

Long-Term Planning Toolkit

2026



www.zoo.org/empathy

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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.

From the pilot phase through Round 4 (as of the end of 2024), the program granted \$4.7 million to support 61 projects represented across the AE toolkit series, spanning initiatives from formal programs for children to infusing empathy into biofact usage, exhibit design, and interpretive planning. 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

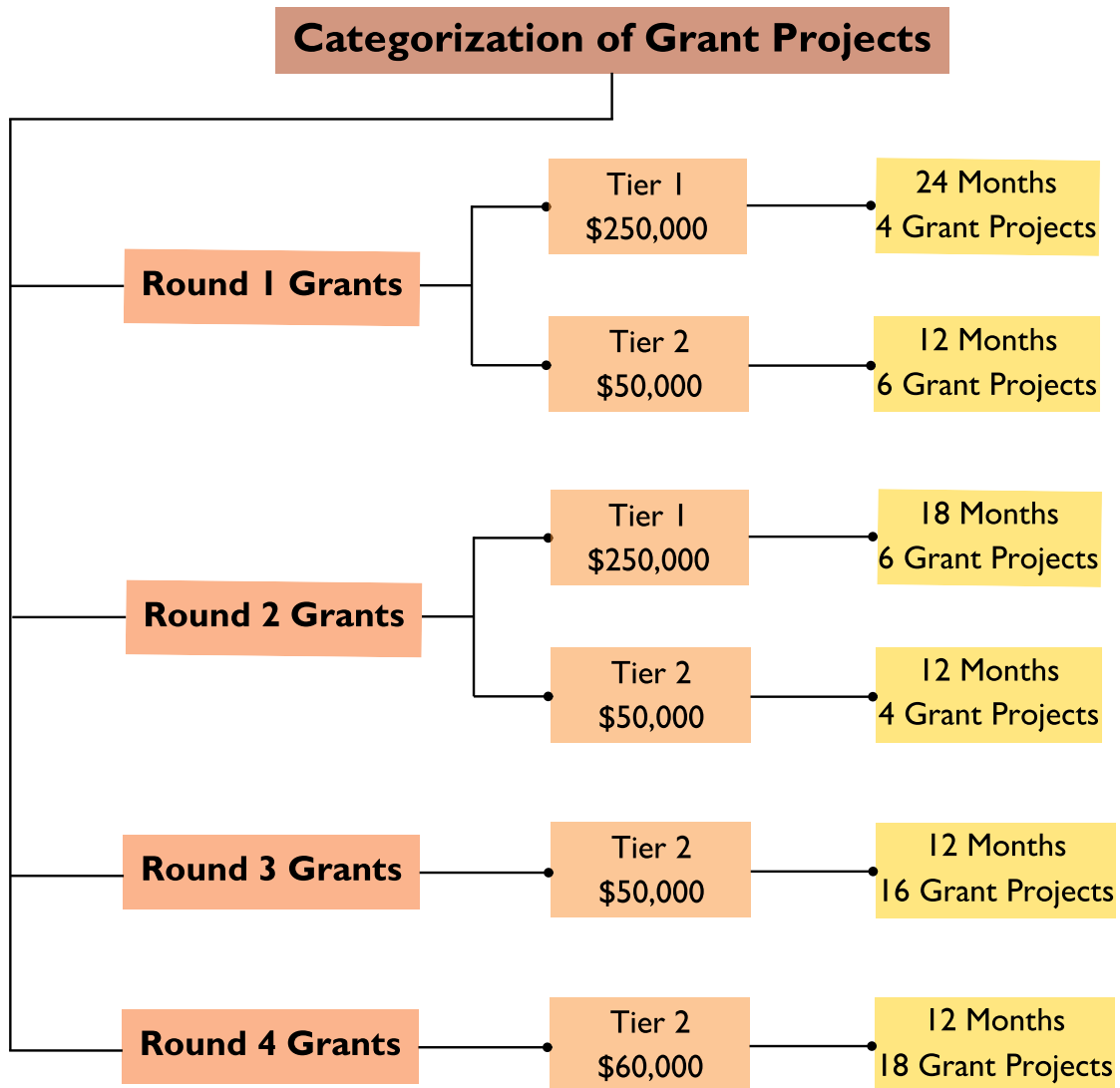


Signage



Staff and Volunteers

The toolkits include AE grants funded in the 2019 grant pilot program and AE Grants Rounds One through 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.



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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary outlines the outcomes, achievements, and challenges of six grant projects that supported teams in developing and implementing empathy-informed long-term and strategic plans for their organizations. Across projects, organizations used planning processes to embed empathy practices into institutional frameworks, guiding decision-making across departments including education, animal care, and guest experience. These efforts moved empathy from a set of individual practices to an organization-focused approach, ensuring consistency, sustainability, and alignment with conservation goals.

Depending on the project, plans focused on organization-wide strategy or targeted areas such as interpretive planning, exhibit design, and program development. Collectively, these projects demonstrate how long-term planning can serve as a critical foundation for scaling empathy-based work and sustaining impact beyond the grant period.

Projects Included



Building Organizational Capacity for Empathy through Interpretive Master Planning & Implementation



ROADMAP to Empathy Project



Integrated Strategic Planning for Empathy Action



Designing Exhibits and Revising Visitor Experiences to Foster Empathy for Wildlife at Zoo Boise



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



Model to Build Public Conservation Through Empathy in Adventure Island

Objectives and Strategies

These projects focused on the development and implementation of empathy-infused long-term organizational plans. Strategies varied by organization and included staff and volunteer training, development of interpretive elements such as signage and exhibit plans, and the creation or refinement of empathy-based programs. Through long-term planning, these efforts became structured pathways for integrating empathy into daily operations and future decision-making.

Across projects, organizations shared common goals:

- Increasing staff and volunteer understanding of empathy practices
- Strengthening the ability to apply empathy in interpretive messaging
- Enhancing visitor connection to animals
- Increasing guests' intent to take conservation action

Key Achievements

These projects highlighted the significant role long-term planning plays in advancing empathy-based work, including the powerful impact empathy-centered messaging can have on guest experiences. Several organizations made significant updates to interpretive elements, redesigned curricula, or developed new frameworks to guide empathy-focused programming.

A key achievement across projects was the integration of empathy into organizational systems and culture. Rather than existing as isolated initiatives, empathy practices became embedded in day-to-day operations, increasing consistency and resilience despite staff turnover. These efforts positioned organizations to sustain and expand empathy-based approaches over time, strengthening both internal alignment and external impact.

Outputs and Deliverables

The projects collectively produced a variety of outputs, including:

- Long-term and strategic plans that embed empathy practices
- Interpretive plans and exhibit concept designs
- New or updated interpretive elements such as signage and murals
- Staff and volunteer training resources
- Frameworks to guide empathy-based program development and evaluation

These deliverables provide adaptable models that can support other institutions in integrating empathy into planning processes and organizational strategy.

Challenges

Many projects were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced challenges including staff turnover, reduced capacity, budget constraints due to decreased visitation, and increased materials costs for sites developing new interpretive elements.

Additional challenges included:

- Integrating empathy-based approaches into established institutional practices
- Coordinating efforts across departments
- Navigating staff survey fatigue
- Aligning on consistent empathy-based conservation messaging

Despite these challenges, organizations adapted their approaches and maintained progress toward integrating empathy into long-term planning.

Conclusion

Through these projects, organizations successfully integrated empathy practices into long-term and strategic planning processes, strengthening their capacity to deliver empathy-based programs and experiences. While empathy practices may have existed within organizations prior to these efforts, formal planning ensured that they are now intentionally embedded within institutional frameworks. This shift supports greater consistency, sustainability, and scalability of empathy-based work across departments and over time. These projects demonstrate that long-term planning is a critical tool for advancing empathy for wildlife and ensuring lasting conservation impact.

PROJECTS

Master Planning & Implementation

Henry Vilas Zoo, October 2021 – September 2023 (Round 1, Tier 1)

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, including murals, signage, and digital media.

As part of the planning process, the project also incorporated community-informed design through cultural listening sessions with local partner organizations, ensuring that diverse perspectives were reflected in the development of the IMP.

Achieved Outcomes: Throughout the course of the grant, Henry Vilas Zoo (HVZ) developed a cohesive IMP that established empathy as a guiding framework for interpretive messaging and future exhibit development.

A key outcome of this project was significant internal capacity building. Staff across departments increased their familiarity with empathy practices and their ability to apply them within interpretive work. The project also strengthened the zoo's evaluation capacity, including staff and volunteer training in observational data collection and formative testing. The IMP development process incorporated input from cultural community partners and baseline audience research, positioning the zoo to design future interpretive elements that are both empathy-driven and community-informed.

Together, these efforts created a strong foundation for the implementation of empathy-infused interpretive elements and the long-term integration of empathy practices across the organization.

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

Success Story: *"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

AFRICAN LIONS

Updated: 5/2022

Wildlife Champions help HVZ save the world!

Zoos rely on the dedication of docent volunteers like you to spread empathy and accurate information to our community. Every time you help a guest connect, you help an animal by giving them one more informed conservation advocate. You are special. Thank you!

Remember your keys to successful empathy-building:

- Use names & pronouns
- Provide accurate information
- Model empathy
- Bring attention to the animal's perspective
- Tell a story

A basic guide to lion behaviors

SWIMMING TOGETHER

I'm feeling relaxed and awake. Capybaras live in social groups that guard each other closely from predators. Water provides a safe place to be as well as a place to have fun and relax.

LAYING DOWN

I'm feeling relaxed and safe. Capys take short naps all throughout the day, punctuated by swimming, eating and playing.

LOW GRADE GRUNTS AND WHISTLES and/or EAR WIGGLING

I feel happy and comfortable. Most often heard/seen when they're laying down/resting.

SNIFFING THE GROUND

I feel curious. Also this is my spot. Capybaras rely on scent for helping them explore the world, and urine to mark their territory.



Planting connections EMPATHY IN ACTION

WE ALL NEED TO REST

Like all cat species lions spend a lot of their time sleeping, they rest for 15 hours a day! You will often find Pelo or Shakura resting on their favorite rock in their enclosure.

WE ALL GET CHECK-UPS

Just like us, our lions get health care. And just like us, they might get a little nervous when it's time for a check-up. So we make sure they feel comfortable and safe for their vet checks by doing lots of training ahead of time complete with plenty of treats.

WE ALL LIKE FUN NEW THINGS

Our lions get enrichment every day! They each have favorite things they like to play with and enjoy new smells around their exhibit. Pelo often takes his toys into the small shelter in his enclosure.

WE ALL LIKE TO SHARE

Our lions love novel smells. Sometimes we will give cardboard boxes to our rhino, who often will pee on them. We take that stinky rhino box and give to the lions for a roaring good time. It may sound gross but this type of smell based enrichment is very fun for our lions, and a great way for our animals to enrich each other!

WE ALL NEED SPACE

Pelo marks his territory by peeing and rubbing up against things. You may notice him rubbing against the glass in the morning to mark his space.

ALL ABOUT LIONS

Panthera leo melanochaita

What do African lions look like?

Weight 330 to 550 lbs

Length 5.5 to 7 ft



Weight 265 to 395 lbs
Length 4-6ft

Avg Lifespan Wild 10-15yrs ----- Average Lifespan Managed Care 15-30yrs



SMOOTH HAIR AND MARVELOUS MANES

Large manes make males look bigger which may intimidate rivals, attract females and protect their throat from another lion's attack.



PERFECTLY PADDED PAWS

Soft foot pads and retractable claws allow lions to move quietly when approaching prey. Lions have great forebody strength which enables them to bring down and hold prey sometimes with just a swipe of their larger front paws.



NOT AS FAST AS SOME

With relatively small hearts and lungs, when hunting lions rely on stalking prey and a short chase, reaching a top speed of about 35 mph.

Where do they live?



African lions are typically found in savannas, plains, grasslands, dense bush and open woodlands where prey is abundant. They can also be found in smaller numbers in semi-desert and mountain habitats.

LIONS
EAT

4-9lbs

OF FOOD PER DAY



What do lions eat?

What are your favorite foods?

AT HVZ THEY ENJOY FOODS LIKE...



MEAT



MEATBALL TREATS



An African lion fact sheet developed as part of the Interpretive Messaging Plan (IMP), which established empathy as a guiding framework for interpretive messaging and visitor engagement.

ROADMAP to Empathy Project

Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, October 2021 – September 2023 (Round 1, Tier 1)

Project Summary: This project enhanced the ROADMAP (Reaching Our Audiences by Developing Mission Aligned Programs) framework to operationalize empathy best practices and increase capacity to develop and deliver effective empathy-based programming and experiences at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory (CPZC) and Denver Zoo (DZ), which originally developed the ROADMAP framework. Through this work, both organizations integrated empathy into program development processes, staff training, and interpretive strategies. The project also included the development of foundational tools and resources, including a Theory of Change and empathy-based outcome frameworks, to guide future program design and evaluation.

Achieved Outcomes: CPZC and DZ operationalized empathy best practices and increased their capacity to develop and deliver effective empathy-based experiences. A primary outcome of this project was the integration of the empathy-infused ROADMAP framework into ongoing organizational operations. Staff and volunteers reported increased confidence and ability to apply empathy-based strategies in program development and visitor interactions following targeted trainings and pilot implementation.

The project resulted in the development and testing of new tools and resources, including empathy-based training materials, program development guides, and evaluation tools. CPZC developed and implemented 14 programs using the enhanced ROADMAP process, including pilot empathy-based public talks.

A key contribution of this work was the creation of the ROADMAP to Empathy Theory of Change, which provides a structured framework for understanding how empathy-based experiences can support caring and conservation action.

While visitor-level outcomes were not fully assessed during the project period, evaluation findings demonstrated meaningful increases in staff knowledge, confidence, and use of empathy-based practices. Together, these outcomes established a sustainable, organization-wide approach to embedding empathy into program design and delivery.

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

Success Story: [Developing an empathy-based public talk was] *“so interesting - such a different approach than what we are used to. It made me really think about how I was talking about the animals and why, and I felt like it connected much more with the visitors.”*

COMO-ALIGNED

We want our programs to help participants connect to Como and our educational aims as an organization. There are many approaches to making your program experience Como Aligned, but we've identified the four approaches below as priorities.

To target this approach in a shorter program like a talk, you might:

MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS	TIME IN AND WITH NATURE	SCIENCE AND INQUIRY	EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share behind-the-scenes stories Highlight "insider info" Highlight WOW facts and figures Focus on real, Como stories Highlight and include visits from Como experts Incorporate Como's core messages (care, awe, interconnection) Ask participants to share or reflect on their previous Como experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observe live plants or animals together Include interactions with live plants or animals Share stories about experiences in or with nature (yours and participants') Include interactions with natural props or materials (brush, leaves, flowers, soil, substrate) Label sometimes unacknowledged natural settings as nature (neighborhoods, parks, backyards) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teach select science vocabulary Ask open ended questions (require more than yes/no) or questions with multiple correct answers Use science framing language (referring to tasks as "doing science" and people doing them as "scientists") Share multiple "right" answers to complex problems (ex. how to help wild giraffes) Use real world contexts and problems Develop or use scientific models or diagrams Incorporate math or computations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frame animals and plants as individuals with unique experiences Use animal (and plant) names and pronouns Assure animal welfare and plant care as a foundation for empathy Model, name, and praise desired empathic behaviors and caring actions Encourage observation and narrate behaviors to help participants better understand an animal's emotions and intentions Draw on similarities and differences between participants and the animal or plant Encourage participants to imagine themselves as an individual animal or plant and ask open-ended questions to support perspective taking Share short stories to give participants a glimpse of an individual animal or plant's life Encourage appropriate caring actions around our plants and animals like using a quiet voice or a gentle touch

The enhanced ROADMAP framework used by Como Park Zoo & Conservatory to guide empathy-based program development, staff practice, and visitor engagement.

Integrated Strategic Planning for Empathy Action

Como Park Zoo and Conservatory, April 2022 – May 2023 (Round 2, Tier 2)

Project Summary: Using an integrated strategic planning process, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory (CPZC) partnered with Canopy Strategic Partners to develop a comprehensive, organization-wide Empathy Action Plan in alignment with a new Education Strategic Plan. This work focused on embedding empathy into institutional strategy by aligning mission, guiding principles, and programmatic goals across departments. The integrated planning process engaged leadership, staff, and key stakeholders to ensure both vertical alignment (mission to operations) and horizontal alignment (across teams and functions), positioning empathy as a central driver of future conservation education and engagement efforts.

Achieved Outcomes: As a result of this project, Como Park Zoo and Conservatory developed an organization-wide strategic framework that integrates empathy across campus-wide education and engagement efforts, providing clear direction for future planning and decision-making. The process resulted in a new education mission: “Cultivating engaging experiences that spark curiosity, appreciation, and action for our natural world,” alongside a set of empathy-aligned pillars and guiding principles that serve as a foundation for evaluating and developing programs.

A key outcome of this work was strengthened organizational alignment, with staff across departments gaining a clearer understanding of how empathy practices connect to their roles and can be applied consistently across programs and visitor engagement. The planning process also supported cross-department collaboration and helped reestablish shared direction following disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This strategic framework serves as a living document, guiding departmental workplans and future program development while supporting the intentional integration of empathy across CPZC’s conservation education efforts.

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

Success Story: *“Since I view the mission of the zoo in general to be education focused not just the education department. . . . I would love to participate in incorporating the education mission into our relative programming. I am excited about these changes/discussions.” - Zookeeper*



Slide from Como Park Zoo & Conservatory’s Education Strategic Plan, highlighting core education goals that serve as a framework for integrating empathy into program design and engagement across the organization.

Designing Exhibits and Revising Visitor Experiences to Foster Empathy for Wildlife at Zoo Boise

Zoo Boise, April 2022 – September 2023 (Round 2, Tier 1)

Project Summary: This project produced empathy-driven concept designs for new exhibits in Phase I of Zoo Boise's master plan, including red panda, penguin, and snow leopard habitats, alongside interpretive guides for zoo chats and visitor experiences that foster empathy for wildlife.

In partnership with an evaluation consultant, Zoo Boise conducted guest surveys and animal behavior observations to inform design decisions and assess how exhibit features and programming influence empathy for wildlife.

The project also included staff and volunteer training, new hire onboarding resources, and engagement with a network of local educators and practitioners to strengthen the zoo's capacity to deliver empathy-based experiences.

Achieved Outcomes: This project resulted in the development of three empathy-driven exhibit concept designs and a comprehensive set of interpretive guides for zoo chats and visitor experiences grounded in empathy practices. A key outcome was the integration of evaluation into both exhibit planning and program development. Zoo Boise conducted extensive baseline and follow-up data collection, including guest surveys and animal behavior observations, which informed both design decisions and interpretive strategies. Findings demonstrated that visitor empathy is closely linked to opportunities to observe active animal behavior and engage meaningfully with exhibits.

The project also led to measurable improvements in staff and volunteer implementation of empathy-based practices. Through targeted training and evaluation, all participating staff and volunteer teams demonstrated the ability to incorporate empathy strategies into zoo chats and visitor experiences, including two public feeding encounters and four private animal experiences. Evaluation of updated programs showed statistically significant increases in visitor empathy and intent to take conservation action.

Additionally, the project strengthened organizational capacity by embedding empathy training into new hire onboarding, developing practical tools for frontline staff, and increasing collaboration between education and animal care teams. Together, these efforts established a model for integrating empathy into both physical exhibit design and live visitor experiences, supported by ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement.

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

Success Story: From survey taker Jaina: “When the summer evaluation started, I was surprised by how quickly the adult volunteers passed the rubric, showing that they were using empathy practices. I was impressed with the depth of their knowledge of animals, such as the sloth bear, and their interactions with the public, which were very welcoming and interactive. I think it was easy for adult volunteers because most had been volunteering at the zoo for several years. I could also see their passion when interacting with guests, which helped them implement empathy practices. I would give tips and pointers for implementing empathy practices and terms, and the volunteers took in the information willingly and implemented it right away. Especially during the sloth bear encounter, volunteers would greet guests by explaining the conservation actions and say goodbye to guests by thanking them for their donations to conservation. The volunteers also did an excellent job of answering questions regarding Paji's wellbeing and the choices she has in her habitat.”

ISOMETRIC VIEW

ZOOBOISE
Conservation • Education • Recreation

GLMVZOS

RED PANDA BLDG.

PROJECT NARRATIVE

Guests to Zoo Boise love the red pandas, and the layout of this new habitat brings guests into the center of their new home. Guests will experience red pandas in three large outdoor habitats and have views into an interior day room. The initial entry into the space brings guests under an overhead transfer with large glass views into Yards 1 and 2. The immersive experience will be able to house a breeding group and cubs, while still holding space for retired pandas or additional breeding groups. This will be one of the best red panda facilities in the country. The first phase of this project will utilize Yard 2 for a temporary sea eagle habitat with a small, conditioned holding building that can be repurposed into a cozy space for red pandas with glass viewing for guests. The proposed landscape bed within the internal space will allow shaded seating and an opportunity for landscaping and shade trees while still allowing access to the existing waterway and seasonal boat rides.

ELEVATION

ISSUED 11/17/2022
CONCEPT DESIGN PACKAGE BY
GLMV ARCHITECTURE

Concept renderings of Zoo Boise's new red panda exhibit, incorporating empathy-based design elements to strengthen visitor connection with wildlife.

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) developed the Inspiring Conservation through Empathy Model (ICE-M), a research-informed framework designed to guide empathy-based zoo design, programming, and visitor engagement. The model leverages community input, evaluation data, and iterative testing to identify and refine strategies for fostering empathy and conservation action among zoo visitors.

Through this project, IFZ engaged community members and stakeholders through a Community Advisory Board and implemented an iterative process to test and adapt the model within the local context. The project also included a feasibility study to assess the model's potential for broader application across zoos and aquariums.

Achieved Outcomes: The Idaho Falls Zoo successfully developed and piloted the ICE-M framework, demonstrating its potential as a structured, adaptable approach to integrating empathy practices into zoo experiences. A key outcome of this project was the organization's increased capacity to conduct evaluation and use data to inform program design. IFZ implemented large-scale data collection using established empathy measurement tools, generating baseline data and early evidence of increased empathy among visitors following animal encounters and engagement with zoo experiences.

The project engaged community members and expert stakeholders through a Community Advisory Board, collaborating on an educational plan and the development of Animal Tracks, an interactive, empathy-focused game. Two new exploration stations featuring small animals in naturalistic settings were created, alongside updated training for staff and volunteers to incorporate empathetic language and highlight animal individuality. These elements served as practical applications of the ICE-M framework and informed its ongoing refinement.

While full implementation of the model within the Adventure Island exhibit was delayed, early findings indicate that the ICE-M approach is feasible, adaptable, and promising in its ability to enhance empathy development and improve guest experience. These results will inform continued testing, refinement, and potential replication of the model in other zoo settings.

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

Success Story: Undergraduate interns were instrumental in the completion of the grant. In turn, this opportunity was highly valuable for all the interns and their future career paths. One shared, *“Not only has it given me great connections and valuable insight into the world of zoos and aquariums, it steered me in the right direction in my career... that clear direction is priceless.”*



One of the exploration station carts developed through the Idaho Falls Zoo ICE-M project to support hands-on, empathy-based learning.

A Model to Build Public Conservation Through Empathy in Adventure Island

Idaho Falls Zoo, January 2024 – December 2024 (Round 4, Tier 2)

Project Summary: This project advanced the implementation and refinement of the Inspiring Conservation through Empathy Model (ICE-M), building on prior work to apply the framework within the Islands exhibit (formerly Adventure Island) at the Idaho Falls Zoo. Using an iterative, data-informed process, the project focused on designing and evaluating empathy-based exhibit features, messaging, and visitor experiences. Continued engagement with a Community Advisory Board (CAB) and the use of ongoing evaluation data guided decision-making and supported further documentation of the ICE-M approach.

Achieved Outcomes: To develop effective and engaging signage, Idaho Falls Zoo collaborated with wildlife biologists, educators, and diverse community members, ensuring the final designs were both accessible and informative. Guest surveys and quick-glance memory tests shaped the messaging to be emotionally resonant and easily understood at a glance. The zoo incorporated interactive elements like tactile sliders, spinning cylinders, and physical prompts to deepen visitor engagement, as well as ball-machine-style exhibits simulating animal migration routes. QR codes were added to connect guests with in-depth online content about individual animals, which was shown to boost empathy in visitors. The final designs balance innovation with brand familiarity, and the zoo is excited to launch the new signage to foster stronger emotional connections between people and wildlife.

This project resulted in the continued development and application of the ICE-M framework, demonstrating its effectiveness as an iterative, data-driven approach to designing empathy-based exhibit experiences. Building on earlier pilot findings, multi-year evaluation data showed statistically significant increases in visitor empathy, knowledge, and conservation behaviors, strengthening evidence for the model's impact.

The project engaged community members and expert stakeholders through a Community Advisory Board, whose input informed exhibit design, educational planning, and messaging strategies. Guest feedback was also incorporated throughout the process, including testing and refinement of signage and interpretive content to ensure clarity, accessibility, and emotional resonance.

As part of exhibit development, IFZ designed and refined a range of empathy-based elements, including interpretive signage, interactive features, digital content such as the Animal Tracks experience, and immersive components like a VR experience. These elements were iteratively tested and adapted using evaluation findings.

Despite construction delays that prevented the full opening of the Islands exhibit during the project period, the ICE-M framework demonstrated flexibility and resilience. The model supported continued progress across multiple components, allowing design, evaluation, and content development to advance alongside evolving timelines. This project demonstrates the potential of ICE-M as a flexible, iterative approach to integrating empathy into exhibit design and visitor experiences.

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

Success Story: At the end of 2024, the project evaluator conducted an online survey of IFZ staff, CAB members, interns, and key partners to gather feedback about the project. Respondents reported positive feedback about the project. Specifically, one shared, *“I have appreciated the collaboration which has helped us come to conclusions and decisions based on multiple points of view rather than just my own.”*

Another commented, *“I really appreciate the work that has gone into the mission. And the graphics and design have been super cool.”*

Puzzle Wall Designs

Initial Puzzle Wall Design



Puzzle Wall Design After Guest Feedback



Example of iterative exhibit design through the Idaho Falls Zoo ICE-M project, with puzzle wall concepts refined using visitor feedback.

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