

Signage Project Toolkit

2025



www.zoo.org/empathy

Contact: empathygrants@zoo.org



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Content by: Advancing Empathy Team, Woodland Park Zoo

Design by: Katie Gibian, Woodland Park Zoo

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

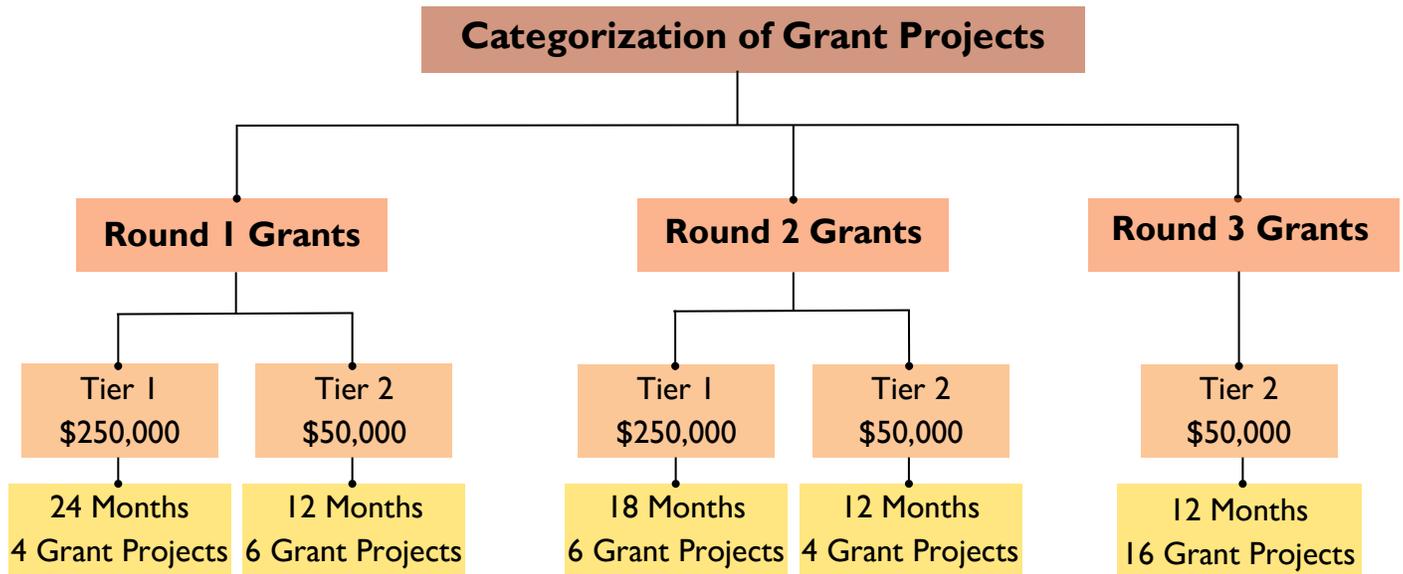


Signage



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 Advancing Empathy Grant Program

For general takeaways from the granting program, see our [culminating.granting.report](#).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary outlines the outcomes, achievements, and challenges of six grant-funded projects aimed at creating or updating zoo signage to foster empathy for wildlife. Signage development and content differed depending on organizational priorities.

Projects Included



Building Organizational Capacity for Empathy through Interpretive Master Planning & Implementation, Henry Vilas Zoo



Animal Bios of ZooMontana, ZooMontana



Fostering Empathy for Wildlife at Zoo Boise through Signage and Phase IA Interpretive Plan, Zoo Boise



Fostering Empathy through Enriched Experiences (FEEE), Roosevelt Park Zoo



Wolves & Large Cat Outdoor Signage Upgrades, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory

Pilot Projects



Biography Signs, Roosevelt Park Zoo

Objectives and Strategies

The primary goal of these projects was to increase visitors' feelings of empathy and connection to the animals under the care of participating organizations. All projects utilized storytelling as a strategy for increasing feelings of connection, incorporating personal narratives and including animal perspectives. Some grantees had a heavier emphasis on animal care and wellbeing.

Key Achievements

Whether it was for a subsection or the entirety of the zoo, each grantee successfully updated or created new empathy-infused signage, and some projects included supporting programming as well. When thinking beyond the scope of the project, many grantees utilized signage wraps as opposed to new boards to allow for cost effective updates or additions. As a result of developing or updating signage, staff and volunteers across the organizations were empowered to spend time engaged in deeper conversation with guests, addressing more common questions through signage. Additionally, these projects helped increase buy-in and understanding of effective empathy practices in staff and volunteers. This increased buy-in was often the result of direct involvement in the project or from hearing positive visitor feedback, depending on the organization.

Outputs and Deliverables

The projects collectively produced a variety of outputs, including:

- New or updated signage: Across select exhibits or throughout the zoo, many projects incorporated murals, digital media, and physical signs.
- Interactive features: Several projects included humor, tactile displays, or life-sized animal comparisons to engage visitors.
- Empathy Program Adaptations: Projects updated keeper chats and other programming to integrate empathy-focused practices and foster connections as well.
- Interpretive Planning: One project included comprehensive plans to guide future empathy-driven initiatives. Empathy Training: Projects provided training for staff and volunteers to enhance their understanding and application of empathy practices.

Challenges

Grantees experienced different types of challenges during these projects, including resource limitations, content development complexities, and evaluation difficulties. Higher-than-expected material costs and staff turnover (both within organizations and with external design teams) affected project timelines. The copy development process was a common challenge, as balancing first and third person narratives and crafting signage from the perspective of the animals required collaboration and additional time.

Measuring visitor engagement with new signage and measuring mindset shifts proved challenging post-installation, especially when project timelines shifted.

Conclusion

The projects demonstrated that updating signage, for specific exhibits or through an entire site, can promote empathy among zoo guests, staff, and volunteers. Whether anecdotal or supported by evaluative findings, grantees reported increased visitor engagement with the new signage and increased feelings of connection with the animals. Despite challenges, the initiatives led to increased visitor engagement, stronger staff commitment to empathy practices, and valuable lessons for implementing similar programs in the future.

PROJECTS

Building Organizational Capacity for Empathy through Interpretive Master Planning & Implementation

Henry Vilas Zoo, Round 1 Tier 1, October 2021-September 2023

Project Summary: This project was divided into two phases: 1) The creation of an IMP (interpretive master plan) that infused empathy practices throughout their interpretive processes and, 2) The design and evaluation of empathy infused interpretive elements informed by the IMP for multiple exhibit areas. This included murals, new signage, and digital media.

Achieved Outcomes: Throughout the course of the grant, Henry Vilas Zoo (HVZ) developed a cohesive IMP for the zoo and their work resulted in the enhancement of nearly 80% of the zoo’s interpretive elements through the installation of new signage, murals, and digital media. A pivotal feature of these elements was the incorporation of individualized animal information and narratives. By conveying unique traits and compelling storylines that foster empathetic connections, they have ingrained empathy as an integral component of all messages in the zoo.

Click [here](#) to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Success stories: “On a recent visit, I noticed the signage for the Somali [Wild] asses and was thrilled. Posted names for all animals really help, and you taught us they encourage empathy--they absolutely do. I've watched parents teach their kids the animal names.” - Henry Vilas Zoo Volunteer



CHILEAN FLAMINGO

MOUNTAIN BIRDS
Chilean flamingos are not found on tropical beaches but instead high elevations (13,000+ ft) in the Andes Mountains.

RANGE: 

DIET: 
Invertebrates Plants

STATUS: 
Endangered
Threatened
Stable

THREATS:

- Habitat Loss (Mining)
- Climate Change
- Hunting and Egg Collection

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- **Recycle** lithium batteries
- **Talk to leaders** in your community about climate change
- **Keep water clean!** Use fewer fertilizers and pesticides

MEET OUR FLOCK

Oldest Flamingo: Hatched 1979
Youngest Flamingo: Hatched 1989
Favorite Food: Dried Krill

CROP MILK
Did you know that flamingos create a unique red fluid called crop milk to nourish their young? When we feed them alfalfa powder, a flamingo favorite, they produce crop milk, which looks red around their beaks.

Animal Bios of ZooMontana

ZooMontana, Round 1 Tier 2, October 2021-September 2022

Project Summary: This project offered ZooMontana’s guests a deeper understanding of why the animals of ZooMontana call their facility home. Since the majority of their animals are rescues, this messaging aimed to reinforce fostering of empathy within their guests, both young and old, while discouraging exotic pet ownership.

Achieved Outcomes: This project increased internal capacity to effectively tell the stories of the animals at ZooMontana, allowing staff and volunteers to focus on more advanced messaging with guests. They achieved this through creating new “bio cards” which were placed at habitats of each animal at ZooMontana to promote and foster empathetic connections in guests. Each bio card is custom to each animal, including common visitor questions, so they better tell the story of why they live at the zoo.

Click [here](#) to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Success Stories: Longtime Zoo supporter Gary said the following of the bio cards – “Oh wow, what a wonderful idea! As I walk the grounds every day, I am constantly hearing guests ask these very questions. (Why are they here?, Who is who?, etc.) I think folks will be tickled pink to have this information so accessible. How fun!”



ZooMontana’s biography signs

Fostering Empathy for Wildlife at Zoo Boise through Signage and Phase IA Interpretive Plan,

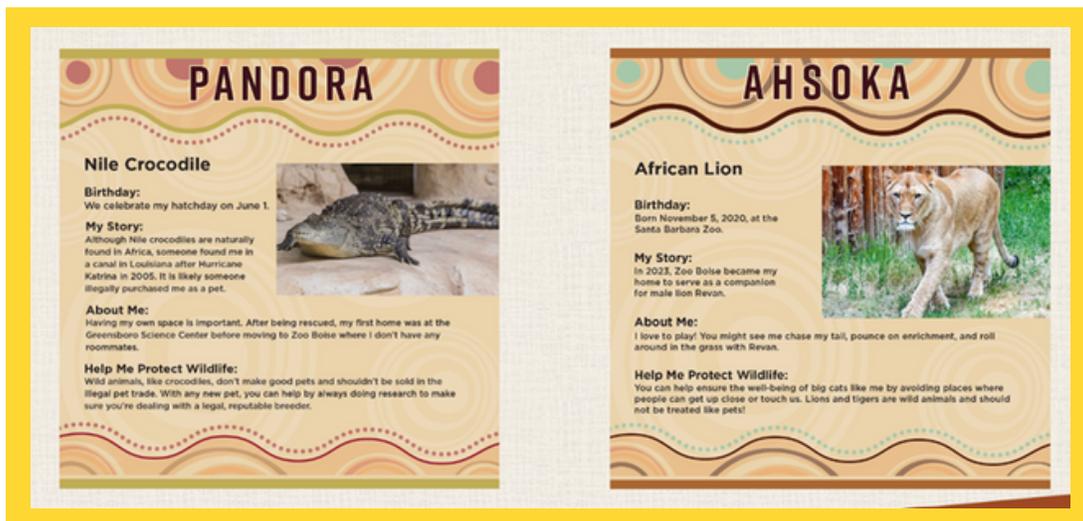
Zoo Boise, Round 3 Tier 2, September 2022-September 2023

Project Summary: Inspired by the Animal Bios of ZooMontana project, Zoo Boise aimed to create signs for multiple exhibits and species, including crocodile, southern ground hornbill, lion, African wild dogs, meerkat, and red panda. Several signs created during this project were written from the animals' perspectives to enhance visitor understanding. This project also experimented with more regulatory and health care signage that incorporated empathy.

Achieved Outcomes: This project fostered guests' empathy for wildlife with updated animal care and biography signs at Zoo Boise. They also developed a comprehensive interpretive plan for new animal exhibits in their Heart of the Zoo Phase IA Capital Campaign. This project has resulted in guests commenting on the different signs since they were written from a first-person perspective.

Click [here](#) to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Success Story: We overhear guests commenting on the different signs since they are written from a first-person perspective. Instead of complaining about an animal not being visible, guests seem more understanding. Humor has also worked well. One sign reads, "KEEP HANDS OFF MESH: I get nervous when people get too close. Plus, I eat a specialized diet that doesn't include fingers." After reading this sign, multiple guests commented, "I wonder what they eat." This tone sparked curiosity, deeper interest in animal care, and encouraged visitors to read posted signs.



**MY HOME HAS
TWO SIDES**

I might be around the corner
because I have the choice of
where I want to spend my time.

Fostering Empathy through Enriched Experiences (FEEE)

Roosevelt Park Zoo, Round 3 Tier 2, September 2022-September 2023

Project Summary: The signage portion of this project was an extension to the “Fostering Empathy through Enriched Experiences” grant, which aimed to create new enriched experiences for Roosevelt Park Zoo’s (RPZ) animals and focus on behavioral outcomes, showcasing an opportunity for guests to view animals using desired behavioral outcomes. To complement these new enriched experiences for specific animals (okapi, tigers, hornbills, and otters) RPZ aimed to add a sustainable element to their current signage by including interchangeable frames that were a place for information to be updated quickly and affordably. These signs were designed to be interactive. This project also built on learnings from their pilot round grant to develop empathy signage for animals' zoo wide.

Achieved Outcomes: Roosevelt Park Zoo was able to create multiple signs that were interchangeable and interactive. These signs included features such as light play, life-sized animals, and tactile elements offering guests opportunities for perspective taking and deeper animal connections. By combining interaction and reusable elements, these signs have made an impact on how RPZ can inspire empathy within their audiences.

Click [here](#) to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Success Stories: Interactive signage has been a large success for RPZ, and there were several indications of engagement post-grant. For example, children especially loved seeing the large cat signage and exploring how they compare in size to each featured feline.



Wolves & Large Cat Outdoor Signage Upgrades, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory

Round 3 Tier 2, September 2022-September 2023

Project Summary: This project utilized Como's [empathy-based ROADMAP](#) (Reaching Our Audiences by Developing Mission Aligned “Programs”) tools to develop, write, and implement new interpretative signage at Como Zoo's outdoor habitats for wolves and large cats. The process included rethinking messaging to their public and using the opportunity to foster empathy and inspire caring action within the ROADMAP framework to make memorable, mission-focused visitor interactions.

Achieved Outcomes: Como Park Zoo & Conservatory staff were able to work cross-departmentally to develop signage content and install empathy-focused interpretive graphics in their outdoor large cats and wolves' habitats.

Click [here](#) to view the webinar and resources related to this project.

Success Story: Visitors appreciated personal photos and names of animals, fostering stronger connections with each featured animal. From a visitor comment card: “We love the new interpretive signs with pictures and the cats' names! I'm happy they chose my very favorite photo of Ruby where she's sitting in the cave looking out at the snow.”



2020 Advancing Empathy Granting Program Pilot Round

[Roosevelt Park Zoo: Enhancing Empathy through Biography Signs](#)

- This project aimed to install biography signs showcasing unique, personalized information about resident animals to inspire empathy and encourage conservation actions with guests.

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