

Animal Ambassadors Project Toolkit

2026



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 \$9 million to support over 90 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 completed 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



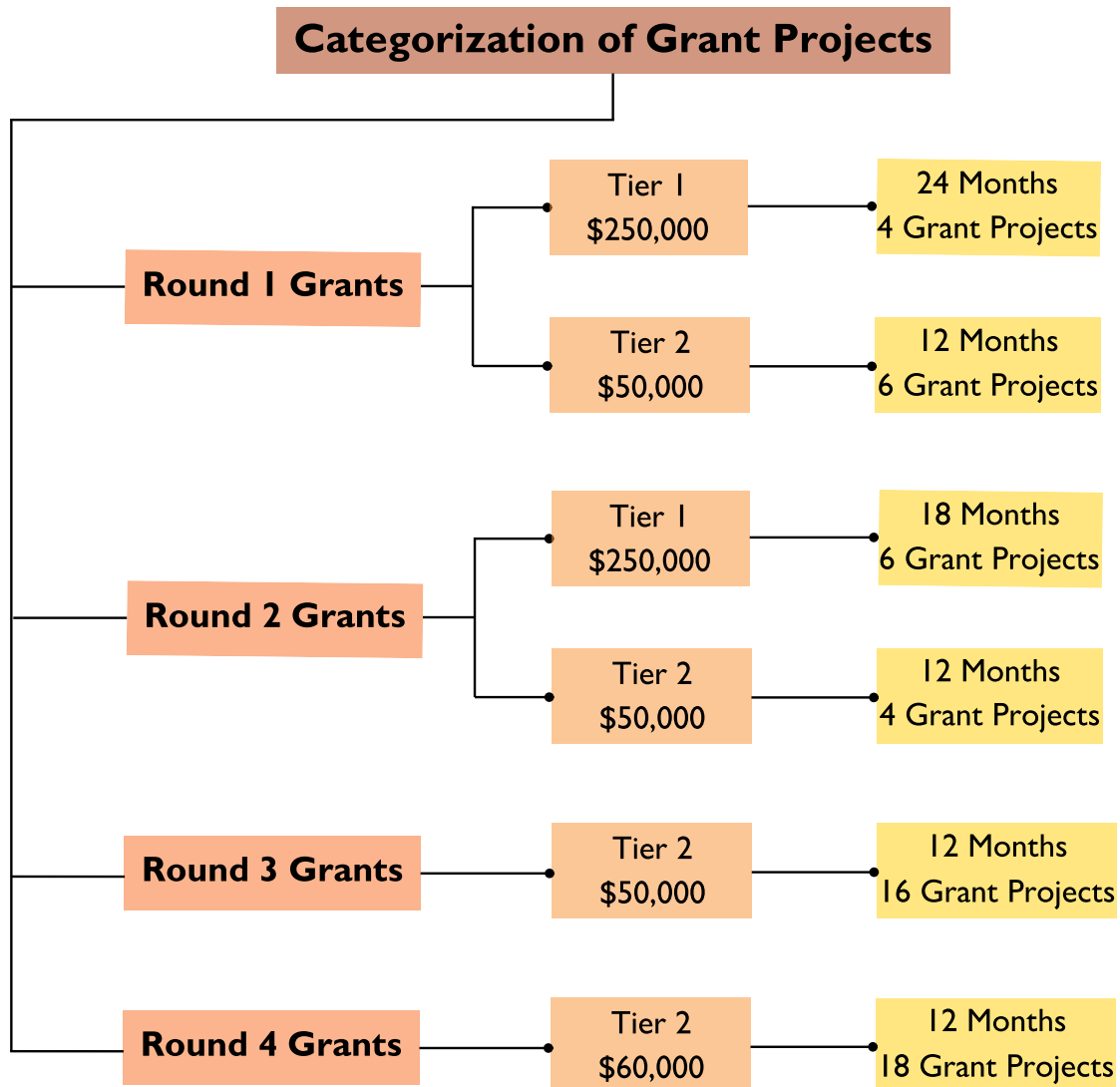
Signage



Staff and Volunteers



The toolkits include AE grants funded in the 2019 grant pilot program and AE Grants Rounds One through Four. 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. Due to an AE grant extension, Round 4 Tier 2 grants were offered on a 12-month timeline as well, with an increase of up to \$60,000 to account for rising costs.



Categorization of Advancing Empathy Grant Program

For insights into the collective impacts of funded projects and key takeaways from the grant program to date, see our culminating grant reports in the [Resource Library](#). These reports highlight lessons learned, emerging themes, and recommendations as the granting program continues to evolve.

Organizations beginning or expanding staff and volunteer training may find the ACE for Wildlife Network [Empathy Training Toolkit](#) resources helpful. These materials were developed to support teams in integrating empathy-based practices into their work. Within this section, you will find five short form videos—Empathy & the ACE for Wildlife Network, Types of Empathy, Effective Empathy Practices, The Empathy Wheel, and Anthropomorphism.

In addition to the Empathy Training Toolkit, organizations may also find the [Empathy Primer](#) helpful as an introduction to core concepts and practices, and the [Empathy Infographic for animal care staff](#), which was designed to support conversations about empathy in daily keeper practice.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary outlines the outcomes, achievements, and challenges of three grant projects funded to enhance the presentation and welfare of ambassador animals in various zoos.

Projects Included



Advancing Empathy Focused Animal Behavior Programming



A Model for Inspiring Conservation Action Through Empathy at Idaho Falls Zoo



Fostering Empathy for Ambassador Animals through Choice and Control



Creating a Space for Empathy



Education Courtyard Expansion



Increasing Capacity for Choice and Control in Ambassador Animals

Objectives and Strategies

These projects primarily focused on incorporating animal choice and control presentation techniques into educational programs to foster empathy and improve perceptions of animal welfare. Ambassador animal programs offer meaningful, up-close interactions that deepen their connection with animals and broaden their understanding of conservation. Research shows that when animals have choice and control over their interactions, visitors not only perceive them as receiving higher-quality care but are more attuned to their welfare. By highlighting opportunities to support animal autonomy, zoos can foster empathy and reinforce positive attitudes toward conservation and animal well-being ([Minarchek et al 2021](#)). These projects explored topics such as voluntary husbandry training and protocols, aligning public programming to prioritize empathy.

Key Achievements

Across all projects, significant strides were made in enhancing ambassador animal presentations and welfare. Zoos implemented new training techniques that prioritized animal choice and control, leading to improved animal welfare and greater guest engagement. Educators and volunteers received training in empathy-based messaging and animal handling, which was integrated into public presentations and educational programs. New tools and equipment facilitated hands-free and choice-based presentations, and zoos developed evaluation instruments to assess the impact on audience perceptions of empathy and animal welfare.

Outputs and Deliverables

The projects collectively produced a variety of outputs including:

- Training plans that increase choice and control for animals;
- Updated animal ambassador presentations prepared with new approaches to animal handling, introductions, and transportation to programs; and
- The creation of evaluation tools and resources to assess the effectiveness of programs related to animal ambassador offerings.

Challenges

Developing these kinds of programs presented several common challenges, including limited staffing capacity and time constraints which hindered some initiatives. The ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to anticipate costs and manage project timelines. Construction challenges also contributed to delays, affecting timelines and expectations.

Conclusion

These funded projects collectively advanced the goals of enhancing ambassador animal welfare, incorporating empathy into zoo programs, and increasing visitor engagement through innovative presentation techniques. Despite facing challenges, these organizations achieved meaningful outcomes that will positively impact animal welfare and visitor education in the long term.

PROJECTS

Advancing Empathy Focused Animal Behavior Programming,

Racine Zoo, October 2021 - September 2023 (Round 1, Tier 1)

Project Summary: This project aimed to train staff to implement new voluntary husbandry training and protocols within Racine Zoo's animal welfare department while collaborating closely with their education department to develop guest programs that highlight this work. The project also realigned existing educational programming, emphasizing voluntary presentations for animals and empathy frameworks to intentionally prioritize empathy-related outcomes.

Achieved Outcomes: Empathy was instilled as a cornerstone of all departments at the Racine Zoo through the hiring of two full-time staff members dedicated to empathy initiatives. Large-scale enhancements were made to public programming and behind-the-scenes animal training programs to better convey empathy messaging, increase animal welfare at the zoo, and create opportunities for guests of the zoo to observe voluntary husbandry behaviors.

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

Success Story: *"As a whole, our success in establishing empathy for wildlife as a primary value within the education department cannot be overstated. It has been not only implemented in programming; it is now considered in every conversation, from team meetings to casual interactions with guests passing by at animal habits."*

CAT CHAT

MEET THE CANADA LYNX:

BAM BAM
 AGE: 5 (4/25/18)

BARNEY
 AGE: 5 (4/25/18)



ABOUT US:

- Bam Bam and Barney are brothers and litter mates! The other two lynx from their litter live at Cosley Zoo in Illinois.
- Barney's mutton chops are thicker and more solid black, while Bam Bam's right mutton chop is thinner and runs up the side of his cheek.
- The lynx's favorite foods are quail, porkchops, and whipped cream (as a very special treat).

QUICK FACTS:

- Canada lynx live in the cold, snowy habitats of Canada and some states, including northern Wisconsin. They have a thick coat of fur to keep them warm, and huge, padded feet like snowshoes to help them get around.
- You may see the cats tilting their heads to the side while they bite down onto their food - cats have special teeth on the sides of their mouth called carnassials, made for puncturing their prey and tearing meat.

KEEPER NOTES

- Individual feedings and training sessions are a helpful way for keepers to make sure each lynx is eating equal portions of their diet and get a closer look at them.
- Training with animals strengthens relationships, builds trust, and opens a line of communication between animals and their caretakers.

RACINE ZOO CAT CONSERVATION:

Conservation status:
 Canada lynx - Least Concern
 African lion - Vulnerable
 Amur tiger - Endangered

All of the cats at the Racine Zoo are part of an AZA Species Survival Plan, while none of them are actively breeding, their genetics are important for maintaining diversity within their species.

Example of a cat chat training document

A Model for Inspiring Conservation Action Through Empathy at Idaho Falls Zoo

Idaho Falls Zoo, April 2022 - September 2023 (Round 2, Tier 1)

Project Summary: The Idaho Falls Zoo (IFZ) expanded their commitment to a new model for empathy-based zoo design and enhancements through the "Inspiring Conservation through Empathy Model (ICE-M)." This model leveraged key community members and the public to identify and refine ideas for implementing empathy best practices within the local context to help improve connections with zoo visitors.

Achieved Outcomes: A key achievement of this project, particularly relevant to ambassador animal programs, was the development of two empathy-based exploration stations: Wild Wagon and Critter Cart. These stations featured small animals in naturalistic settings, allowing guests to observe their authentic natural behaviors. By intentionally moving away from presenting these animals as handheld pets, the stations encouraged a deeper appreciation of each animal's individuality. This approach also empowered staff to model empathy-based practices, fostering meaningful connections between visitors and animals.

Click [here](#) to view the resources and webinar (start at 13:04) related to this project that give a deeper insight to what these carts looked like.

Success Story: This project was featured on an edition of the Empathy Matters newsletter – click [here](#) to check it out and learn more about the successes of this project.



Fostering Empathy for Ambassador Animals through Choice and Control

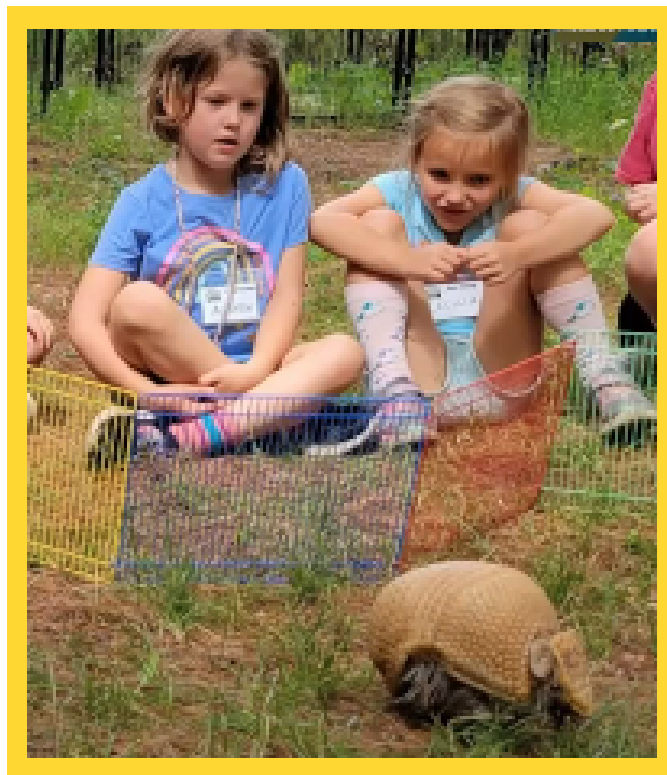
Lake Superior Zoo, October 2021 - September 2022 (Round 1, Tier 2)

Project Summary: This project increased Lake Superior Zoo's capacity to incorporate animal choice and control presentation techniques into education programs that foster empathy and improve perceptions of animal welfare. The project leader also provided training to staff and volunteers on how to present, interpret, and assess animal welfare.

Achieved Outcomes: Project lead used positive reinforcement to successfully train ambassador animals for greater choice and control in presentations. Educators and teen volunteers received training on how to present, interpret, and assess animal welfare. The zoo also updated the ambassador animal policy, introducing new guidelines for animal handling, presentation, and welfare assessment. Additionally, this project created and utilized three evaluation instruments to measure whether the new presentation techniques positively impacted visitor perceptions of animal welfare and empathy for animals.

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

Success Story: *"We have noticed that children are more fascinated by and less fearful of snakes now that we allow the snakes to move around on the floor during programs. Many children say that the snake was their favorite animal in the program – they even seem to like the snake more than the armadillo, hedgehog, or tortoise."*



Creating a Space for Empathy

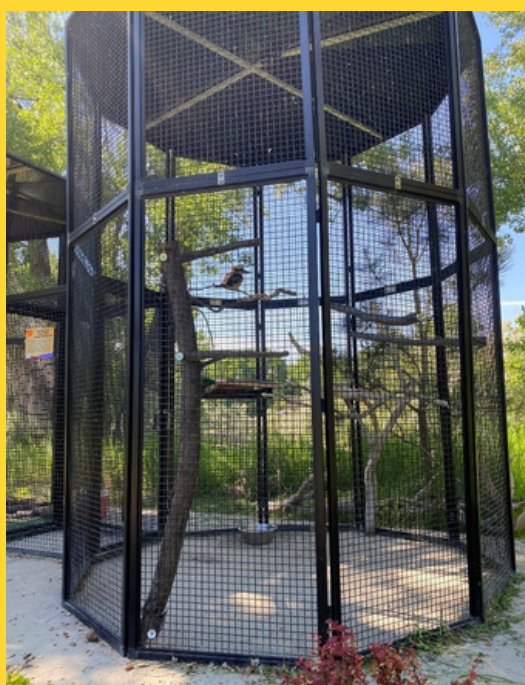
ZooMontana, September 2022 - September 2023, (Round 3 Tier 2)

Project Summary: This project created safe outdoor environments for ZooMontana's animal residents to enjoy voluntary interactions with guests. The new outdoor facility enabled visitors to observe natural behaviors and positive interactions with staff; as well as training, education, and enrichment sessions. Construction of outdoor habitats allowed indoor animal residents to enjoy fresh air and outdoor stimulation. In addition, the project included plans to build a dedicated training and exercise space for enrichment staff to facilitate their outdoor work. To encourage greater attendance at animal ambassador presentations, this project supported the installation of much-needed shade structures at the amphitheater, creating a weather-safe and comfortable environment for guests. These presentations play a crucial role in helping the public to gain a **deeper** understanding of the importance of preserving and conserving the natural habitats of all animals.

Achieved Outcomes: Several outdoor Animal Playgrounds were created for Zoo Montana's ambassador animals, offering the indoor animals (birds, reptiles, and mammals) with opportunities for outdoor enrichment and informal guest interactions to enhance their overall welfare. These improvements enabled the zoo to expand their empathy-infused educational programming throughout the summer. In addition, a new training enrichment yard is planned to give guests an opportunity to see animal caregivers provide enrichment and conduct training sessions.

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

Success Story: *"I think the biggest success story is sort of a culmination of all the work the ACE Network has allowed us to do. When I was walking across our grounds and heard a little girl yell, Hey...Sydney's outside" I realized that the little girl not only knew who Sydney was but she was at first concerned Sydney was not in her normal sport and then elated to see she was outside in a new environment (and knew it was her by her call)." - ZooMontana staff*



Sydney enjoying her new outdoor space.

Discovery Zone: Education Courtyard Expansion

NEW ZOO & Adventure Park, September 2022 - September 2023, (Round 3, Tier 2)

Project Summary: This project transformed the NEW Zoo's current Education Courtyard area into the Discovery Zone, a unique, interactive space for zoo visitors to learn and play. The project included the creation of outdoor habitats "Vacation Stations" for education ambassador animals, which were previously housed behind-the-scenes and only visible by zoo guests during specific programs or encounters. These new habitats are able to accommodate a range of species that can rotate through the space with movable signage that highlights the animals presenting the space at that time. The upgrade also introduced empathy-based interactive signage and nature play spaces, designed to encourage perspective taking and animal mimicry, building connection to animals and wildlife with our youngest audiences.

Achieved Outcomes: The NEW Zoo & Adventure Park was able to expand a small, private education courtyard space into a large, inclusive and engaging environment for all visitors. This zone includes: three animal habitats with accompanying "get to know me" signs that introduce each animal, interactive games and puzzles that promote learning through play, an outdoor classroom space to increase the capacity of educational programming offerings, and a giant nature play space (with a dino dig and spider web tunnel).

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

Success Story: When asked about the new Discovery Zone, the NEW Zoo & Adventure Park's Operations Manager, Barbra Basten, remarked *"I love that it will provide access for our guests and our behind-the-scenes education animals a better opportunity to connect by offering more outdoor habitat space."*



Increasing Capacity for Choice and Control in Ambassador Animals

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

Project Summary: Building on the success of their Round 1 grant, this project provided Racine Zoo with the materials required to present nearly all ambassador animals using hands-off methods and voluntary participation, emphasizing animal agency for all their audiences. Staff were equipped with tools and training to highlight unique animal behaviors and enhance their current programming with stronger opportunities to achieve empathy-related outcomes. Program evaluations assessed change in perception of animal welfare, value, and empathy-based behaviors before and after the programmatic changes. Racine Zoo staff began collaborating with other zoos to develop a shared resource document demonstrating the value of empathy-driven animal ambassador programs.

Achieved Outcomes: Racine Zoo redesigned indoor presentations for 100% of ambassador animals and created hands-free, choice-based presentations for 80% of ambassador animals to showcase greater levels of empathy for wildlife. This was achieved by designing innovative presentation spaces to showcase animals, such as acrylic habitats that offer dynamic environments for the animals and insights into the animals' natural habitats, or adjustable perches for birds. Animal care and education staff were also equipped with the tools needed to train all the zoo's ambassador mammals and birds, and many of the zoo's ambassador reptiles and amphibians. These program enhancements increased the positive perception of value of the Ambassador Animal program at Racine Zoo, demonstrating the impact of empathy-focused practices on both animal welfare and visitor engagement.

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

Success Story: *"One of our most popular ambassador animals is our resident four-toed hedgehog, Minx. Minx has historically been presented in-hand in a blanket, which understandably leads to many guests expressing how they want to take her home and snuggle with her, or at least their desire to touch her. Upon the first trial run of Minx's new mini-habitat bin (with a 3rd grade class), not a single student or teacher expressed desire to touch Minx or bring her home (which is something this writer has never encountered while using Minx during a program!). They still expressed the same "aww admiration" of her cuteness, but they admired how cozy she appeared in her artificial rock hide. Many even expressed behavioral mimics upon seeing Minx enter the hide, acting like an animal "settling in" with slight side-to-side lower body wiggles in their seats." - Racine Zoo staff member*



Minx's mini habitat

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