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The Interconnections of Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) Initiatives and Effective Empathy Practices

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WOODLAND
PARK ZOO

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Executive Summary

Various programs or initiatives at organizations in the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife®) Network have demonstrated that effective empathy practices and diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion initiatives are related. Organizations use *framing* to make their programs more relevant to their communities, recognize the importance of *modeling* behaviors to create meaningful change, *increase their knowledge* by actively listening to and including community in program development and appropriately sharing the knowledge with guests, and can *provide experiences* to those who may not be able to experience the zoo in the same way as others. As a community heavily focused on fostering empathy for animals, it can be easy to forget that our shared definition of empathy is heavily informed by research on human–to–human empathy. Zoos and aquariums must not only create experiences that foster empathy for animals, but look within ourselves to do the same for others in our local and global communities. Approaching all aspects of our work with an empathy lens allows us to truly accomplish our collective conservation missions. At its core, conservation is people–focused. This resource, created with guidance from the Network's DEAI Committee, highlights the relationship between effective empathy practices and DEAI initiatives by showcasing different projects from across the Network that embody that relationship. The committee hopes that this resource will not only provide tangible examples of empathy and DEAI in practice, but be used by the variety of practitioners in the Network and provide avenues of connection for resource users on DEAI topics.

Introduction

The ACE for Wildlife Network's vision is a "conservation-minded community, motivated by empathy for animals and the environment that sustains them." Through achieving our mission of "sharing knowledge, experiences, and data to drive conservation change" we can: foster empathy for wildlife, promote conservation missions, and motivate visitors to take conservation action. Increasing understanding, connection, and perspective taking are some of the key practices for fostering empathy for animals as well as components of developing empathy for people and successful diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) initiatives.

It takes all of us for Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited zoos and aquariums (henceforth zoos) to accomplish our collective conservation missions. Historically, there have been a variety of barriers in the zoo field that have made it difficult for those from marginalized and traditionally excluded communities to visit, volunteer with, or work at our organizations. Some of these barriers include:

1. **Cost of a visit:** Tickets may be priced out of budget for individuals or families. The estimated average cost of a single adult ticket to an ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organization in June 2025 is $19.88. Because many organizations now utilize dynamic pricing or offer discounts for pre-purchasing tickets online, the actual average of a ticket purchased at the gate may be higher.

2. **Community relevancy[1] and perceptions of belonging:** As a result of systemic racism, conservation – and conservationists – have often excluded or marginalized Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) communities.[2] In zoos and aquariums, this often means that those in BIPOC communities may not see themselves or their lived experiences represented in the people or messages there. As a result, BIPOC individuals may have perceptions that zoo spaces, events, or programs are ""just not for them."[3]

3. **Geographic and architectural inaccessibility:** The geographic location of the organization can be a barrier to those without access to public or personal transportation. Architecturally, while there have been significant improvements recently to increase the accessibility of zoos, many exhibit areas or buildings were not constructed with accessibility in mind (e.g., exhibit walls being too high – or lacking windows – for a wheelchair user to see into an animal's habitat).

4. **High cost of entry into the field:** Many job opportunities for early career professionals in zoos are temporary, unpaid, or low-paying. This can make it difficult for individuals without additional financial or family support, or the ability to relocate for a temporary position, to get the experience necessary for full-time zoo positions or staying in the field for a prolonged period of time.

5. History of racism in zoos: Less than 120 years ago, the New York Zoological Gardens exhibited Ota Benga, a Congolese man, alongside great apes at the Bronx Zoo. At the time, the zoo justified his captivity and treatment in the name of science, stating the since disproven theory that African "pygmies" were the missing link between humans and apes. While perhaps the most infamous example in the United States, it is certainly not the only example of racist human zoos in the Western world.[4] This racist history has left a legacy of pain and distrust that zoos must work to overcome and is directly related to systemic racism in the field of conservation as a whole.[5]

As a result of these barriers, among others, most leadership and staff at facilities accredited by the AZA are white and middle class,[6] lacking the diversity that may more accurately reflect the communities the organization hopes to serve. Because a large percentage of staff at AZA accredited facilities belong to one or more dominant identity groups,[7] biases often emerge in organizational structures, conservation messaging, and programs that perpetuate exclusionary practices.

However, despite these biases, many organizations have embarked on projects for years that would be considered DEAI initiatives today. Examples of these projects include having signs in multiple languages, obtaining Kulture City certification, providing rentable mobility devices, or offering discounted ticket days. While these efforts are undoubtedly DEAI initiatives, since they help to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for all, many were not framed as such before 2020. The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 catalyzed a national reckoning with systemic racism as demonstrations took place across the country calling for justice and a dismantling of oppressive systems.[8] Riding the momentum of the social movement, organizations across a variety of sectors published statements proclaiming their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and justice and/or recognizing their role in upholding systems of oppression. The AZA published their Diversity, Equity, Access and Inclusion Statement in 2020 that "recognize[s] the lasting impacts of the colonial history of the conservation and zoo and aquarium fields" and "acknowledge[s] that systemic racism is embedded in our structures, culture and organizations, and we are committed to positive and sustained change that dismantles these barriers."[9] They also implemented their Fifth Promise and DEAI–focused accreditation standard as an enforcement of this commitment. The original standard required institutions to "follow a written diversity, equity, access, and inclusion program. Programs must be proactive and transparent, with measurable goals for assessing progress, and must have a paid staff member(s) or committee responsible for oversight."[10] As a result, DEAI–focused efforts have become more prominent in the zoo field more broadly and within the ACE for Wildlife Network. However, pressure from the second Trump administration has caused many organizations, including AZA, to soften or get rid of standards and statements supporting or enforcing DEAI initiatives. The current accreditation standard for AZA requires accredited organizations to have a "written plan to create a welcoming environment that is accessible to all and is embedded in the organizational culture."[11]

To promote an inclusive environment within the ACE for Wildlife Network and help those within it feel empowered to incorporate DEAI initiatives at their organizations, the DEAI Committee was

formally established in 2024 after 1.5 years of being a working group. As the Network's collective knowledge of empathy practices and fostering empathy for wildlife has expanded, so have individual and organizational DEAI efforts. It is becoming increasingly clear that to successfully foster empathy for animals to achieve our conservation missions, we must not only recognize the intersectionality of empathy practices and DEAI initiatives, but also approach DEAI initiatives with a curious, empathetic lens to learn more about how zoos can include everyone in conservation actions. To date, the DEAI Committee has produced a variety of resources in an effort to support this, but it is clear that an explicit connection between empathy practices and DEAI initiatives needs to be made. Establishing that connection, and highlighting examples in the ACE for Wildlife Network that showcase it, is the purpose of this resource.

The DEAI Committee has created this resource for the ACE for Wildlife Network to provide Members and Affiliates with:

1 **Resources that explore and navigate the intersections of empathy and DEAI,**

2 **Tangible examples of empathy and DEAI in practice,**

3 **A resource that can be used by a variety of practitioners, and**

4 **Avenues of connection for document users on DEAI related topics.**

This resource is divided into three sections. *Empathy Practices & DEAI* provides a brief background to empathy, empathy practices, and DEAI terminology. This section also establishes the connection between empathy practices, fostering empathy for wildlife, and applying an empathy lens to DEAI initiatives. *Empathy & DEAI in the ACE for Wildlife Network* showcases resources created, or initiatives led, by Network Members and Affiliates that exemplify the relationship between empathy and DEAI work. The *Summary* includes ideas for future directions the Network and/or DEAI Committee could take to support Network initiatives that benefit from the intersection of empathy practices and DEAI efforts.

Empathy Practices & DEAI

Introduction to Empathy

Empathy is a complex emotion that at its core entails an understanding of shared feelings.[12] The ACE for Wildlife Network defines empathy as "a stimulated emotional state that relies on the ability to perceive, understand, and care about the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal."[13] This definition demonstrates that empathy is an emotion that can be directed towards humans and non-human animals alike, which is supported by recent research that found "human-directed empathy and nature relatedness to be positive predictors of animal-directed empathy in an adult sample."[14] The ACE for Wildlife Network believes that by fostering empathy for wildlife in guests that visit our organizations, we can all further our collective conservation missions. For more information about why the ACE for Wildlife Network believes that empathy can inspire positive environmental action, please check out our Introduction to Empathy resource.

To create experiences that foster empathy for wildlife, those in the ACE for Wildlife Network rely on the following common effective empathy practices.[15] Practices with a * next to them are ones that we as a committee believe are also relevant to DEAI initiatives.

*Framing: As defined by The Frameworks Institute, framing is "the choices we make in what we say and how we say it." It also encompasses the environment in which behavior and interactions are taking place. Framing can equally support empathy development or lead to objectification and disconnection.

*Modeling: This is acting in ways that we ask our visitors to and supporting caregivers as role models for the children they are with. Examples of modeling include consistent messaging throughout an organization, rewarding positive behavior, and acting as role models (individually and as an organization) for our guests for appropriate behaviors around animals, other people, and conservation actions.

*Increasing knowledge: Providing learning opportunities for visitors, and staff, on various topics helps increase collective knowledge and understanding. However, not all knowledge is created equal. Sharing information that helps people understand how and why someone, or an animal, experiences the world the way they do can help foster empathy.

*Providing experiences: Attitudes and beliefs are stronger when they are developed through direct experiences.[16] Zoos and aquariums can provide a variety of experiences that foster empathy and connection, ranging from exhibit design, events and programs hosted or delivered, and animal encounters.

Practice: This entails providing opportunities for zoo-goers to practice their empathy skills through experiences like feeding or interacting with animals, talking with staff or volunteers about animal needs, or role playing as animals or their care takers.

Activating imagination: Perspective taking is a core piece of empathy development. We can activate the imagination of our guests through storytelling and with questions that prompt empathetic reasoning, such as "what do you think it's like when *[insert animal here]* experiences that?".

"Practice" and "Activating Imagination" are left out of the ***Empathy & DEAI in the ACE for Wildlife Network*** section of this resource because we were unaware of examples in the Network that demonstrated the relationship that practice had to empathy and DEAI initiatives in a compelling manner. If you have examples or information that could change this, reach out to empathy@zoo.org.

DEAI initiatives rely on a philosophy and culture of acknowledging, embracing, supporting, and accepting those of all racial, sexual, gender, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (among other identifiers),[17] and then creating environments that are respectful, welcoming, and affirming of all individuals.[18] In 2024, we created definitions for the terms diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion for the ACE for Wildlife Network.[19] These definitions are intended to both inform the Network and the work that we do and to serve as launchpads for individuals and organizations in our Network as they move through their own personal and/or organizational DEAI journey(s). They are as follows:

Diversity: Diversity is the broad range of characteristics that differentiate us within the human experience. These characteristics intersect differently in various areas of our lives and environments.

Equity: Equity is ensuring either fairness or justice in services, opportunities, and access for all individuals depending on their needs. This means identifying and eliminating barriers by challenging exclusionary systems and supporting impacted groups.

Accessibility: Accessibility is the degree to which we create environments, products, facilities, or services that accommodate a variety of needs. This allows for effective and meaningful forms of engagement by those of varying abilities.

Inclusion: Inclusion is the act of creating an environment that fosters a sense of belonging and ensures that all individuals are invited to be their most authentic selves.

Through various projects in the ACE for Wildlife Network, we can see the intersections of effective empathy practices and the cultivation of spaces, projects, and programs that promote and sustain diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. In the next section, by focusing on each specific effective empathy practice, we will demonstrate how individuals and organizations have applied effective empathy practices to their work and in doing so, expanded their DEAI efforts. Each practice can be applied at an individual and/or an organizational level. It is important to remember that organizations are made up of individuals and the collective action of individuals shapes an organization's culture. While any of the effective empathy practices can be effective when intentionally utilized by a singular individual, the potential impact significantly increases with the consistency that comes from a collective, organizational commitment to embedding empathy and DEAI frameworks into their culture.

Empathy & DEAI in the ACE for Wildlife Network

Framing

> **Definition:** As defined by The Frameworks Institute, framing is "the choices we make in what we say and how we say it." It also encompasses the environment in which behavior and interactions are taking place. Framing can equally support empathy development or lead to objectification and disconnection.

Framing is perhaps the most ubiquitous effective empathy practice, as it can apply to nearly every aspect of the zoo experience – for guests, volunteers, and staff. Framing encompasses everything from verbal, non-verbal, and written language to the built environment and the structures within it. For example, framing can apply to the way a volunteer talks to guests about the bears in the habitat behind them, and it can also apply to the biofacts they have on the interpretive cart in front of them. They may be using empathy–informed language to talk about the living animals at the zoo, but if the biofacts they are using are damaged or in poor condition, or are being used as props or sensationalistic items, guests receive conflicting messages about the animal and our messages of industry care and animal wellbeing. However, if the biofacts on the table are well–cared for, in good condition, and used in a way that supports the educational goals of the interpretive station, the verbal and situational framing aligns, allowing guests to receive consistent explicit or subliminal messages throughout the interaction.

Framing can also apply to DEAI focused work. For example, when creating animal ambassador programming that focused on North American porcupines, staff at the Dakota Zoo wanted to ground their programming in a sense of place. To quote Brent Weston, the Education and Volunteer Coordinator at Dakota Zoo, "When you are building a program with a local animal, you have to think about the identity of your area." Truly understanding the identity of one's area helps a conservation organization craft their messages and conservation asks in ways that are most likely to resonate with visitors. For the Dakota Zoo, this meant not only understanding how the geography and ecology of North Dakota impacts present North American porcupine populations, but also how the animal is perceived by various communities in the state. North Dakota has the 6th highest percentage of Native American residents in the United States,[20] so it was important to the zoo to incorporate the importance of the animal to local Indigenous cultures in their revised animal ambassador programs and conservation messages. North American porcupines play an important role in Lakota stories such as How Porcupine Got His Quills.[21] Staff also considered the negative perceptions many North Dakotans have about the animal as well. Hunting culture is strong in North Dakota, with over 53,000 small and general game permits issued in 2024.[22] For many North Dakotans, the only time they encounter a porcupine is after the animal has had a conflict with a hunting dog, leaving the dog with painful quills embedded in their face.

By considering the value of the animal to various communities within North Dakota, staff are able to frame their animal ambassador experiences in more impactful ways. The intentional use of

arboreal-inspired program structures helps to emphasize to guests the importance of forests to North American porcupines. By talking about the cultural importance of the North American porcupine to the Lakota people, who have called the Northern Great Plains home since time immemorial, staff at Dakota Zoo emphasize the deep connections between animals and people in North Dakota and give voice to stories once actively oppressed by colonization. In considering negative perceptions of the animal, staff are able to create more well-rounded conservation messages. This shift helps ensure that those in the audience who many dislike the animal can both feel heard and welcomed into the conservation conversation. Collectively, this work demonstrates that framing can be used to both foster empathy for wildlife and support work that fosters inclusion.

You can learn more about this project from Brent Weston's presentation at the [2025 Empathy Summit here](). At the time of publishing this resource, Dakota Zoo is continuing to expand on this work and hopes to expand their programming off-grounds to include communities within the nearby Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Learnings from the ongoing project will be posted in our Resource Library as they develop, not in this document.

Modeling

> **Definition:** *This is acting in ways that we ask our visitors to and supporting caregivers as role models for the children they are with. Examples of modeling include consistent messaging throughout an organization, rewarding positive behavior, and acting as role models (individually and as an organization) for our guests for appropriate behaviors around animals, other people, and conservation actions.*

Zoo and aquarium staff can act as empathetic role models for our guests by modeling the appropriate or desired behaviors towards other animals. We can also act as role models for how to treat and think about other people. As we continue to recognize our interconnectedness with the natural world and draw parallels between human and ecological diversity, it may come as no surprise that many behaviors we can model to foster empathy for animals and people are often the same. For organizations, departments, or individuals that focus heavily on early-childhood programming, modeling is a common effective empathy practice in interactions with young learners. Staff at the Lake Superior Zoo came to recognize the importance of modeling through an early-childhood educator community of practice.

For seven months, individuals within the community of practice "explored empathy through engagement with Indigenous peoples and perspectives. [They] sought to take a Two Worlds Approach, which acknowledges the differences between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and avoids knowledge domination and assimilation."[23] Two of the grounding concepts used by the community of practice explicitly recognize the importance of modeling in fostering empathy for animals and people; that empathy is the way of life of the teacher, and that we can honor all relatives through modeling empathy as opposed to formal teaching. A focus on modeling helped practitioners remember that children may need guidance, support, and facilitated opportunities to comfortably connect with nature, and that it is the role of the teacher

to support them in their journeys. This is demonstrated in the following passage, "Together we can learn the land's history, asking: who has played here, learned here, breathed here, grown here? What has happened: for them, the forest, and you?....We model in every moment, whether we like it or not. We can and should model empathy in many different ways, always striving to meet the children where they are at. Hopefully, by watching us, children learn that empathy and emotions are shared by all of our relatives: it's everyone's job to contribute to the empathy reciprocity cycle."[24] You can learn more about Lake Superior Zoo's community of practice and its impacts on their approaches to empathy programming and the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives through their [community of practice model and narrative and Advancing Empathy Grant webinar, both linked here](#).

Another example of modeling's connection to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion initiatives is the wearing of pronoun pins, the inclusion of pronouns in email signatures, and the inclusion of pronouns as part of a person's verbal introduction of themselves. This movement has spread across many industries, including the zoo and aquarium field, in the past five years as more people have come to recognize human gender diversity and the importance of gender inclusion. Knowing, and then using, someone's preferred pronouns helps avoid the emotional and mental harm that can come from misgendering an individual, especially if they identify with a marginalized gender identity that faces additional forms of discrimination and social isolation.[25] The sharing of personal, preferred pronouns, especially by cisgender individuals, is important for multiple reasons. Gender is a social construct and cisgender individuals hold dominant social power in Western society because they do not deviate from perceived gender norms.[26] Thus, when members of a dominant social group begin engaging in behaviors such as sharing their preferred pronouns, a behavior that may traditionally spotlight those not in the dominant social group, they normalize "behaviors that prioritize inclusivity and dignity for everyone."[27] In many spaces (ACE for Wildlife Network spaces included), the sharing of preferred pronouns has now become a sort of social norm. It is important to note that modeling this behavior should come from a place of genuine respect and allyship and be an introductory action someone does to be in solidarity with LGBTQIA2S+ communities.

Increasing Knowledge

> **Definition:** *To do this we engage visitors, and staff, on various topics and in interesting ways to grow collective knowledge and understanding. However, not all knowledge is created equal. Sharing information that helps people understand how and why someone, or an animal, experiences the world the way they do can help foster empathy. This can of course come through a list of facts, but more often it comes through stories.*

Coupled with emotions, increasing knowledge is often one of the first steps to action. Increasing knowledge is incredibly relevant before embarking on DEAI related work. Without taking time to learn and grow understanding, organizations and/or individuals risk unintentionally perpetuating cycles of harm experienced by marginalized groups and/or inadequately meeting the needs of a community. The work done by Dakota Zoo featured in the Framing section is a great example of how individuals or an organization can increase their knowledge about their surrounding

communities. There are many ways individuals and organizations may increase their knowledge of the historic and current dynamics in their communities that have led to various systemic inequities. In an effort to learn about and better meet community needs, the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM) sought to create an informed and collaborative community engagement strategy. To do so, they created an Empathy Program Advisory Committee that reflected the diversity of their community. All community members on the committee led or served on youth-serving organizations in Milwaukee, including Milwaukee Public Schools, Hmong American Friendship Association, Indian Community School, La Causa Inc., and more. The advisory committee consisted solely of youth-serving organizations because of ZSM's focus on youth programming. In conversations with the committee, ZSM staff gained a better understanding of how they could meet community needs and how communities wished to engage with the zoo. It became clear that communities needed resources in multiple languages, wanted the zoo to provide opportunities for the youth to explore career opportunities, and wanted to emphasize meaningful and intentional connections between their organization and the zoo. This feedback meant identifying places where partnership not only made sense, but also spaces where the communities didn't feel it was appropriate, or necessary, for the zoo to be involved.

After increasing their knowledge and understanding of how they can better serve the communities in Milwaukee, the ZSM was able to increase their community engagement from approximately 1,800 people in 2022 to over 6,500 in 2023. They did this through intentional partnership with 57 community partners in the greater Milwaukee area, including other zoos and aquariums, local conservation organizations, and youth-serving organizations. They were also able to bring back their home school programming in ways that better addressed the needs of their homeschooling audience, expand their World Languages Day from one to eight schools reached, and hosted their first Black Birders Week event with Nearby Nature. To learn more about their first time hosting a Black Birders Week event, check out this Project Community feature on local Milwaukee news. The zoo continues to host Black Birders Week events and in 2025, led a guided birding tour for 25 students.[28] The Zoological Society of Milwaukee has continued to expand their community partnerships and now partners with the BIPOC Birding Club of Wisconsin as well.

The impact of the ZSM's intentional, community-focused approach to increasing their knowledge and understanding of community needs is clearly demonstrated in their increased community reach following the establishment of their Empathy Program Advisory Committee. Whether it was establishing new programs, such as Black Birders Week events, or revising existing ones like their homeschooling programs, the Zoological Society of Milwaukee expanded the number of community members reached by ~260%. By not assuming community needs and instead approaching community engagement from a growth mindset and interest in increasing knowledge, they have been able to share their conservation mission to a wider audience and do so in relevant, responsive, and respectful ways. To learn more about their approach to community engagement, you can watch Isabelle Bieser and Shanna Hillard present about this project as a part of their Advancing Empathy Grant webinar here.

Providing Experiences

> **Definition:** *Attitudes and beliefs are stronger when they are developed through direct experiences. Zoos and aquariums can provide a variety of experiences that foster empathy and connection, ranging from exhibit design, events and programs hosted or delivered, and animal encounters.*

Direct experiences can drastically influence the ways an individual experiences and sees the world and their role within it. For example, it's one thing to recognize and know about the importance of creating spaces that are accessible for wheelchair users; it's another to experience moving through a space as or with a wheelchair user. Zoos and aquariums can provide a variety of experiences that foster empathy and connection and those experiences can be for staff and volunteers, or visitors. This section will examine two projects at Partner Organizations that demonstrate how providing experiences can be both an effective empathy practice and related to DEAI initiatives; one focuses on experiences provided to staff while the other focuses on experiences provided to visitors.

Northwest Trek Wildlife Park's land acknowledgement states that the entirety of the land the institution sits on is part of the traditional and present homelands of the Coast Salish people. To move beyond the land acknowledgement, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park began a partnership with the Nisqually Indian Tribe over three years ago. Through their Weaving the Basket Project, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and the Nisqually Indian Tribe has incorporated Tribal perspective, voice, and heritage into the existing culture at Northwest Trek Wildlife Park. One of the ways they did this was through their Cultural Connections Series. In this series, Nisqually Tribal members and elders were invited to Northwest Trek Wildlife Park to give presentations to park staff on subject matters that were of interest to them. These experiences helped to "counter the white washed history" that many staff were familiar with and broadened their perspectives of the history and current state of the area they work and live in. Additionally, through the paid fellowship position and opportunities like the summer youth employment program, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park is able to provide empathy-informed and empathy-fostering experiences to Nisqually Tribal Members of all ages as they learn about and care for the animals. To learn about their blossoming partnership with the Nisqually Indian Tribe, you can do so through an article published on Northwest Trek Wildlife Park's website and through their Advancing Empathy Grant webinar.

Wild Wonders, a program at Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens, utilizes providing experiences as an empathy building opportunity and as an opportunity to create inclusive experiences for attendees. Developed in partnership with Mayo Clinic Jacksonville, ElderSource, and the Alzheimer's Association, Wild Wonders is a partner-supported program for those experiencing memory impairment and a time of respite for their caregivers too. Financially hosted by the Mayo Clinic, each 90-minute program creates intentional, joyful, and accessible experiences tailored to the needs and abilities of participants and their caregivers. Like the Zoological Society of Milwaukee's community programming highlighted in the "increasing knowledge" section, Wild Wonders is a program built from information gathered through listening

to community needs as opposed to assuming community needs. Both staff and volunteers participate in workshop style training led by supporting partners in order to understand and connect with program participants prior to community engagement. Program experiences are cultivated through multisensory opportunities and memory invitations. By approaching the creation of this program with curiosity and empathy for program participants, the Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens was able to create meaningful experiences for those who may not be able to experience a trip to the zoo the same way as an average zoo-goer.

Summary

Programs like those highlighted in the previous section demonstrate the intersectionality of effective empathy practices and DEAI initiatives. Organizations can use *framing* to make their programs more relevant to their communities, recognize the importance of *modeling* behaviors to create meaningful change, *increase their knowledge* by actively listening to and including community in program development and appropriately sharing the knowledge with guests, and *provide experiences* to those who may not be able to experience the zoo in the same way as others. As a Network heavily focused on fostering empathy for animals, it can be easy to forget that our definition of empathy is heavily influenced by research on human-to-human empathy. We must not only create experiences that foster empathy for animals but look within ourselves to do the same for others in our local and global communities. Approaching all aspects of our work with an empathy lens, whether that's animal care or guest experiences, allows us to truly accomplish our collective conservation missions. At its core, conservation is inherently a people-focused field. Without identifying, and then acting, on the milieu of ways that zoos and aquariums can help more communities and perspectives feel welcome, validated, and included in their work, we will only continue to perpetuate the misconception that only certain people can be conservationists.

There are multiple other projects that we did not have the space to deep-dive in this document from across the ACE for Wildlife Network that have demonstrated the connection between empathy and DEAI initiatives. They are organized alphabetically by project/program name below:

- [Bridging the gap: The importance of considering cultural factors when teaching empathy for animals, Minnesota Zoo](#)

- [Building community-relevant empathy for wildlife (CREW) infrastructure, Zoological Society of Milwaukee](#)

- [Considering cultural factors when teaching empathy for animals online, Minnesota Zoo](#)

- [Guidance for Depicting Animals with Disabilities, Western Washington University and collaborators](#)

- [Increasing positive perception of disability through depictions of animals with disabilities, Western Washington University and collaborators](#)

- [Nonspeaking cues for empathy with animals: Broadening our idea of what empathy looks like, Minnesota Zoo](#)

- [Volunteer Inclusion Guide, Woodland Park Zoo](#)

- [Wildlife trafficking and biofact literature scan for Minnesota Zoo, Inform Evaluation & Research](#)

As the ACE for Wildlife Network continues to expand its areas of interest, it's important that efforts to answer pressing conservation challenges are intersectional. For example, we cannot

effectively answer the question of how effective empathy practices can be used in conservation messages surrounding invasive species without considering how much of the language we use to discuss invasive species parallels anti-immigration or nationalist rhetoric. Similarly, we cannot truly apply an empathy lens to challenging guest conversations with stigmatized species without understanding the social and/or cultural systems that may have led to a species being stigmatized. The DEAI Committee looks forward to seeing how the ACE for Wildlife Network continues to progress in our empathy-informed conservation efforts and learning how we can best support the Network throughout the process.

The committee would greatly appreciate any feedback you have regarding this resource and how we may make future resources more applicable. If you would like to leave anonymous feedback on your experience with this document, you can always do so here. The committee will update this document annually as needed based on feedback or changes to any of the projects highlighted. Additionally, the committee can be reached through a member of the Advancing Empathy Team at Woodland Park Zoo through empathy@zoo.org.

Appendix

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