

AZA Connect Article: Rethinking Anthropomorphism

There is a movement underway within the Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE) for Wildlife Network and beyond to tell the stories about zoo animals in an intentional way to foster connection and caring in our guests. When Network Partner Milwaukee County Zoo's sign compares Belle the African elephant's workout to that of humans, or Roosevelt Park Zoo highlights Akili the okapi's fondness for Cheerios, they are fostering empathy by creating an opportunity for guests to feel a connection to Bella and Akili and their subjective experiences in the world.

Empathy is a powerful emotion that relies on the ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal.¹ Feelings of empathy can drive conservation behavior by prompting people to connect their concern for the well-being of individual animals to the importance of preserving healthy environments for their species to thrive.² In addition to building scientific knowledge into interpretation about animals' natural history, the ACE for Wildlife Network advocates for imparting a cohesive and relatable story about zoo animals' daily lives, behaviors, or preferences.

While many zoos and aquariums have implicitly done this over the years, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, Seattle Aquarium, and Woodland Park Zoo sought to understand the empathy research and determine how to make it explicit, consistent, and measurable with the Measuring Empathy Collaborative Assessment Project from 2015 – 2017. Since then, Woodland Park Zoo has supported a larger group of 20 accredited zoos and aquariums in forming the ACE for Wildlife Network to build on this foundation and collaborate on ways to strengthen guest connections with wildlife and nature.

Several effective interpretive practices have been identified that aim to foster empathy for animals, such as framing conversations about animals as subjective others and prompting guests to consider their perspectives.³ Studies have repeatedly shown that though sharing information about challenges animals face in the wild is important, it is insufficient to inspire behavior change.⁴ One of the interesting discoveries from this collaborative community of practice has been the effectiveness of the careful use of anthropomorphism in zoo and aquarium narratives. Though this may be a dramatic shift in practice and raise concerns for some people in our field, in this article we share the most common concerns we hear and provide examples from Network Partners on how they navigate these topics.

Critical Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is typically defined as the attribution of human characteristics to nonhumans. Traditionally, and in many spaces still today, its use has been taboo as it has been

¹ Young et al., 2018.

² Luebke, 2018.

³ Minarchek et al., 2021.

⁴ Bolderdijk, Gorsira, Keizer, & Steg, 2013; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002.

deemed unscientific. Yet, anthropomorphism is something our guests (and humans in general) engage in naturally, especially when they see animals. Often what occurs is **uninformed anthropomorphism**; people assume their own feelings about a situation equates to the animal's experience. Making inferences about the unknown by connecting new, unfamiliar experiences or observations with known and familiar concepts is how humans make sense of the world and experiences.⁵ For example, "That tiger must be lonely as she has no friends." The guest is voicing how they would feel in that situation instead of understanding the perspectives and biology of a different species, which is projection **not** empathy. This misattribution, potentially due to a lack of knowledge of the animal's natural history, is counterproductive. When this happens, we have the opportunity and responsibility to shift the nature of that connection and to counter those misperceptions by showcasing the animal in the context of their natural history and behavioral preferences. Empathy practices can help us to do so. At Zoo Boise, they might say, "Akasha the tiger is 13 and has shown throughout her life that she much prefers to have her own territory. As large carnivores, it's more typical than not for cats to want lots of space to themselves. Did you know that if there were another tiger in the habitat, Akasha would feel stressed?"

What we encourage instead is **critical anthropomorphism**, using familiar and approachable metaphors to interpret phenomena when backed by scientific findings.⁶ Advances in animal neurobiology and behavior research show us that there are traits and behaviors shared across species that were previously thought to be unique to humans (e.g., grieving in elephants, primitive emotions in mice); we believe that by highlighting those similarities, guests can further empathize and connect with animals.⁷ This strategy can be particularly useful with animals that are traditionally misunderstood or instill fear, such as insects, snakes, or bats. For example, an Alaska SeaLife Center "The Life of the Giant Pacific Octopus" sign includes familiar references to explain the life cycle: "Caring Mom," "Settling Down," and "Dining In." They can then prompt guests with questions about how their experiences and preferences compare to that of octopuses.

For animals that guests easily relate to and may inaccurately anthropomorphize, like gorillas or other great apes, it is beneficial to limit use of critical anthropomorphism. Instead, consider pointing out differences. For example, if a Woodland Park Zoo guest thinks it is a positive connection when Kwame the gorilla stares at them directly in the eyes, our sign explains, "Gorillas prefer to look at each other from the corner of their eyes. A direct stare means he may feel threatened. Our animal keepers have learned to peek sideways, out of respect. Can you try that?" If someone expresses concern about Como Park Zoo's African lion Mumford's inactivity as a potential sign of depression, they might say, "Did you know that lions typically sleep up to 20 hours a day? When Mumford does that, it is a sign that he is acting how he would in the wild." This approach can be more helpful in getting the guest to have a better understanding of

⁵ Turner et al., 2023.

⁶ Akerman, 2019.

⁷ Natterson-Horowitz, 2012.

animals' needs and behaviors. In short, using an animal's name, discussing their past, and sharing individual preferences and behaviors are intended to **enhance, not supplant**, scientific facts about the animal and species.

Why should we use critical anthropomorphism in guest interactions? As noted earlier, it is almost unavoidable for zoo guests to think about the animal's perspective in relation to human experiences. Walk around any AZA facility and you will hear guests make comparisons to humans or guess at an animal's mood. Furthermore, research has shown that its use can increase connectedness, positive perceptions and even increase a willingness to act on that being's behalf.⁸ Take Racine Zoo, which facilitated an encounter with a live cockroach with virtual classes reaching over 150 students. Every single class showed significantly improved attitudes from their initial introduction to a Madagascar hissing cockroach when compared to their response once they had learned about the cockroach's personality and named her accordingly. Not a single student expressed negative, or even neutral, emotions after the activity. Considering the classes had largely negative initial emotions towards the cockroach before this activity, these results are remarkable.

Idaho Falls Zoo hosts regular Bat Nights that demonstrate how local wild bats are using the zoo as critical housing and feeding space. An echometer collects data in the zoo permanently, which shows it is common to get upwards of 1,500 echolocation calls per night. During events, staff highlight the bats as attentive mothers and helpful at controlling insect populations. The zoo staff also conduct a pre- and post-Bat Night survey asking participants to share their feelings and understanding of bats. They consistently see guests go from squeamish to inspired to build bat houses and take other actions to support local bat populations. At Lake Superior Zoo, utilizing critical anthropomorphism and other empathy practices in their programs have changed children's perceptions: "We have noticed that children are more fascinated by and less fearful of snakes now that we allow the snakes to move around during programs. We explain that the snake likes to make choices, like we do. We ask them to guess what they think it will choose to do – maybe it will climb or go under something. They realize it doesn't choose to approach them or bite them. At the end of the program, many children say the snake was their favorite animal. They often like the snake more than the armadillo, hedgehog, or tortoise."

While anthropomorphism can result in guest overestimation of animals' mental or emotional capacities, it is perhaps more dangerous for guests to underestimate animals' capacities. Anthropomorphic language can lead to increased connection, care, and action⁹ while mind-denial or objectivization can make it easier to disregard animal suffering.¹⁰ We do not want our guests detached from or underestimating all that animals can do and feel. As utilized as an interpretive starting point of a guest interaction in combination with other effective empathy practices and **not** as the end goal, critical anthropomorphism can reduce guest

⁸ Butterfield, 2012.

⁹ Butterfield, 2012.

¹⁰ Leach et al., 2023.

barriers to connection and help them begin to empathize with the animals in our care. After that, anything is possible.

Join Us

If you would like to join this conversation or are interested in implementing empathy initiatives at your organization, you do not have to go at it alone. The ACE for Wildlife Network offers opportunities for connection and collaboration with over 300 Members and Affiliates, as well as professional development opportunities to help advance your skills in fostering empathy and connection in guests. By joining this free Network, you get access to previous and upcoming events, empathy resources and trainings, and insights into practices used by other organizations. To learn more about joining the ACE for Wildlife Network, check out our website at www.aceforwildlife.org or send us an email at empathy@zoo.org.

Citations

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