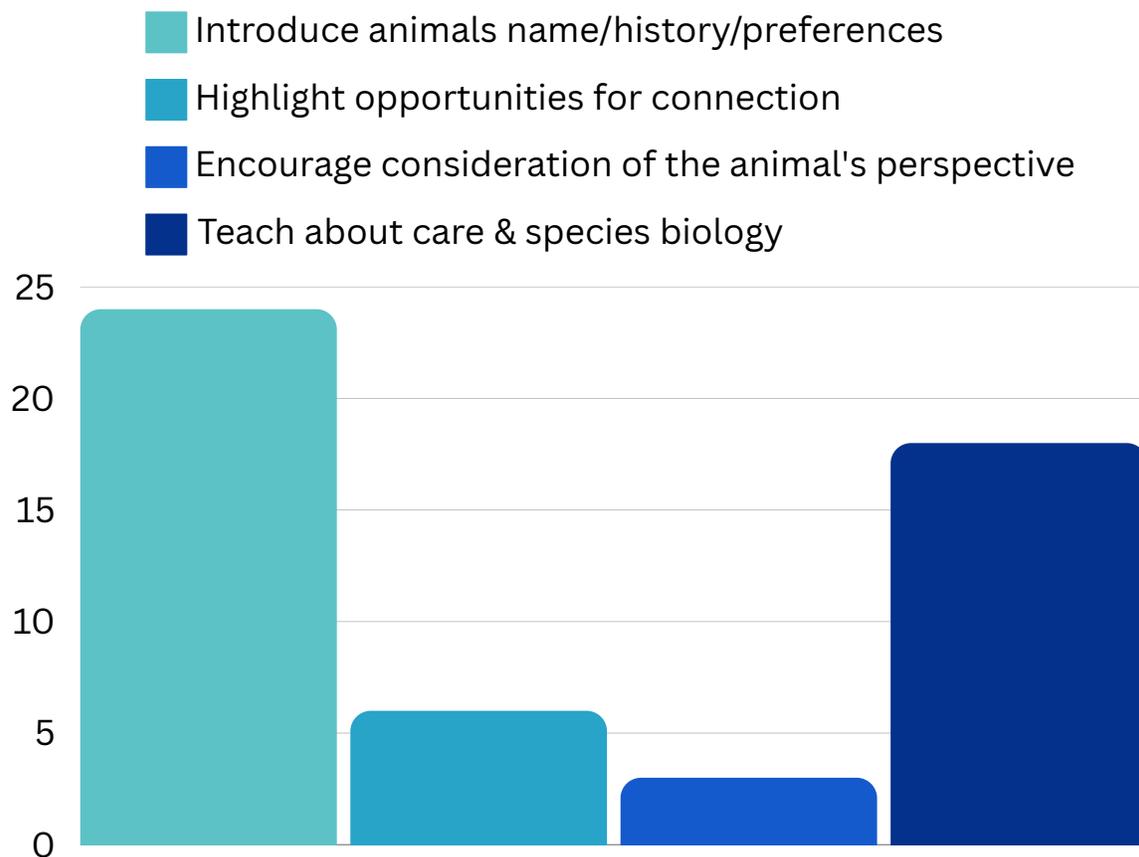
It should be noted that during the final stages of creating this toolkit the future of Tiktok in the United States became increasingly uncertain.¹⁰ As of January 19, TikTok resumed service¹¹ but the status of the platform seems to be in flux with any administration. Despite this and the fact that no posts from Tiktok were selected for inclusion in this resource, we still included a discussion about it in this resource as it is a dominant app worldwide.



Empathy Wheel Components Across Posts

The most commonly represented component of the Empathy Wheel was “introducing animals using their names, talking about their personal history, and preferences or personality” (n=24) followed by “teaching about care and species biology” (n=18). The least commonly represented component of the Empathy Wheel was “encouraging consideration of the animal’s perspective” (n=3) (see Figure 1). “Opportunities for connection” was identified six times across the social media posts chosen for the toolkit. Seeing as our post categories: births, deaths, and medical procedures/animal transfers, rely heavily on communicating animal care procedures and decisions as well as information about the individual animals in the post, it makes sense why introducing animals and teaching about care and biology were the top two represented components of the Empathy Wheel.

Figure 1: Empathy Wheel Components Represented across Social Media Posts in the Toolkit



Because of the virtual nature of social media, it can be difficult to appropriately convey genuine opportunities for connection and consideration of an animal’s perspective. Sensory experiences that heighten feelings of connection and foster perspective taking (such as touch, sound, and smell) that exist during an in-person visit to a zoo may be totally lacking, or reduced, in a social media post. However, the facts and histories associated with individual animals, their species, or care received in the zoo or aquarium remain consistent and equally interpretable regardless of the in-person or virtual dynamic.



Additionally, while it was not coded for, the committee felt it appropriate to mention that instances of displaying, or asking for, empathy for staff appeared in multiple of the posts examined, even if they did not make it into the final resource. Empathy for staff appeared in 31.03% of the total coded posts. It was seen the most in posts about animal deaths, and one instance appeared in a post about animal transfers between zoos. The committee did not code or analyze comments on the posts. As the zoo and aquarium field continues to recognize the importance of, and take steps towards, improving staff wellbeing, the committee expects posts expressing or asking for empathy for staff to increase across social media platforms.

Things to Consider

The committee is currently unaware of data on whether posts from zoos and aquariums on social media have impacts on viewers feelings of empathy towards animals or wildlife. Thus, it is difficult to claim with certainty that infusing social media posts with components of the Empathy Wheel or the effective empathy practices will result in users feeling empathy towards animals and taking appropriate actions. As organizations and individuals across the ACE for Wildlife Network continue to embed empathy into various methods of guest engagement, including social media, it is key that evaluations are conducted to understand the impact of these efforts. [While resources exist for in-person empathy evaluation](#), to the committee's knowledge those tools have not been applied in a social media setting.

The committee cannot claim that the posts examined were created with empathy in mind and evaluating the presence of empathy in social media posts has not been done (to the committee's knowledge). While the presence of empathy practices in the posts, without confirmation that all posts were intentionally created with fostering empathy in mind, is a positive indicator that utilizing empathy practices is already something many organizations are doing well, there is still a lot of room for inquiry. Should there be further continued interest in the intersection of empathy and social media within the ACE for Wildlife Network, the committee believes that the following should be examined based on their work:

Evaluating the impact of empathy-infused social media posts on viewers

Evaluating whether certain effective empathy practices, or Empathy Wheel components, are better suited for a virtual setting than others

Analyzing comments or responses to posts for effective empathy practices or components of the Empathy Wheel

The intersection of public relations and empathy, particularly with topics like animal deaths, transfers, or medical procedures



However, from this work the committee was able to identify the following recommendations and considerations for incorporating empathy into social media posts.

1. Build connection over time. While there may be many barriers for an individual to repeatedly visit an animal in a zoo in person (e.g., time, cost, transportation), social media can lower those barriers. Because of this, think about how you can use your platform(s) to continually build connections between your audience and the animals or staff at your organization.

2. Create experiences. Highlighting opportunities for connection and encouraging perspective taking were the two lowest represented components of the Empathy Wheel in the posts examined. Both of these are key parts of creating an empathy-infused experience. Identify creative ways to create an experience for your online audience by using techniques like point-of-view filming or showcasing the soundscape of the zoo or aquarium.

3. Think small. Because of the preference for short form media,¹² it can be difficult to feel like you are utilizing the Empathy Wheel or effective empathy practices to their full potential. However, something as “small” as including animal names and avoiding the use of the word “it” and instead saying “he/she/they” is still a great way to showcase empathy for animals in a virtual setting.

4. Remain consistent. If you are wanting to create your organization’s social media posts through an empathy lens, ensure you are doing it consistently. For example, are you only using animal names when posting about charismatic zoo or aquarium animals (e.g., bears, otters, big cats) as opposed to those considered “less charismatic” animals like invertebrates or snakes? If so, why is that and can you work to change that? Applying empathy consistently to your posts will ensure that, just like with an in-person visit to your organization, your virtual audience is continually being primed to feel empathy for all animals and wildlife.



Conclusion

If you used this resource and found it helpful, the committee would love to learn about your experience. Please reach out to either empathy@zoo.org to relay your message to the Advancing Empathy Team at Woodland Park Zoo, or directly to the committee co-chairs whose emails were listed at the beginning of this document.

Additionally, if you manage the social media pages at your organization and you have a framework or system for infusing your posts with effective empathy practices and/or the Empathy Wheel, let us know! We would love to include case studies or examples in updates to this resource.

Notes

1. Young et al., "Empathy for Animals: A Review of the Existing Literature"
 2. DataReportal, "Global Social Media Statistics"
 3. Statista, "Most Used Social Networks 2024, by Number of Users."
 4. Backlinko, "Facebook User & Growth Statistics to Know in 2024"
 5. Statista, "Number of Instagram Users Worldwide"
 6. Statista, "Number of TikTok Users Worldwide"
 7. CNN, "ByteDance Director Confident TikTok Deal Will Get Done, Sees Options to Avoid an Outright Sale."
 8. 7 Top Tips for Making TikTok Videos.
 9. Stokel-Walker, "TikTok wants longer videos-whether you like it or not"
 10. Yilek, "TikTok starts restoring service in the U.S. after shutting down over divest-or-ban law"
 11. BBC, "TikTok restores service in US after Trump pledge"
 12. Stokel-Walker, "TikTok wants longer videos-whether you like it or not"
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