



ADVANCING CONSERVATION THROUGH
EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE®



2025

ADVANCING EMPATHY YEAR IN REVIEW



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ADVANCING CONSERVATION THROUGH
EMPATHY FOR WILDLIFE®

2025 was a turning point for the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife®) Network. We started the year strong with our largest in-person Empathy Summit in Seattle to date, a new literature review that demonstrated the efficacy of fostering empathy for wildlife for conservation change, and the launch of the Empathy Measurement in Zoos and Aquariums Project. The momentum carried throughout the year in outputs like the new Empathy Champions leadership program, the Most Valuable Resource and Empathy Excellence Awards, the onset of a strategic planning process with Canopy Strategic Partners, and overflowing empathy sessions at this year's Association of Zoos and Aquariums Annual Conference. This fall, we also welcomed two new Partner Organizations and the 1000th person into the Network!

As the Network continues to grow, we've been working to find ways we can succinctly share our collective accomplishments and provide snapshots of our progress. Thus, we welcome you to our first (of hopefully many) Advancing Empathy Year in Review. This report shares a few of our major successes, impactful people and projects from the year, and rising topics on the forefront of empathy and conservation change. These achievements are a direct reflection of all of you – the passionate Members and Affiliates that make this work possible!

With endless gratitude,

Emily Bernhardt

Empathy Network Specialist

Sarah Panciroli

Advancing Empathy Coordinator

Marta Burnet

Director of Advancing Empathy

\$20,000

AWARDED IN CONFERENCE SCHOLARSHIPS



29

Partner Organizations

1,000+

INDIVIDUALS

25

events hosted

twenty eight

new committee representatives

EVENT ATTENDEES

602

30



new resources created

SIX

NEW EMPATHY
TRAINING VIDEOS
CREATED WITH
ENGLISH & SPANISH
SUBTITLES

500+ ATTENDEES
ACROSS

NINE

CULMINATING GRANT
PRESENTATIONS
REPRESENTING **20**
FUNDED PROJECTS

EIGHTY

funded grant projects to date

4

GRANTEE
SITE
VISITS

grant toolkits
published -

5

7 total
project
types
covered

eighteen

projects launched in 2025 with
an investment of \$3.3 million

\$8 million

IN PARTNER GRANT FUNDING TO DATE

New grant funding expansion:

SEVEN

*new grant recipients in six states
expanding our reach to 13 states*

These awards are pending public announcement and are not included in the totals above.



ADVANCING
EMPATHY
GRANT
PROGRAM

As the ACE for Wildlife Network continues to evolve, the Advancing Empathy (AE) Grant Program remains a distinct but aligned pathway for deepening empathy-based programs and practices across the zoo and aquarium field. From the first grants awarded in 2019 to today, grant-funded projects have strengthened capacity across the sector and generated resources others throughout the Network can replicate or adapt.

In 2025, the program expanded eligibility for the first time beyond the original seven-state region, allowing recently added ACE for Wildlife Network Partner Organizations to apply, broadening the geographic footprint of grant-funded work. While only invited organizations can apply for and receive AE funding, all Network Members and Affiliates benefit from the output of these projects.

Grant-funded efforts often operate as pilots that test ideas for new approaches to empathy, new entry points, or new partnerships. Each grantee shares an end-of-grant presentation, and deliverables, reports, and other resources are added to the ACE for Wildlife Network resource library, ensuring that lessons and tools developed through the grant program strengthen learning, capacity and impact across the full community. Key insights from these projects also inform our Grant Toolkits, which translate lessons learned across projects and rounds into practical guidance for others taking on similar work. Together, these resources ensure that tools and insights generated through the grant program continue to build learning, capacity and impact across the full community. The metrics to the left reflect the progress of the AE Grant Program itself in 2025 and are distinct from Network-wide participation metrics.

Sincerely,

Michele Kahrs

Empathy Grants Specialist

Marta Burnet

Director of Advancing Empathy

KNOWLEDGE & IMPACTS

Between new resources and community members, the ACE for Wildlife Network has grown significantly in our empathy knowledge and impact to the zoo and aquarium field. To address the need for practitioner focused resources, [we worked with animal care staff from around the Network to create the Empathy Infographic](#) that details how and why effective empathy practices can work to make information “sticky”. We also published two new literature reviews. [Comparing Empathy for Wildlife Across the Animal Kingdom](#) illustrates why empathy connections may differ across taxa while [Building Empathy for Wildlife in Zoos & Aquariums](#) demonstrates the strategies and research that can help organizations develop effective approaches to build empathy for wildlife for conservation outcomes. Additionally, multiple empathy-focused research papers were published by Network participants or Advancing Empathy team members, including:

- [Going with the Flow: Assessing how Zoos and Aquariums Communicate Information About Marine Animals Without Faces \(MAWFs\)](#)
- [Guidance for Depicting Animals with Disabilities](#)
- [Increasing Positive Perception of Disability Through Depictions of Animals with Disabilities](#)

Our community also saw massive changes in 2025.

Not only did we welcome two new Partner Organizations, but in October we welcomed our **1000th person** into the Network! The 2025 Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Annual Conference was a major moment for our community, with all empathy-focused sessions packed wall-to-wall with conference attendees. Conversations with panelists, or with Network Members and Affiliates at our exhibit hall booth, were no longer answering questions to justify why we’re doing what we’re doing. Instead, they were focused on how impactful the work has been to individuals or organizations, whether they’re already in the Network or not. To us, this signifies a huge shift in how the broader zoo and aquarium community views our work. **No longer are our efforts on the fringes of conservation work; they’re at the forefront.**



RECOGNIZING OUR COMMUNITY

There is no shortage of engagement and talent across our organizations in our Network. In 2025, we prioritized ways to recognize significant achievement of our Members and Affiliates through two new initiatives: **Empathy Photo Competition** and **Empathy Excellence Awards**.

Empathy Photo Contest

In 2024, the ACE for Wildlife Network launched our first-ever Empathy Photo Contest to capture what empathy in action looks like across our organizations. The contest showcases the unique ways our Members and Affiliates observe empathy between animals and people and highlights how photography and storytelling can advance conservation. Participants submitted everything from intimate animal portraits to behavior-focused images and shots that inspire connection and inclusion across a wide range of taxa. We announced the inaugural winners at our 2025 Empathy Summit, which you can [view here](#).

This competition has strengthened our sense of community by offering a glimpse into how people across the Network see wildlife through their own empathy-centered lens. We have also used these incredible photos in the new empathy training videos, program materials, and other content to reflect the diversity of animals represented across the Network. Now in our second year, participation has nearly doubled, and while winners have not yet been selected, the enthusiasm for this program continues to grow.

Empathy Excellence Awards

To further disseminate empathy practices across the AZA and beyond, we have expanded participation in empathy work while continuing to elevate the reputation of empathy practices.

To support that future, the Network has begun to recognize the outstanding work underway by awarding Empathy Excellence Awards to AZA-accredited organizations or other conservation-based organizations who have implemented innovative and impactful projects that help drive conservation change through fostering empathy for animals. This program sought to recognize outstanding projects utilizing empathy for wildlife practices and spread awareness of impactful projects to other organizations. We recognized Empathy Excellence in the following three categories:

1. **Empathy projects within one department**
2. **Multi-departmental empathy project at a small zoo**
3. **Outstanding achievement for multi-departmental empathy project at a large zoo**

We look forward to the continuation of this program and the announcement of our new recipients at the 2027 in-person Summit.

2025 AWARD WINNERS

Outstanding achievement for empathy projects within one department:

Minnesota Zoo's Bringing Empathy for Animals to Traditionally Underserved Audiences

This program designed and implemented ambassador animal education programs for audiences with economic, geographic, or health-related barriers to coming to the Zoo. Program structure and curriculum design were based on best practices for implementing culturally responsive programs as well as empathy for animals. During the grant period over 120 ambassador animal programs offsite and virtually were provided to the targeted populations.



Outstanding achievement for multi-departmental empathy project at a small zoo:

Henry Vilas Zoo's Interpretive Master Plan Focused on Empathy, Inclusivity, and Individual Animal Connection

Henry Vilas Zoo's Interpretive Master Plan Focused on Empathy, Inclusivity, and Individual Animal Connection where they developed a cohesive Interpretive Master Plan and their work resulted in the enhancement of nearly 80% of the zoo's interpretive elements, through the installation of new signage, murals, and digital media. A pivotal feature of these elements is the incorporation of individualized animal information and narratives. By conveying unique traits and compelling storylines that foster empathetic connections, they have ingrained empathy as an integral component of all messages in the zoo.



Outstanding achievement for multi-departmental empathy project at a large zoo:

Zoological Society of Milwaukee's Infusing Empathy into Biofacts Programs

Through this program, the Zoological Society of Milwaukee formalized their new BioFacts program, which entailed creating a biofacts interpretive guide video series; and creating a biofacts maintenance guide video series. These videos are now available worldwide on YouTube to assist other organizations in their biofact practices.



2025 AREAS OF INTEREST & *TRAJECTORY FOR 2026*

Our Members and Affiliates are continuously finding new perspectives, ways to build upon previous work, and grow their skills as leaders in fostering empathy for wildlife. In 2025, we focused on empathy's connection in everything from storytelling to coexisting with wildlife to bridging with those who disagree with you on a fundamental issue. Of course, while we have explored empathy's connection to new topics, we are always focused on empathy's connection to topics at the core of our work: **increasing animal wellbeing and perceptions of wellbeing, making evaluation-informed decisions, and inspiring conservation action.**

In 2026, we expect to continue our collective explorations of how empathy intersects and influences other bubbling topics in the conservation field. Thanks to conversations with many of you, or your responses to our various Network surveys, we already have an inkling of some of what we will continue or begin exploring in 2026 including:

- **Effectively fostering empathy for plants**
- **Using empathy to maximize the impact of summer camp programming**
- **When can empathy go too far?**
- **Increasing organizational and leadership investment in empathy initiatives, and**
- **Using empathy to navigate complex conservation topics**

If any of those topics excite you and you have work related to the topic that you'd like to share with this community, you can access our 2026 Learning Group planning information [here](#). Otherwise, we always want to hear about the fun and innovative projects people are working on. Please reach out to us at empathy@zoo.org and tell us about your cool projects! We're happy to work with you to create a place to showcase them.

In addition to exploring exciting empathy-related topics, we will be **embarking on pivotal projects throughout 2026 to make our Network a stronger and more sustainable community of practice.** We have just begun working on a Network strategic plan in collaboration with Canopy Strategic Partners and the Steering Committee. This plan will guide us in our longer-term work beyond 2027. Soon, we will also be working with a curriculum developer to transform the Network's extensive material into manageable, structured learning pathways and create engaging workshops for staff and volunteers working at zoos, aquariums and other conservation-focused organizations. We hope that this initiative addresses feedback we've heard from across our Network as an offering that **helps legitimize our knowledge and work, builds confidence in our community, provides professional development opportunities, and increases collective influence and leadership opportunities.** Lastly, but certainly not least, we will continue our collaboration with Team Soapbox to **create a resource that folks can use to communicate the importance of this work to organizational leadership or their fellow conservation leaders.** At various points in each of these projects, there will be opportunities for Members and Affiliates to contribute their perspectives. Keep a lookout in our monthly Empathy Matters and on our discussion board for opportunities to get involved in these exciting projects!

THANK YOU!

Thank you to all of our 2025 committee representatives and chairs for all of their hard work and dedication to making our community of practice a better place!

Communications Committee

Co-chair: Delanie Jellison, Santa Barbara Zoo

Co-chair: Natalie Stier, Utah's Hogle Zoo. Transferring to the Steering Committee in 2026.

Brent Weston, Dakota Zoo

Cher Vatalaro, Lehigh Valley Zoo

Leanne Schuh, Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center

Liz Hines, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

Conservation Action Committee

Co-chair: Erica Carnes, Blank Park Zoo

Co-chair: Kelsey Raffel, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Bethanie West, Idaho Falls Zoo

Brooke Tucker, ZooMontana

Toby Seegert, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

DEAI Committee

Chair: Crystal Fox, Lake Superior Zoo

Abigail Flores, Racine Zoo

Alejandra Medina, Minnesota Zoo

Julie Pickard, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Kirinne Slaughter, Visitor Studies Association

Sharon Spencer, Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens

Membership Committee

Co-chair: Autumn Russell, Akron Zoo

Co-chair: Isabelle Bieser, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Chris Berg, Shedd Aquarium. Term ended in December.

Heather Harelson Nutick, Conservation Society of California

Oakland Zoo. Term ended in December.

Steering Committee

Interim co-chair: Aszya Summers, Lincoln Park Zoo. Rotated off in May.

Co-chair: Liz Gilles, Minnesota Zoo

Co-chair: Shana Kent, Alaska Sealife Center

Austin Reich, Zoo Boise

Courtney Cordova, Henry Vilas Zoo

Hannah Tilden, Woodland Park Zoo. Term ended in December.

Strategic Learning Committee

Chair: Jessica Schellhorn, Blank Park Zoo

Cameron Whitley, Western Washington University

Dani Ford, ZooMontana

Jennifer Gauble, Saint Louis Zoo

Monica Digre, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. Rotated off in August.