Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility Project Toolkit

2024

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INTRODUCTION

Woodland Park Zoo's Advancing Empathy (AE) Initiative was launched in 2019 to expand the use of the empathy practices and build community and collaboration with other Association of Zoos and Aquarium (AZA)-accredited zoos and aquariums. As part of its AE Initiative, Woodland Park Zoo was privately funded to develop a grant program that builds capacity to foster empathy for wildlife in accredited zoos and aquariums across Alaska, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Washington and Wisconsin.

The AE Grant Program supports organizational efforts to plan, build, and/or expand practices and programs that foster empathy for animals and wildlife. Through grant support, recipients are developing the resources and expertise they need to increase the long-term impact of empathy practices and programs at their zoo or aquarium and have a lasting influence on their organization and their peers.

To date, the program has granted $4.7 million to support 61 grant projects that have developed, implemented, and evaluated initiatives ranging from formal programs for children to infusing empathy into biofact usage, exhibit design, and interpretive plans. Grantees have also benefited from the program's collaborative nature and cross-institution knowledge sharing, which happens during grant periods, across grant rounds, and in professional forums such as peer-reviewed journals and panels at AZA conferences.

AE grant recipients also share best practices, lessons learned, and resources developed through their grants with the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife™) Network. The Network is a global learning community that creates and shares effective practices to foster empathy for animals and people. This amplification allows grant outcomes to support collaboration among all zoos and aquariums working to inspire conservation action.

To make the 142 resources developed by all 61 projects more accessible, the AE team has created this series of toolkits based on the 10 underlying themes that cut across grant projects including:

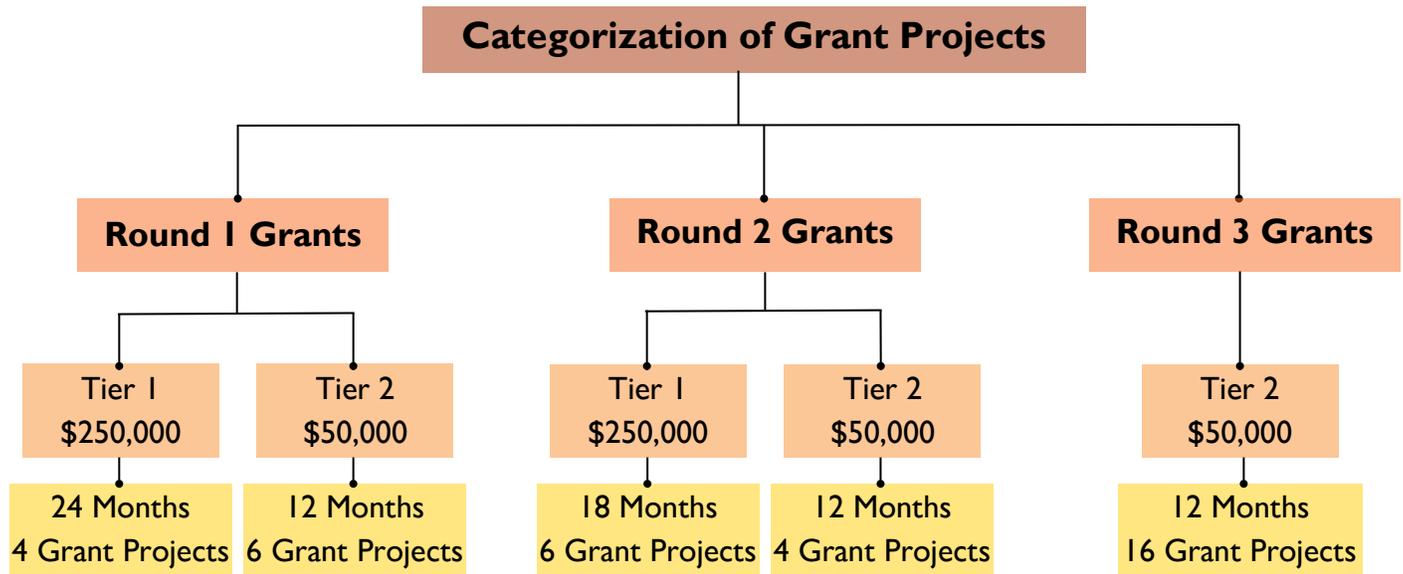|		
🐧 *Animal Ambassadors*	*Animal Care Play Spaces & Young Learners*	*Animal Husbandry*
Construction	🌍 *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility & Inclusion*	📅 *Long Term Planning*
On-Site Interpretation	🤝 *Programs & Partnerships*	*Signage*
	Staff and Volunteers	

The toolkits include AE grants funded in the 2019 grant pilot program and AE Grants Rounds One through Three. As subsequent grant rounds conclude, additional resources will be added. In Rounds 1 and 2 (awarded in 2021), there were two funding tiers: Tier 1, up to $250,000 and up to 24 months (in Round 1) or 18 months (in Round 2); and Tier 2, up to $50,000 and up to 12 months. Round 3 only featured Tier 2 grants due to the timeline of the overarching AE grant that had been set to end in December 2023.

Categorization of Grant Projects

Round 1 Grants		Round 2 Grants		Round 3 Grants
Tier 1 $250,000	Tier 2 $50,000	Tier 1 $250,000	Tier 2 $50,000	Tier 2 $50,000
24 Months 4 Grant Projects	12 Months 6 Grant Projects	18 Months 6 Grant Projects	12 Months 4 Grant Projects	12 Months 16 Grant Projects

Categorization of Advancing Empathy Grant Program

For general takeaways from the granting program, see our culminating granting report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary encompasses four grant projects aimed at advancing Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) within wildlife education and conservation programs. Each project, spearheaded by different institutions, has contributed uniquely to the overarching goals of fostering empathy for wildlife and ensuring accessibility and cultural responsiveness in educational offerings.

Projects Included

Piloting Culturally Responsive Empathy Programming for Diverse Audiences in a Virtual Environment

Building Community-Relevant Empathy for Wildlife Infrastructure

Breaking Down Barriers: Bringing Empathy for Animals to Traditionally Underserved Audiences

Deepening Empathy Practices with Indigenous Perspectives through a Community of Practice Approach

Objectives and Strategies

The combined objectives of these projects focused on enhancing the efficacy of empathy-based educational programs through different means of engagement and community involvement. Strategies included piloting and evaluating empathy programs in culturally diverse schools, developing community-focused program designs, and creating accessible education programs for underserved audiences. Each initiative aimed to embed culturally responsive practices into their programming to reflect and serve diverse community needs.

Key Achievements

Across these projects, there was successful recruitment and engagement of diverse school groups for virtual empathy programs, and establishment of a community-focused program design processes. Off-site education programs were developed, targeting over-excluded groups with virtual alternatives when in-person programs were not feasible. Another significant achievement was enhanced internal capacity for empathy-based programming through staff training, development of evaluation tools, and cross-departmental resource creation.

Outputs and Deliverables

Generalized outputs from the projects include the development and delivery of virtual empathy lesson plans aligned with state standards, as well as comprehensive literature reviews and best practice guides for culturally responsive teaching and empathy education. The creation of training materials and evaluation frameworks for empathy programs were implemented. These projects also conducted many virtual and off-site programs for diverse audiences, including schools, hospitals, and communities with economic, geographic, and/or health-related barriers.

Challenges

These projects faced some challenges, including:

Technical issues, such as webcam installation and increased costs of materials, difficulty in assessing impact due to lack of post-activity submissions from teachers, and attendance issues within advisory committees caused by staff turnover at partner organizations, which required strategic adjustments in member recruitment and meeting scheduling. There was also a need to adapt to the pandemic-related shortages of skilled laborers and the need for flexible program delivery modes.

Conclusion

These projects collectively advanced the goals of DEAI within wildlife education by developing and evaluating empathy-based programs that are culturally responsive and accessible to diverse audiences. Despite challenges, the projects achieved significant milestones in recruitment, program delivery, and capacity building. The insights gained and best practices identified will serve as valuable resources for future initiatives aimed at fostering empathy for wildlife and promoting conservation action across diverse communities.

PROJECTS

Piloting Culturally Responsive Empathy Programming for Diverse Audiences in a Virtual Environment

Minnesota Zoo, October 2021 - September 2022 (Round 1, Tier 2)

Project Summary: This project contributed to current ACE for Wildlife Network priorities by confirming the efficacy of live virtual engagement with animals in fostering empathy for wildlife, while ensuring future work is inclusive and accessible. The project piloted and evaluated empathy-based virtual programs in schools with high cultural diversity to both measure the effectiveness of the programs themselves, and to explore the intersection of culture and indicators of empathy.

Achieved Outcomes: Minnesota Zoo successfully recruited a diverse group of schools and empathy occurred among students who participated in virtual programs at a higher rate than previous in-person programs. This project also successfully identified a list of culturally responsible best practices for delivering empathy programming to diverse audiences and evaluated which best practices are the most impactful.

Click here to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Evaluation: This project resulted in the development of the Empathy Observation Tool for Virtual Programs which can be viewed here.

Reflecting on our practice the biggest takeaways were the following:

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

CONTEXT MATTERS
We should be aware of what is happening in the community, classroom, and world because it affects everyone involved in the virtual program. An environment needs to be created that honors this both in the planning process, a program time, and debriefing of the process.

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER
By putting students at the center and following their lead, a much richer learning experience is achieved. Space needs to be created for students to feel comfortable asking questions and explore their answers together.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS
Classroom teachers are the interpreters in virtual programs. They facilitate communication during the program and follow up with other learning experiences. Partnership with teachers is key.

ZOO INTRUCTOR TRAINING AND SUPPORT
It is important to design programs in collaboration with zoo education staff. This includes providing training and ongoing support as well as responding to their feedback and making program adjustments.

SEEING MORE OF THE ZOO
Virtual participants often cannot come to the zoo due to barriers. For that reason, it is important to give participants a sense of what the zoo is as a place and not just to do isolated classes.

MINNESOTA ZOO

Positive Project Comment: *"My students were able to see the world through a snake's perspective. They thought about what challenges the snake would face in the wild, and ways it deals with those challenges."*

Building Community-Relevant Empathy for Wildlife Infrastructure
Zoological Society of Milwaukee, April 2022 - September 2023 (Round 2, Tier 1)

Project Summary: Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM) developed a community-focused program design process and organization-wide evaluation framework to ensure their offerings not only achieved their vision of fostering empathy for wildlife to inspire conservation action, but best serve their audiences by providing culturally-responsive learning spaces. ZSM achieved a more meaningful and impactful community engagement by designing and integrating the input process from participants at the start of program development to create community-relevant empathy for wildlife (CREW) offerings that intentionally reached a broad audience reflective of their diverse Milwaukee community.

Achieved Outcomes: ZSM successfully achieved their objectives to build internal capacity for CREW best practices. They worked to incorporate participant "voice" within their programming model and ensured meaningful community engagement, which was instrumental during programming re-design process by representing community constituents' voice and the various cultural backgrounds reflective of the greater Milwaukee community. This project ensured that staff and volunteers were enthusiastic to incorporate CREW best practices and cultural inclusion into their work.

Click here to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Evaluation: This project created a biofact interpretation observational protocol and rubric tool that can be found here.

ZSM's Empathy Program Advisory Committee. Includes representatives from: Milwaukee Public Schools, Hmong American Friendship Association, Indian Community School, Milwaukee Area Homelearners Association, La Causa, Milwaukee County Zoo

Positive Project Comment: *Just recently, a Society Educator who specializes in our school programming asked a 4th -grade Milwaukee Public School student what she felt was most important about her role as an Animal Ambassador. With full conviction and a serious look in her eye she responded: "Animals don't have mouths to tell us important things, that's why we're learning how to help them from becoming extinct!"*

Deepening Empathy Practices with Indigenous Perspectives through a Community of Practice Approach

Lake Superior Zoo, September 2022 - September 2023 (Round 3, Tier 2)

Project Summary: Lake Superior Zoo's (LSZ) project used a Community of Practice (CoP) approach, guided by the Natural Curiosity: Four Branches and Indigenous Lenses professional learning program and an Indigenous mentor, to engage a cohort of 15 regional early childhood professionals in the co-creation of empathy practices that are deepened by Indigenous perspectives. As a result, these participants implemented an infused approach in their respective settings, where they intentionally weaved empathy with wildlife and people into their early learning programming. The co-created practices for infusing empathy into nature-based early learning was more broadly shared through the creation of an infographic and "toolkit," empowering educators at AZA sites and beyond to utilize these practices in their own early learning settings and contexts. Additionally, the CoP approach to facilitate the deepening of empathy practices has the potential to serve as a model for replication, with far-reaching impact.

Achieved Outcomes: This project increased and deepened early childhood professionals' (including LSZ preschool staff) knowledge regarding empathy and effective practices for supporting empathy, particularly in the context of early childhood. Regarding strategies for fostering empathy in young children, participants in this project also expressed expanded understandings, including strategies such as the importance of creating space for stories, honoring historical trauma, supporting a connection to place and a deep understanding of their relationship with all things in that place, supporting a culture of reciprocity, and heart-centered learning.

Click here to view the webinar and resources related to this project and see their most recent paper on exploring perceived impacts and implications from the CoP approach.

Icon from LSZ CoP project

Positive Project Comment: *"This CoP reignited my passion for deepening empathy by broadening the scope of my understanding of how empathy has been central to Indigenous cultures since time immemorial. It has been a powerful shift in my life."*

Breaking Down Barriers: Bringing Empathy for Animals to Traditionally Underserved Audiences
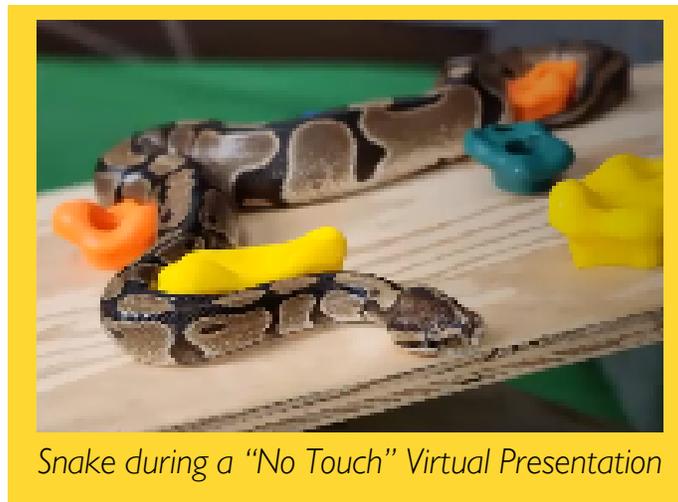*Minnesota Zoo, September 2022 - September 2023 (Round 3, Tier 2)*

Project Summary: In this project, Minnesota Zoo designed and implemented off-site education programs for audiences with economic, geographic, or health-related barriers to coming to the Zoo. They designed program structures and curriculum based on best practices for implementing culturally responsive programs as well as empathy for animals. When in-person programs were not feasible, they provided an e-Learning program alternative. Minnesota Zoo continues to identify ways to create access in programs to ensure their messages of empathy for animals and conservation action is accessible to all their community members.

Achieved Outcomes: The Minnesota Zoo re-established their off-site education program based on industry best practices with a primary audience being over-excluded groups. This project has strengthened their organization's ability to foster empathy for wildlife into the future by re-building their outreach program. It has allowed them to use the strengths of both in-person and virtual programming to bring programming to those who have traditionally been left out of zoo experiences while paying attention to current animal welfare and wellbeing standards.

Click here to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Evaluation: This project resulted in the development of the Nonverbal Empathy Evaluation Tool which can be viewed here.

Snake during a "No Touch" Virtual Presentation

Positive Project Comment: *Email sent Aug 22, 2023: "I'm a producer for the children's programming at the hospital. We are so pleased with the team that has been coming out to do the shows, they are just terrific!" This was followed by a request for more frequent programming in the future.*

For further information on grant projects and the Advancing Empathy Grant Program, please send inquiries to empathygrants@zoo.org