



# Words That Matter

## Exploring the Language We Use in Zoos and Aquariums

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# Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife

## Network Background

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In 2019, Woodland Park Zoo founded the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (ACE for Wildlife®) Network. This Network facilitates the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and data to drive conservation change through fostering empathy for animals and the environments that sustain them. Today, the Network is a global community of more than 1,000 educators, keepers, communicators, and leaders who are using empathy practices to advance conservation action, learning as we go.

We use empathy to inspire our peers and the communities we serve to join us in taking conservation action, build and utilize new tools and skills, and evaluate our practices by leveraging research, field-testing, and on-the-ground experiences.

## Words That Matter Background

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Within the Network, we understand that zoos and aquariums can have a powerful impact on their guests, and the language that we use to talk about our animals and how we care for them can play an important role in shaping guest perceptions about animal wellbeing. With this sentiment in mind, professionals across the ACE for Wildlife Network have collaborated to create our version of a traditional Words that Matter document.

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide alternatives for some traditionally used words in the zoo lexicon that have become outdated or do not fully express the thoughtfulness and professionalism of Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accredited organizations' high level of care. The list also suggests alternatives for jargon terms to make our work more accessible and understandable for all, while providing information and context for words we recommend using and not using.

We recognize some suggestions in this toolkit may not reflect communication that is suited to your organization or regional context. We suggest using these terms and alternatives as a starting point for discussion about prioritizing language that infuses an empathetic lens for communication that suits your organizational needs and preferences. We encourage you to utilize this toolkit in a way that best fit your needs. This is intended to be a living document, and we expect that we will update this toolkit as our knowledge on language best practices grows and advances over time.

# Toolkit Creation Process

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The inception of this project began several years ago with the creation of Woodland Park Zoo's (WPZ) internal Words That Matter document that was shared with the ACE for Wildlife Network in 2021. In the intervening years, many other zoos and aquariums have created similar documents based on their individual contexts. Several tested words with guests to better understand what terms most resonated and/or clearly conveyed what the organization was trying to say. In 2024, the Network began to collect example documents (see page 6) and decided to create a Words That Matter Toolkit to help other organizations in their efforts to reconsider the terminology they use with guests. The WPZ Advancing Empathy Team collected a list of words that we were interested in testing to get general feelings about language used in zoos and aquariums. At the AZA Annual Conference in 2025, we then invited visitors to our exhibitor booth to fill out a survey where they rated the various words on a scale of strongly oppose to strongly approve. They also had the opportunity to submit alternative or additional words to the list. This same survey was also presented to the Network through a survey in our Newsletter.

Using the results of this survey, we compiled and then discussed a list of terms at a Network Words That Matter Learning Group. During this learning group, people discussed alternatives to outdated zoo and aquarium terms and provided context as to why we suggest discontinuation of these words. Alternatives to these words were also identified to reflect a more accurate and empathetic representation of our animal care programs.

## How is this Toolkit Organized?

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This toolkit provides a list of zoo/aquarium terms that we believe could be improved, which we have defined when applicable. We also provide alternatives to those words, as well as context to understand why we are focusing on these alternative words. This format follows the "Instead of X, use Y" format. **\*Please note that the focus of these suggested alternatives is intended to be used with public audiences and not necessarily intended for internal staff communications.**

### Outdated Terms:

- Based on current working documents and voices within the Network, words in this category are not recommended to be used in external communication within the zoo and aquarium fields and related organizations.
- These words may incite uncomfortable feelings with guests, are outdated/incomprehensible to external audiences, or do not properly reflect the level of care provided in our organizations. Again, please note that this toolkit offers recommendations for consideration. It may not fully capture the nuances of your regional context or communities, so please adjust as appropriate.

### Alternative Terms:

These are words that have been identified as strong alternatives to outdated terms. They help to reflect appropriate, easily understandable, and accurate language in our organizations.

## Words Relating to an Animal's Location and Care within a Zoo or Aquarium

Instead of: Bars / Cage / Enclosure / Tank / Exhibit / Bedroom

Use: **Habitat / Indoor space / Species specific resting places (Such as Den, Lair, Burrow)**

*Terms like “cage” and “enclosure” can carry negative connotations and may create an unintended perception of confinement, which can be off-putting to some guests. While “exhibit” is commonly used, it can sometimes suggest that animals are present solely for display or entertainment, rather than as part of broader conservation, care, and education efforts. This term should be used thoughtfully and with context, or when referring to an entire building rather than an individual habitat. We avoid referring to animal spaces as “bedrooms” as this can lean toward misinformed anthropomorphism and may not accurately reflect the animals’ lived experiences. A good replacement could be referring to species specific resting places such as a “den” or “burrow,” which is a more accurate description of where they are living.*

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Instead of: On display / Time Out / Auxiliary Area

Use: **Visitor view / On or off view / On or off habitat / Choosing to be behind the scenes**

*The phrase “on display” can unintentionally objectify animals, suggesting their primary purpose is entertainment. In contrast, more intentional language can help shift perspective, encouraging guests to see animals as individuals and to recognize their important roles in conservation, care, and education. Time out and auxiliary area also remove the aspect of the choice and control that we strive to provide for our animals, so emphasizing that animals can choose to be on/off view or behind the scenes can be a good alternative.*

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Instead of: Captive / Captivity

Use: **In professional care / In human care / In managed care**

*The use of the term “captive/captivity” can be standard within our profession, but use will depend on context and should be avoided when addressing the public. Instead, focus on explaining how we care for the animals and why they are in zoos. For people not working in our profession, this term can be off-putting and undermine your message. Alternatives such as “in professional care” elevates the high level of expertise needed to care for these animals.*

*\*A note on “in human care”: Some voices in the Network found this term has confused guests in the past as people can hear or misinterpret this as “inhumane care.” With that in mind, be sure to take care to emphasize the human part of this word, especially when talking to guests who may be hard of hearing.*

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Instead of: Specimen / Collection / Our Animals / Zoo family

Use: **Living in zoos and aquariums / Zoo community / Zoo residents**

*In general, it is best to avoid terms like “specimen” and “collection,” as they are more commonly associated with museums and can feel clinical or impersonal. This type of language may unintentionally create distance, making it harder for guests to connect with animals as living individuals. While these terms may be appropriate in scientific contexts, they are not always accessible or effective in guest-facing conversations.*

*Similarly, phrases like “our animals” or “our zoo family” can imply ownership or a pet-like relationship. While they often come from a place of care, they may misrepresent the nature of our relationship with the animals and take agency away from them. Using more intentional language like “animals living in zoos and aquariums” helps reinforce that animals are individuals with their own needs and roles, rather than possessions or extensions of us.*

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Instead of: In the wild

Use: **Natural (or Native range) / Natural (or Native habitat) / Local (when relevant)**

*The term “in the wild” is often used to describe the natural environments that a species can be found, but it can carry unintended connotations when referring to place. For some guests, “wild” may suggest that animals are unpredictable, dangerous, or in need of taming. It can also evoke the idea of pristine or untouched habitats, which may unintentionally position zoos and aquariums as lesser in comparison. Be sure to communicate that AZA-accredited organizations put immense time and care into creating the most optimal environments for the animals we care for.*

*When possible, it is more effective to use specific language to describe habitats or ecosystems rather than relying on “in the wild” as a general descriptor. “Wild” is more neutral and appropriate in phrases like “wildlife” or “wild populations,” where it refers to animals living outside of human care without implying value judgments about place. It can also be good practice to be specific about where the species you are discussing is found, such as “The natural range of this animal is Madagascar,” or include actual maps on signage of where a species can be found in the world.*

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Instead of: Transfer / Surplus / Rehome / Dispatch

Use: **Moving to X facility / Arriving from X facility**

*Many terms used to describe an animal’s move to another facility can unintentionally misrepresent the purpose behind the decision. Words like “surplus,” “rehome,” or “transfer” may imply that an animal is unwanted, expendable, or experiencing behavioral challenges. Using more neutral language, such as “moving to [facility],” provides a clearer and more accurate foundation, especially when paired with context. Also, you can explain that these moves are often guided by species-specific plans, like AZA Species Survival Plans, which consider factors like genetics, social dynamics, and long-term wellbeing. Animal care teams put immense amount of staff time and resources into planning these moves, so providing this context also helps guests better understand that these transitions are intentional and rooted in animal care and conservation.*

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## Words Relating to Animal Behavior, Biology and Medical Practices

Instead of: Commands

Use: **Cues**

*Animals in our care are given choice and agency in their participation with training. Rather than “commanding” behaviors, training cues are based on voluntary participation, allowing animals to choose whether or not to engage. This approach supports their wellbeing and reinforces a relationship built on trust and positive reinforcement.*

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Instead of: Toys / Treats

Use: **Enrichment**

*Enrichment informs visitors that we are enhancing the environments and care of animals to improve their well-being. This word helps guest understand that we are providing opportunities for mental stimulation and physical exercise, rather than using words like toys and treats that can be associated with pet ownership.*

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Instead of: Lifespan

Use: **Life expectancy**

*Life expectancy is a more accurate reflection of a natural life’s course. Lifespan can refer to the maximum number of years of life possible. We also refrain from ascribing particular human age to animal’s ages (e.g., “in dog years”) to focus instead on the life phase of the animal (e.g., adolescent, adult, geriatric). This avoids any scientific inaccuracies when discussing animal age.*

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Instead of: Put down / Euthanize

Use: **Humanely euthanize**

*Communicating the death of an animal to guests can be tricky and is going to be audience dependent. Transparency also goes a long way with guests, and rather than trying to make a euphemism for death, the term “humanely euthanize” is our proposed alternative to “put down” or just “euthanize.” When possible, it is also important to provide general information as to why an animal had to be humanely euthanized, as well as find a way to share fond memories of that animal to offer meaningful reflection and respect. We have also seen some organizations describe their elderly animals as “being on hospice” which is phrasing that many guests relate to and can resonate with.*

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Instead of: Dart / Knockdown / Restrain / Immobilize

Use: **(Safety / Medical) Restraint**

*When discussing animal procedures, it is not always necessary to include specifics of animal operations and may be best to avoid discussing specifics of animal restraint. However, if you are choosing to discuss this, the words “dart,” “knockdown,” and “immobilize” sound severe and cruel when taken out of context. Guests may not know why or how these procedures are used so it is best to provide clarity if you choose to mention when it is necessary to restrain an animal. If you are choosing to add in these details, we propose adding a word in front of restraint such as “medical restraint” or “safety restraint” to convey the reason for these actions and always include that these procedures are necessary to maintain the health of the animal.*

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Instead of: Shows / Performances

Use: **Animal experiences / Training demonstrations / Animal Programs**

*It’s important to avoid language that suggests animals are here solely for guest entertainment. The experiences we offer are designed to foster understanding of animal needs and behaviors, highlighting the role of zoos and aquariums in conservation and empowering guests with actions they can take to support wildlife and should not be treated as a performance.*

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Instead of: Tricks

Use: **Behaviors/ Behavioral training / Learned Behaviors**

*The word “tricks” can suggest that animals are performing for entertainment or doing unnatural actions for amusement. In contrast, terms like “behaviors” or “behavioral training” more accurately reflect the purpose of these interactions. Training focuses on supporting animals’ wellbeing, encouraging natural behaviors, and enabling voluntary participation in their own care, rather than performing for an audience.*

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### **Discussing Biofacts:**

The term “biofact” is appropriate to use, but it should be clearly defined for guests who may be unfamiliar with zoo terminology. Often, it is even more effective to simply name the item, such as “red panda fur” or “turtle skeleton,” so the object is immediately understandable. It is also important to clarify that animals are never euthanized for this purpose. Biofacts are preserved to support education and conservation, helping guests learn about the species long after an individual’s life has ended. This can also be an opportunity to honor the animal’s life by explaining how they passed and why preserving their fur, skeleton, or other remains allows us to continue teaching and fostering empathy for the species.

### **Non-English Interpretation:**

When interpreting in languages other than English, there is often a real challenge of finding alternative words that align with the terms we recommend using in this document and convey the same kind of meaning. In many cases, there is not a 1:1 translation that can easily substitute for these words. We want to be thoughtful when exploring solutions to speaking about zoo and aquarium terms in languages other than English and we are beginning to see what this looks like in the Network. We invite you to contribute to this topic with any ideas, questions, or work [you’ve done through this discussion post](#), or feel free to reach out to our team.

## Husbandry:

Animal husbandry has long been used to describe the process of caring for animals in zoos and aquariums, however, some note that this word carries negative connotations. Critics point out that husbandry is a human-centered word that focuses on profits over welfare, is gendered, and brings complicated feelings of dominion over animals. As we continue to evaluate how this word is showing up in our organizations, we invite you to share your opinions on the term on our [words that matter discussion post](#).

## Additional Resources

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As noted above, we recognize that this list of words may not represent the regional contexts or specific preferences that your organization has when communicating these words. We encourage you to work within your organization to use and adapt the terms in this resource to best fit your organizational needs.

Additionally, we want to provide you with additional Words that Matter documents from the Network to explore how other organizations are intentionally using language. If you want to contribute your Words that Matter document to this toolkit or have suggestions for additional terms to consider, please reach out to [empathy@zoo.org](mailto:empathy@zoo.org).

[Akron Zoo - Words that Matter](#)

[Central Florida Zoo - Words that Matter](#)

[Endangered Wolf Center - Empathy Based Language](#)

[Maryland Zoo - Terminology from Maryland Zoo's 2024-28 Interpretive Plan](#)

[NEW Zoo and Adventure Park - Empathy Training Manual \(see page 11\)](#)

[Woodland Park Zoo - Words that Matter](#)

[Zoological Society of Milwaukee - Zoo Coalition Preferred Language](#)