



EMPATHY BEST PRACTICES

WHAT IS EMPATHY, AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT IT?

Regardless of our diverse backgrounds and different roles at Woodland Park Zoo, we have one thing in common—we care deeply about our animals and about their wild counterparts. Having animals here at the zoo allows us to foster a connection between people and nature, which can lead to caring action to protect wildlife and the environment around us. One way to inspire people to act is by building **empathy**.

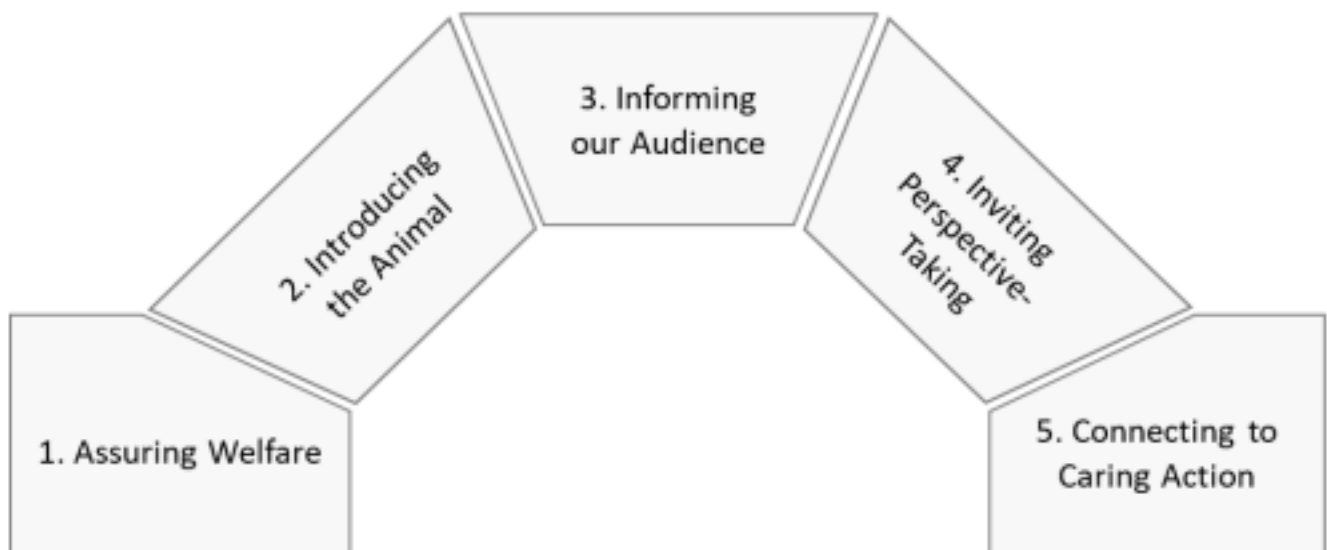
“Empathy is a stimulated emotional state that relies on the ability to **perceive**, **understand**, and **care about** the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal.”

Conservation psychology research tells us that when it comes to taking conservation or caring action, people need more than knowledge of what to do and why to do it. They also need a personal, emotional connection, and that’s where empathy comes in. There are three main components or types of empathy.

Types of Empathy

- **Affective empathy** – the ability to sense the perceived emotions of another (it’s what makes you cry in movies when you see others cry)
- **Cognitive empathy** – the ability to identify and understand the perspective of others
- **Empathic concern (compassionate empathy)** – the ability to sense and be motivated to improve the life of another

EMPATHY BRIDGE AND BEST PRACTICES



While we already do a lot to foster empathy, we now want to make it **consistent** and **intentional**. There are a number of factors that influence a person’s capacity to feel empathy and toward what they are capable of feeling empathy. Some of these factors are out of our control, but what we can do is use empathy to connect people to animals and inspire caring action.

The following are research-based best practices for fostering empathy, broken up into segments of the empathy bridge. They should be incorporated into any interactions with guests, program-based or casual. Others are more specific to particular types of programming.

1. Assuring Welfare

- **Before we even think about empathy, there has to be a strong, positive foundation of animal welfare and guest experience.** It is our responsibility to assure people of our animal welfare considerations and that animal care is our top priority. Everything we do for our animals is deliberate and intentional.
- **We want to make sure our guests have the best possible experience at the zoo.** The happier people are when they are here, the more open they will be to feeling empathy and hearing our messaging (conservation, etc.).
- **Model an empathetic attitude and empathic behavior.** Don't be afraid to show people that you care about your animals. If they see how much you care and are passionate about the animals, they will feel it too.

2. Introducing the Animal

- **Use personal pronouns and individual names.** Names are powerful indicators of sentience and individual value. "It's a brown bear" implies he's an inanimate object, but "his name is Denali, and he's a brown bear," tells us he is a someone.
- **Give people the individual age or personal traits of an animal, if you know them.** These help individualize the animals even more than talking about a species as a whole.
- **Be accurate and productive when providing information.** People are prone to project their own emotions (and sympathize) rather than empathize with another's true perspective. Make sure to give correct information that will help people connect to animals, but be mindful of what you are saying since we do not want to promote misconceptions.

3. Informing Our Audience

- **Tell a story.** The most effective empathy-evoking stories are ones that highlight an animal's relationships and an animal's choice and sense of agency. For example, "Taj and Glenn, our greater one-horned rhinos, love taking warm showers. We found out one day that the hot water heater was broken because they refused to take a shower. We fixed it immediately, and they started taking showers again..." is much more compelling than "rhinos like being in water." This shows the animals' choices, as well as our efforts to provide the best animal welfare.
- **Provide personal facts and natural history facts.** Include facts about an animal's way of sensing and acting, common misconceptions, and how they are similar or different to humans.
- **Avoid reinforcing fear or disgust.** It is okay to acknowledge another person's fear or disgust, be it is better to focus on something else, like a unique fact about the animal they may be curious to hear.

4. Inviting Perspective-Taking

- **Give the guest an opportunity to observe the animal.** Taking the time to observe an animal gives people the ability to learn more and try to imagine what it is like to be that animal. "Notice how he is flicking his forked tongue out. What do you think he is smelling right now?"
- **If safe and appropriate, encourage mimicry, storytelling and roleplaying.** This is especially great to engage younger audiences and have them take the perspective of another animal.

5. Connecting to Caring Action

- If a guest feels connected with an animal, often times a particular individual, they will be more willing to learn about the animal and take action toward saving species.
- You can suggest some simple caring actions, like voting at Quarters for Conservation, choosing to buy sustainable palm oil products, recycling old electronics to ECO-CELL, or buying Conservation Coffee to help tree kangaroos.