



ADVANCING
CONSERVATION
THROUGH
**EMPATHY FOR
WILDLIFE®**

Empathy Training Toolkit

2025

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Partner Organizations Represented in this Toolkit

Como Park Zoo & Conservatory



Location: St. Paul, MN
Organization size: Large
Resources in toolkit: 1

Racine Zoo



Location: Racine, WI
Organization size: Medium
Resources in toolkit: 1

Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center



Location: West Yellowstone, MT
Organization size: Medium
Resources in toolkit: 1

Red River Zoo



Location: Fargo, ND
Organization size: Small
Resources in toolkit: 1

Henry Vilas Zoo



Location: Madison, WI
Organization size: Medium
Resources in toolkit: 2

Woodland Park Zoo



Location: Seattle, WA
Organization size: Extra large
Resources in toolkit: 5

International Crane Foundation



Location: Baraboo, WI
Organization size: Medium
Resources in toolkit: 1

Zoo Boise



Location: Boise, ID
Organization size: Medium
Resources in toolkit: 11

Northeastern Wisconsin (NEW) Zoo & Adventure Park



Location: Green Bay, WI
Organization size: Medium
Resources in toolkit: 3

Zoological Society of Milwaukee



Location: Milwaukee, WI
Organization size: Large
Resources in toolkit: 9

Northwest Trek Wildlife Park



Location: Eatonville, WA
Organization size: Large
Resources in toolkit: 3

ZooMontana



Location: Billings, MT
Organization size: Small
Resources in toolkit: 3

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium



Location: Tacoma, WA
Organization size: Large
Resources in toolkit: 5

*Organization size determined using AZA's budget brackets, not staff size.



Introduction

The Advancing Conservation Empathy (ACE for Wildlife®) Network's vision is a "conservation-minded society motivated by empathy towards all life." Through achieving our mission of "creating and sharing effective practices to foster empathy for animals and people," we can: foster empathy for wildlife, promote conservation missions, and motivate their visitors to take conservation action. This toolkit, originally created in 2022 by the Strategic Learning Committee, provides readers with empathy trainings and similar resources created within our Network. These resources can be used at organizations to familiarize staff with empathy practices and embed empathy within their organizations.

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

It is important to the Strategic Learning Committee that the resources in this toolkit represent the diversity across our Network's region. During the site visits to Partner Organizations in 2022, the Empathy Network Specialist accumulated resources that Partners shared to be a part of this toolkit. In addition to compiling existing resources, staff at our Partners were asked what resources they would like to see in this toolkit. Partners that were not visited in 2022 were contacted to provide any relevant training materials and suggested resources that they wish to see incorporated in the toolkit. Once resources were compiled, the Empathy Network Specialist, Advancing Empathy backbone support staff, members of the Strategic Learning Committee, and other Network Members collaborated to create resources that filled in the gaps between what existed and what was needed to complete the first edition of the toolkit.

For additions to the 2025 edition of the toolkit, calls for resources were put on our discussion board, in the newsletter and announced at Network events. This toolkit is designed to be a living document and will change year to year as the Network learns what resources work and what is still needed.

Purpose of this toolkit

This toolkit is a compilation of resources from across our Partner Organizations that can be used as is, or as a template, to train staff and volunteers at your organizations on effective empathy practices. The first edition of this toolkit was created in 2022 to address one of the Network's first Strategic Learning Questions; "how are we sustainably promoting empathy for animals and people within and across our organizations?" It was created by the Empathy Network Specialist and the Strategic Learning Committee and is intended to be used by anyone interested in learning more about, or developing, empathy training. Each year, after the Network has had the opportunity to submit new resources, the committee and Empathy Network Specialist create an updated edition of the toolkit. This is the 2025 edition.

The capacity for developing empathy training greatly differs across our Network. What does not differ is the desire to be able to train staff on effective empathy practices and infuse empathy throughout their organizations. We hope that this toolkit helps staff across our Network develop and implement effective empathy training(s) and instill a culture of empathy at their organizations.



How can I add to this toolkit?

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





What is Empathy?

Introduction to Empathy and ACE for Wildlife Network

After engaging with this content, people will understand

- the definition of empathy used by the ACE for Wildlife Network
- the role that zoos and aquariums can play in using empathy as a conservation tool
- what the ACE for Wildlife Network is

[Video](#)

[Script](#)

[Discussion Qs](#)

Types of Empathy

After engaging with this content, people will understand

- the difference between empathy and sympathy
- the three types of empathy and how they can show up in a zoo or aquarium setting

[Video](#)

[Script](#)

[Discussion Qs](#)

Effective Empathy Practices

After engaging with this content, people will understand

- the various effective empathy practices
- how to utilize the effective empathy practices in their interactions with guests

[Video](#)

[Script](#)

[Discussion Qs](#)

Empathy Wheel

After engaging with this content, people will understand

- what the Empathy Wheel is and its components
- how the effective empathy practices fit within the Empathy Wheel
- how to utilize the Empathy Wheel in guest interactions

The Empathy Wheel is a tool developed by Woodland Park Zoo and is intentionally nonlinear, as that is what resonates better with our current staff. The tool is an alternative form of an earlier tool known as the Empathy Bridge. The Empathy Bridge follows a more linear interpretive model. Individuals are welcome to use the tool that works better for them.

[Video](#)

[Script](#)

[Discussion Qs](#)



Empathy Bridge

After engaging with this content, people will understand

- what the Empathy Bridge is and its steps
- how the effective empathy practices fit within the Empathy Bridge
- how to utilize the Empathy Bridge

[Video](#)

[Script](#)

[Discussion Qs](#)

Critical Anthropomorphism

After engaging with this content, people will understand

- the difference between scientifically unjustifiable anthropomorphism and educational anthropomorphism
- the role of educational anthropomorphism in empathy practices
- the four characteristics that influence anthropomorphism for animals

[Video](#)

[Script](#)

[Discussion Qs](#)

[Resources](#)





General Empathy Training



NEW Zoo & Adventure Park

- [NEW Zoo & Adventure Park Empathy Training Manual](#)

Contact: education@newzoo.org



Northwest Trek
Wildlife Park
METRO PARKS TACOMA

Northwest Trek Wildlife Park

- [Naturalist Training Workshop PowerPoint](#)
- [Expressions of Empathy PDF](#)
- [6 Degrees of Separation PDF](#)

Contact: Craig Standridge – craig.standridge@nwtrek.org



Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

- [Empathy Best Practices Tips](#)

Contact: Liz Hines – liz.hines@pdza.org



Woodland Park Zoo

- [A Case for Empathy PDF](#)
- [Empathy Best Practices Empathy Bridge Framework PDF](#)
- [Empathy Wheel PDF](#)

Contact: empathy@zoo.org

Zoo Boise Empathy Training Video Series

Videos

- Introduction (7m 12s), [script](#)
- Penguin Keeper Talk (3m 29s), [script](#)
- Crocodile Interpretation (2m 26s), [script](#)
- Best Practices Language (2m 31s), [script](#)
- Zoo Tour Visit (3m 23s), [script](#)



How these videos were created

Contact: Tierney Ball – tball@cityofboise.org



ZooMontana

- [Volunteer Empathy Training](#)

Contact: education@zoomontana.org



Zoological Society of Milwaukee Training Videos

- [Empathy for Conservation & Animal Care](#)
- [Empathy in Action as an Animal Ambassador](#)
- [Inspiring New Conservationists](#)
- [Why Empathy](#)

Contact: Isabelle Bieser – isabelleb@zoosociety.org





Empathy Interpretation Training



Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center

- [Interpretation Guidelines](#)

Contact: Tut Fuentesvilla – tutf@grizzlydiscoveryctr.com



Henry Vilas Zoo

- [Docent Interpretation Training PowerPoint](#)

Contact: Courtney Cordova – cordova.courtney@henryvilaszoo.gov



Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

- [Tidal Touch Zone Training](#)
- [Tidal Touch Zone Residents – Fill in the Blank](#)
- [Tips & Tricks for on the Beach](#)

Contact: Liz Hines – liz.hines@pdza.org



Zoo Boise

- [Words that Matter](#)

Contact: Tierney Ball – tball@cityofboise.org



Zoological Society of Milwaukee Training Videos

- [Empathy Practices in Signage](#)

Contact: Isabelle Bieser – isabelleb@zoosociety.org



ZooMontana

- [Monthly Training PowerPoint example](#)

Contact: education@zoomontana.org



Empathy Infused Animal Fact Sheets

Just as the content of animal fact sheets differs from organization to organization, the way they are utilized in staff and volunteer trainings varies across our Network. Four organizations whose fact sheets are included in this toolkit have provided additional information about the content and utilization of their fact sheets to help those who want to create similar documents for their organization.

NEW Zoo & Adventure Park

They are currently in the process of creating fact sheets for all their ambassador animals. At the time of the 2025 edition of the toolkit, they have fact sheets for ~40% of their ambassadors and create them in Canva. These sheets are intended to be used during animal handling training for education staff, volunteers and interns. During this training, individuals are “shown how to pick up, crate, hold, and present animals during formal and informal programming. In addition, there are discussions on how to converse with the public and to include scientific information as well as personal connections with names, ages, and favorites of the individual animal.”

Unique among the fact sheets in this toolkit, NEW Zoo & Adventure Park’s sheets include a page where individuals can note how to handle the animal, signs of distress for the animal, and behaviors that they observed. This final page of the sheet is intended to be filled out both during the training of how to handle the animals and after handling. Before individuals can handle an animal, they must be aware of the signs of distress for that animal and know how to properly present the animal.

Contact Andrea Vahey at education@newzoo.org to learn more!

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

Fact sheets like the one included in this toolkit are used by staff giving Close Encounter animal ambassador programs. They are used by staff as a tool to provide ways they can incorporate empathy best practices into these programs. These sheets are provided before staff learn how to handle an animal. They include anecdotes about each individual animal as well as other elements such as questions to ask audience members, and conservation messaging that utilizes perspective taking and compare/contrast practices.

Contact Suzanne Akerman at suzanne.akerman@pdza.org to learn more!



Racine Zoo

Racine Zoo's fact sheets are the primary material for staff members (part-time, full-time and seasonal) to focus their public programming around. They include facts about the animals that encourage empathy for wildlife (e.g., food and enrichment preferences of individuals, drawing similarities between animals and humans), notes about training or feeding activities that may be concurrently happening to the interpretation, and conservation actions that guests can take part in locally. When training staff with the fact sheets, they are encouraged to see the sheets as a guide but continue to tailor their conversations to the interest of the guests. These sheets are kept in a small binder that staff can easily carry around with them throughout the zoo during their workday.

Contact Racine Zoo at education@racinezoo.org to learn more!

ZooMontana

Their fact sheets function as a "back pocket tool" for ZooMontana's employees and volunteers. During training, new staff and volunteers are given time to learn about the animals in-depth with a larger, more science-heavy document provided by Education Staff. Once individuals are ready to focus on interpretation, they are urged to utilize the fact sheets that provide examples on ways to speak with a more empathy-focused lens. The sheets serve as a more convenient, on-the-go way to learn information about ZooMontana's animals and are especially helpful for those with a more visual learning style.

Contact the education team at education@zoomontana.org to learn more!





* Funded by the Advancing Empathy Grant Program



Como Park Zoo & Conservatory

- ZooBook Profiles
- * Empathy-Focused Volunteer Interpretation Project



Henry Vilas Zoo

- Capybara Info Sheet
- * Building Capacity for Empathy through Interpretive Master Planning

Contact: Courtney Cordova – cordova.courtney@henryvilaszoo.gov



NEW Zoo & Adventure Park

- Box Turtle Fact Sheet

Contact: education@newzoo.org



Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

- Tidal Touch Zone Training
- Tidal Touch Zone Residents – Fill in the Blank
- Tips & Tricks for on the Beach

Contact: Liz Hines – liz.hines@pdza.org



Racine Zoo

- African penguin
- Spurred tortoise
- Lynx
- Hartmann's mountain zebra
- Spider monkey
- * Advancing Empathy-Focused Animal Behavioral Programming



ZooMontana

- All About Gray Wolves

Contact: education@zoomontana.org



Empathy and Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion



Red River Zoo

- [IDE Training PowerPoint](#)

Contact: education@redriverzoo.org



Woodland Park Zoo

- [Volunteer Inclusion Manual](#)

Contact: volunteer@zoo.org





Evaluation for Empathy Trainings



NEW Zoo & Adventure Park

- [NEW Zoo & Adventure Park Online Empathy Training Quiz Questions](#)

Contact: education@newzoo.org



Woodland Park Zoo

- [Woodland Park Zoo Animal Keeper Training Evaluation Survey](#)

Contact: Theo Bamberger – theo.bamberger@zoo.org

