EMPATHY WHEEL FOR PARKS DEPARTMENTS

Utah's Hogle Zoo

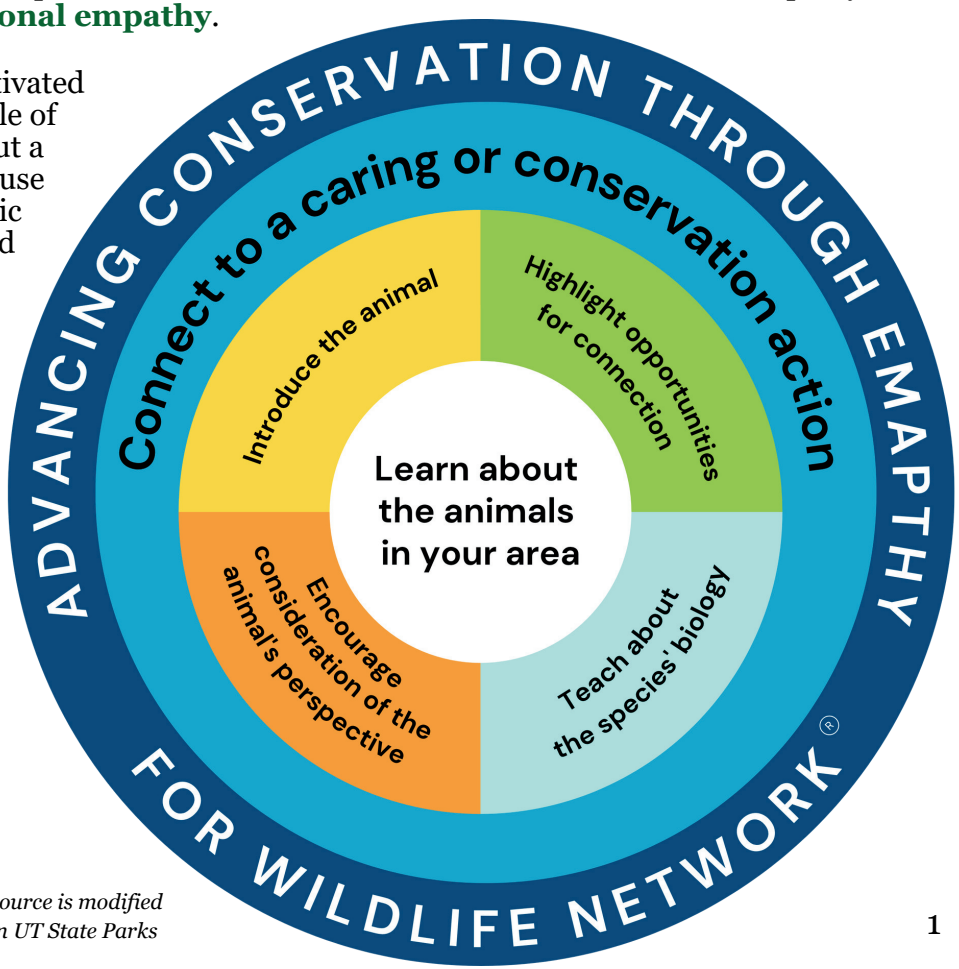
What is Empathy and Why Should We Care About It?

At our organizations, we care deeply about wild animals. We aim to foster a connection between people and animals, 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 to use a particular wetland they frequent, then the guest choosing to sanitize their shoes to support clean wetland conditions.



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.

Adapted from Woodland Park Zoo's Empathy Wheel ©

**This resource is modified for use in UT State Parks*

What to do?	How?	Why?	Example
Learn about the animals in your area	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, and learn from colleagues about animals that frequent the park
	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 are important members of nature's cleanup crew. Their 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 black bear" implies the bear is an object, but "Her name is Fern, she's a black bear," tells us Fern is an individual.*
	Highlight personality traits.	This helps individualize the animals more than talking generally about the species.	*"This particular bison often spends time on his own, and you may see him away from the herd."*
	Talk about animals as unique individuals.	The most effective empathy-evoking stories highlight an animal's relationships and their choice and agency.	*"A wolverine that was far from home walked right through the park on his way to another mountain range. It is not common to see wolverines here, even though they have large natural ranges."* *OR* *"806 raised her own cub while adopting another, Biggie, into her life. She's kind-hearted but willing to get her paws dirty to protect her family."*
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.	*"You can observe the burrowing owls best from the safety of your car, like watching from a bird blind. The owls will feel more comfortable and you will be more likely to see them."*
	Give folks time to observe wild animals or care for animal habitats	Observations of animals in the wild can be lasting positive memories.	This can include identifying good spots or times of day to see certain species. Visitors may also be encouraged to not step off the path to preserve delicate habitats.
	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 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.	*"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 a spot that animals frequent. Point out instances of animals making choices and exhibiting agency. *"Do you notice how the pika pops out from the rocks? The rocks are where he feels safe and blends in, so he likes to shelter there."*
	Discuss what we do to foster animal wellbeing by caring for habitats and wild spaces.	This helps people feel confident that the animals' habitats are well cared for. A confidence in care allows connections to be made.	*"Leave no trace helps us keep, not only the osprey's home clean, but also keeps it clean for all of the other animals as well."*
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 the garter snake is flicking out his forked tongue. What do you think he is smelling now?"* *OR* If safe and appropriate, utilize roleplaying and mimicry: *"Can you puff up your cheeks like a chuckwalla puffs up their body?"*
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.	*"Staying far away from the wildlife not only protects you, but also protects our animal friends"* *OR* *"You can help protect the tiniest creatures at the park, the brine shrimp, by using less water at home."*