



ADVANCING
CONSERVATION
THROUGH
**EMPATHY FOR
WILDLIFE®**

Conservation Action Toolkit

2025

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Introduction

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (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 their visitors to take conservation action. This resource, created in 2024 – 2025 by the Conservation Action Committee, provides readers with an introduction of the landscape of wildlife-trafficking focused, empathy-informed education in a zoo or aquarium setting.

How do we define empathy?

The Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife Network uses the following definition of empathy:

"Empathy is an emotional state that relies on the ability to engage in one or more of the following: perception, understanding, feeling, and/or action in response to the experiences or perspectives of another living being."

As of August 2026, we formally updated our definition of empathy to the one above that is used in Whitley et al., 2026, [an open access literature review published](#) as a part of the Empathy Measurement in Zoo and Aquarium Audiences Project (EMZAAP). This change ensures that as a Network, we are using and promoting definitions that accurately encompass the evolving scope of our work. This definition reflects new learnings in empathy and conservation psychology research, emphasizes that empathy can be felt for beings beyond animals, and is more conducive to research and evaluation. Individuals and organizations are welcome to continue using [Young et al.'s \(2018\) definition](#), but any Network-created or promoted materials will utilize Whitley et al.'s definition moving forward.



How resources for this toolkit were compiled

All Partner Organizations were invited to contribute samples from programs, signage and social media where they have encouraged audiences to take actions to benefit wildlife. During ACE for Wildlife Network Site Visits, Network support staff took pictures of any conservation action signage and interactives that encouraged guests to take action. This toolkit will be a living resource, updated as additional resources are developed and contributed by Partner Organizations.

Purpose of this toolkit

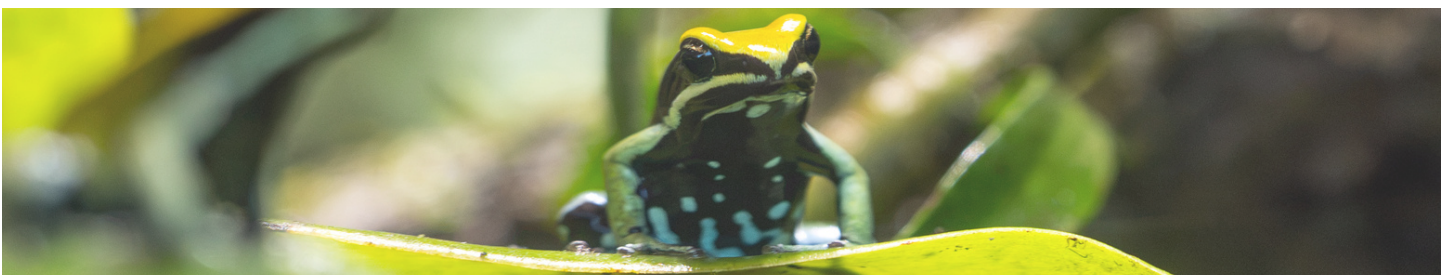
The Conservation Action Toolkit was initially developed in 2023 under the guidance of the ACE for Wildlife Network Conservation Action Working Group and with contributions from many Partners. The purpose of this toolkit is to support the Advancing Conservation portion of the Network's name by:

- Identifying resources on conservation behavior change research to inform conservation action initiatives;
- Sharing Partner resources, tools and ideas to make it easier to consistently encourage guests to take conservation action;
- Fostering collaboration and shared learning about conservation action; and
- Providing suggestions on using empathy practices in conservation action messaging.

This toolkit has three components. It begins with some general recommendations and suggestions about developing conservation messaging, then provides some recommendations specific to empathy practices, next it shares examples on specific conservation topics with the Joint Initiative highlighted specifically and finally it ends with additional resources for conservation action efforts.

How can I add to this toolkit?

If you have a resource that you think would be a beneficial addition to this toolkit, please reach out to us at empathy@zoo.org.





Overview and Links to Resources on Conservation Behavior Change

We have the [Empathy Best Practices](#) and the [Empathy Wheel](#), but how do you use those in developing messaging for conservation calls to action? At a basic level, you create connections with animals in your zoo or aquarium by introducing the animals there as individuals, linking them to their wild counterparts, and then asking the audience to start (or stop) doing something. That may or may not work, so we recommend incorporating some effective practices in behavior change research that can help shape what you do to increase your likelihood of effectiveness.

While there are many approaches to creating a call to action for behavior change, one of the most readily available approaches is Community-Based Social Marketing (CBSM) which draws from the idea that sustainable behavior change is most effective when it involves direct contact with people and is carried out at the community level.

Community-Based Social Marketing

Doug McKenzie-Mohr pioneered the CBSM method. You can read his detailed how to guide, [Fostering Sustainable Behavior: An Introduction to Community-Based Social Marketing](#). It is about 170 pages (\$15 paperback) and provides step by step information, which is worth purchasing if this is an approach you are interested in pursuing.

Introduction

University of Pennsylvania has developed a [4-page quick reference guide](#) to CBSM, or you can watch a [48-minute video](#) by Dr. McKenzie-Mohr if you prefer. Both are solid introductions to the approach.

Partners in the Know

Minnesota Zoo is currently working with Dr. McKenzie-Mohr on utilizing CBSM for their invasive v. native mussel conservation project.

The U.S. Department of Energy offers [this sample energy toolkit](#) using CBSM that walks you through the various steps in this concrete example.

Connect-Understand-Act: CBSM in a Zoo Context

Zoos Victoria's Connect-Understand-Act (CUA) model utilizes the CBSM method and has tailored it to the needs of their three zoos to promote conservation action across Australia. You can learn more about their program in [this 3-minute video](#). Unfortunately, they are not currently offering virtual workshops. However, you can access their [teacher's guide](#) and [workbook for students](#), which provide a lot of step-by-step instructions and links to sample videos to work with students on designing conservation projects.



Why use CBSM and/or CUA?

The research around behavior change shows that people need more than just knowledge to get to the point of doing something different. Studies have repeatedly shown that sharing information by itself has little to no effect on behavior change.

Zoos and aquariums have long been strong in the knowledge sphere and empathy practices can help move people to motivational empathy where they want to act, but we also need to understand the barriers to action. By getting to know the concerns and interests of our audiences, we can start to figure out what the barriers (and benefits) are; how we might develop social norms to build community support for action; what prompts and messages resonate with our audiences; how to incentivize and make it easier to act, all of which can help to change behaviors.

Links to Other Tools and Resources on Conservation Psychology Topics

Rare and The Behavioural Insights Team. (2019). Behavior Change For Nature: A Behavioral Science Toolkit for Practitioners. Arlington, VA: Rare. <https://rare.org/report/behavior-change-for-nature/>

TRAFFIC. (n.d.) Behavior change online course [online course]. <https://www.traffic.org/learning-centre/>

United Nations Environment Programme, GRID–Arendal and Behavioural Insights Team (2020). The Little Book of Green Nudges: 40 Nudges to Spark Sustainable Behaviour on Campus. Nairobi and Arendal: UNEP and GRID–Arendal. <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/33578>

[UC San Diego Extended Studies. \(n.d.\) Conservation psychology \[online course\].](#)

The Wildlife Management Institute and Responsive Management. (2022). Conservation words that work: determining how to engage the public through the language of conservation. Outdoor News Bulletin, 76 (5). <https://wildlifemanagement.institute/outdoor-news-bulletin/May-2022>





Effective Empathy Practices and Conservation Action Messaging

While building empathy for and connection with animals in our care are valuable outcomes, we view promoting empathy as an important strategy in helping us achieve our conservation missions with guests. There are two tools available to incorporate empathy into messaging. Both the [Empathy Bridge](#) and the [Empathy Wheel](#) include encouraging conservation and/or caring action as the final stage to try to keep taking action at the forefront of empathy messaging. Yet, that messaging can often feel tacked onto the end rather than weaved throughout the story. Below are two examples that show how you can combine the empathy practices and conservation action in just 5–7 sentences!

Say hi to Polly the pollinating hummingbird. Her favorite flowers are tubular, which work best with her long, thin beak, particularly in shades of reds and yellows. But Polly and other hummingbirds are so intelligent that they will change their color preferences to favor the most nectar-rich source wherever they are. The best way to support Polly and other pollinators in your area is to plant native nectar plants and avoid pesticides for their safety as we do here at the zoo. It is ok to start small, even with just one flowering plant outside or even better, include a variety of flowers with staggered bloom times to provide a steady food source spring through fall. Imagine how happy Polly will be with such a feast. Sign our pledge that you will plant at least one flowering bloom here.



Say hi to Juniper, a brown bear born in winter 2022 in Alaska. Since she was an orphan and too young to survive on her own, Woodland Park Zoo offered her a permanent home. Here, Juniper receives excellent care in a naturalistic habitat, including a swimming hole with live fish; rocks for sunbathing; tree stump scratching posts; and a quiet cave for winter naps. Before she arrived, staff needed to babyproof her habitat since young bears can be very curious just like small children. You can help keep bears like Juniper wild by keeping garbage in secure containers and pet food inside. If you were a hungry bear and found an easy food source, wouldn't you come back again?



Incorporate Effective Empathy Practices in Conservation Messaging

Empathy Practice	Definition	Prompts to Think about in Developing Conservation Messaging
Framing	Names, pronouns, unique individual, inclusive language like we, together, our, all of us; also: Healthy ("making sure wildlife is healthy"), protect, safe, clean, [what could be] lost, "responsible recreation", "future generations," "coexist," and "balance"	When thinking about the conservation action we want to inspire, are there animals at our zoo we can highlight and tell stories about to draw audiences in? Can we tie the issue to local situations (e.g., similarities between ranchers in Africa and your community)? Can we use phrases like "our habitat" or others listed here to include the zoo, guests and wildlife?
Modeling	Role models play an important role in motivating individuals to take desired behaviors	Are we highlighting what the zoo is doing to promote this conservation action? Can we highlight community leaders, teachers, friends who are taking this action? Are we reinforcing messaging over time with those who attend camps or other longer-term engagement, so it becomes more ingrained in their thinking?
Increasing Knowledge	Share information about animal needs, experiences, behaviors to help the development of accurate empathy; share similarities/differences to our experiences; link to wild relatives	Are we highlighting the issues accurately (e.g., not a ban on palm oil but a focus on sustainable palm oil)? Are we relating the issue to animals in our care and their wild cousins? Are we pointing out ways to reduce barriers or make taking action easier (e.g., handing out native pollinator seed bombs at events or having a make a reusable bag activity)? Are we highlighting the benefits these actions in our lives (e.g., turning off the sink when you brush which saves on your water bill)?
Providing Experiences	Giving opportunities for people to interact with animals and in nature to build connections	Are we tying conservation asks to animal keeper chats or animal encounters when people have a chance to connect with animals first?
Practicing	Provide opportunities for people to practice caring for animals, learning what they need and voicing their empathy	Can we offer activities like making bee hotels or bat houses to stimulate empathy and give people a chance to help animals? Do we build on knowledge by giving people opportunities to practice care, like gentle touching at the tide pool?
Activating Imagination	Ask guests to take the perspective of animals through storytelling, mimicry, roleplaying, and responding to prompts	Can we use stories, puppet shows, performances, programs to help audiences think about the needs and feelings of our animals, how they might feel in that situation and then give them an outlet for something to do?



Partner Organization Resources by Topic



Bat Boxes and Events

- Idaho Falls Zoo Bat Night
- Woodland Park Zoo Bat Activity Trends
- Zoological Society of Milwaukee Bat Habitat Checklist and Bat Walk



Bronx Zoo



Bird Friendly Actions

- [Songbirds Conservation Action Signage | Bronx Zoo](#)
- The Essential Bird Friendly Toolkit | Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute
- Your Coffee is Stronger than You Think | Smithsonian Institution



Community/Citizen Science

- SEEK Naturalist Guide | iNaturalist
- Woodland Park Zoo
 - Coexisting with Carnivores
 - Pollinators and Carnivores
- Wisconsin Forest Safari Plan | Zoological Society of Milwaukee
 - Bioinventory List
 - Urban Tree Guide



Deforestation and Sustainable Palm Oil

- Orangutans and Palm Oil | [Cheyenne Mountain Zoo](#)



ECO-CELL and Gorillas on the Line Project





Partner Organization Resources by Topic

Gift Shop Signage



International Conservation Days



Land, Soil and Wetland Restoration



Ocean Conservation



Polar Bears



Quarters for Conservation





Partner Organization Resources by Topic

Take Action

Signage



Activities





Network Joint Initiatives

The ACE for Wildlife Network's vision is a "conservation-minded society motivated by empathy towards all life." One of the goals of the Network's Conservation Action Committee is to coordinate joint conservation action campaigns to maximize our impact.

So far, the committee has provided two toolkits, one on Pollinators and one on World Wildlife Conservation Day, to help Partners promote conservation actions without having to reinvent the wheel. Our hope is that by collaborating, we will both extend our reach and help share the workload.

We suggest any of the following messaging and actions, but it will be up to Partners to determine what level of involvement they want to have in any joint initiatives. These are not required activities, but with more participants, the greater reach and impact we can achieve together.

Network Joint Initiative on Pollinators

Partner Organization Examples



Pollinator Signage at Zoos



Network Joint Initiative on Greenwashing

Network Joint Initiative on World Wildlife Conservation Days

