What is Empathy and Why Should We Care About It?

At our organization, we care deeply about our animals and their wild counterparts. We aim to foster a connection between people and animals in our care, which leads to caring action that protects wildlife and the environment around us. One way to inspire people to act is by building **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. *Whitley et al., 2026*

Conservation psychology studies repeatedly show that although sharing information about the challenges animals face in the wild is important, it is insufficient to inspire behavior change. People also need a personal or emotional connection, and that is where empathy comes in. We strive to take empathy a step further, to inspire **motivational empathy.**

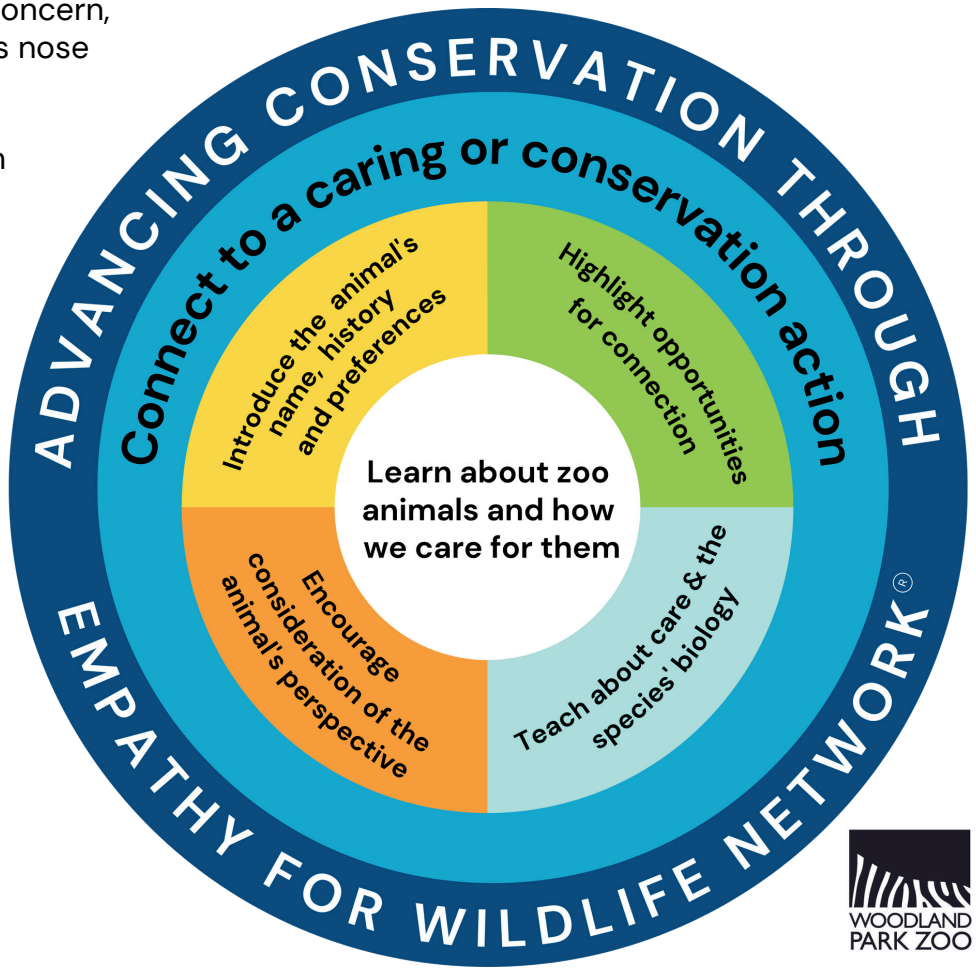
This occurs when, as a result of feeling empathy, individuals can be motivated to either improve the life or extend the happiness of another. An example of wanting to help, known as empathic concern, can be seeing a video about a turtle's struggle with a straw in his nose and resolving not to use single-use straws anymore.

An example of extending happiness, known as empathic joy, can be a guest finding out an animal likes a particular enrichment item and purchasing another one from a keeper wish list.

Empathy Wheel for Audience Engagement

Fostering empathy for wildlife is a top priority and a crucial component of achieving our conservation mission. The Empathy Wheel is designed to consistently and intentionally help us demonstrate that animals are unique individuals, with preferences and habits worthy of our respect and care.

This tool utilizes research-based best practices for fostering empathy in a digestible format. The components should be incorporated into any animal-focused interactions with audiences, whether program-based or casual. While the various parts of the wheel are listed below in a specific order, they can be presented in whatever order you prefer.



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What to do?	How?	Why?	Example
Learn about our animals and how we care for them	Seek info about animal stories and wellbeing.	The more you know, the more you can share with others.	Read organizational blogs, social media, and press releases attend keeper talks, and learn from colleagues about the animals and their care.
	Model empathetic behavior and attitude.	Show people that you care about the animals. It will help them to feel it too. Refrain from showing disgust or fear.	*"While they may eat food we consider gross, turkey vultures like Modoc are important members of nature's cleanup crew. His stomach acid is 100x more concentrated than ours and kills diseases like rabies and botulism instantly. Vultures keep the environment clean for everyone. How neat is that?"*
Introduce the animal	Use names, refrain from using "it."	Names are powerful indicators of sentience and individuality.	*"It's a brown bear"* implies the bear is an object, but *"Her name is Fern, she's a brown bear,"* tells us Fern is an individual.
	Highlight personality traits.	This helps individualize the animals more than talking generally about the species.	*"Annabelle and Bailey are sister pot-bellied pigs. Annabelle is very energetic and curious, always running around, while Bailey is mellow and more of a walker."*
	Talk about animals as unique individuals.	The most effective empathy-evoking stories highlight an animal's relationships and their choice and agency.	*"Glenn, the greater one-horned rhino behind me, loves taking warm showers. We found out that the hot water heater was broken because he refused to take a shower. We fixed it immediately, and he started showering again."*
Highlight opportunities for connection	Draw connection between guest behavior and animal comfort and safety.	This gives people a chance to understand how their actions impact animal behaviors and set program expectations.	*"That banging on the glass is really loud and potentially scary for Valkyrie the otter. If we want to make sure we can see her well, let's stand still and see if she comes closer."*
	Give folks time to interact with or care for animals.	Interactions with animals can be lasting positive memories.	This can include allowing them to touch, brush or feed an animal, or placing enrichment in high visibility places so guests can see animals up close.
	Highlight similarities/ differences between animals and people.	Seeing similarities can help destigmatize the unfamiliar and explaining differences can increase understanding of well-known animals.	*"Did you know that male water bugs are attentive dads? They carry their babies on their backs until they hatch."* Then, compare that to guests' experiences of being carried when they were younger.

What to do?	How?	Why?	Example
Teach about care and the species' biology	Inform about animal needs in the wild.	Knowledge helps provide context and understanding for what people observe. Include facts about an animal's way of sensing and acting, address common misconceptions.	*"Skyana the porcupine's quills are made from keratin, just like our nails. Porcupines use their quills to protect them from predators, but they can't shoot their quills at people any more than you can shoot your hair!"*
	Encourage focused observation of animal traits or behaviors.	People may notice things they've never had a chance to see before.	Draw attention to behaviors that may go unnoticed without a trained eye, or an animal's favorite spot in a habitat. Point out instances of animals making choices and exhibiting agency. *"Do you notice how Monty the Canada lynx is curled up at the base of that log? He blends right in with his surroundings and really likes to nap there."*
	Discuss what we do to foster animal wellbeing.	This helps people feel confident that the animals are well cared for. A confidence in care allows connections to be made.	Speak about the quality of the food we provide for animals, exhibit design, the level of veterinary care, and more! *"Windana is fairly old for an emu, so he gets weekly laser therapy for his arthritis. His keepers give him neck scratches during the treatment and he's often so relaxed that he falls asleep."*
Encourage consideration of the animal's perspective	Ask guests questions or spark their imagination about an animal's perspective.	Taking the time to observe an animal gives people the ability to learn more and try to imagine what it is like to be that animal.	*"Notice how Kaa the python is flicking out his forked tongue. What do you think he is smelling now?"* OR If safe and appropriate, utilize roleplaying and mimicry with younger audiences: *"Can you flap your wings like Lola?"*
Connect to caring and/or conservation action	Include way(s) for visitors to help and care for animals.	If a guest feels connected to an animal, they may be more willing to behave more considerately and/or take action toward saving the species.	*"You can help save Azul's tiger cousins in the wild by purchasing products that use sustainable palm oil."* OR *"Using quiet voices will help Harry the skunk to feel safe and stay out here with us longer."*