Incorporating Empathy into Programming and Outreach

Welcome to Northwest Trek Wildlife Park! Thank you for joining us today to learn more about how incorporating empathy for wildlife has furthered Northwest Trek's mission of awakening a connection to wild life for everyone in the Pacific Northwest. By incorporating empathy best practices, we hope to create connections between our guests and our animals, which has been proven to inspire further conservation actions.

Today, we are going to cover the definition of empathy, the different types of empathy, and how we can seamlessly incorporate empathy into programming and outreach. We will then have time to practice incorporating empathy into mock programs, and have time to brainstorm ways to add empathy into projects you plan to implement over the summer season. The information in this document and workshop is adapted from Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE) for Wildlife Network resources.

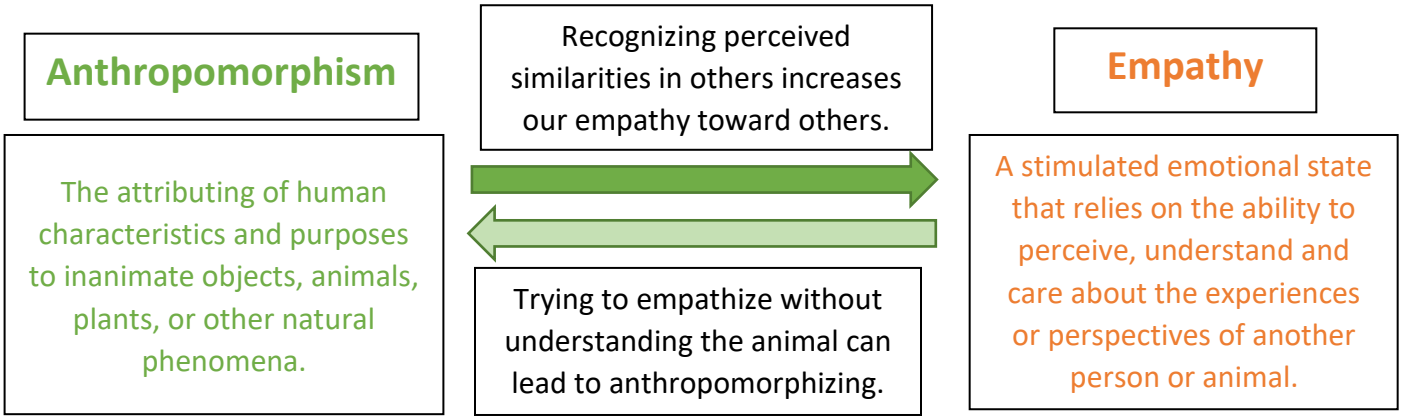
Founded in 2019, ACE for Wildlife is based out of Woodland Park Zoo to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and data to drive conservation change through fostering empathy for animals and the environment that sustains them. Currently, the network partners with 29 Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accredited zoos and aquariums across the United States, with more individual affliates across the globe.

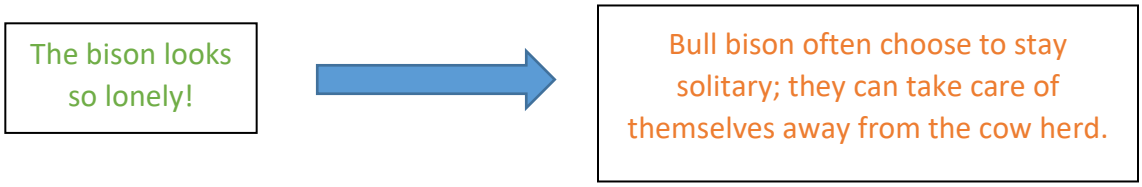
For the purposes of this workshop, we are going to use a definition of empathy created by the ACE for Wildlife Network, which states: **Empathy** is a stimulated emotional state that relies on the ability to **perceive, understand, and care about** the experiences or perspectives of another person or animal.

Empathy and Anthropomorphism

Empathy is not anthropomorphism, to a degree. If we think of it like a sliding scale, there is a level of anthropomorphism we can use to encourage empathetic connection that stays true to the agency of animals.

Anthropomorphism vs. Empathy





Types of Empathy

Learning the types of empathy can help us identify how humans connect with other humans and animals. We can use this knowledge to guide us in creating impactful moments that lead to conservation actions.

Types of Empathy

- **Cognitive empathy** – the ability to identify and understand the perspective of others
- **Affective empathy** – the ability to sense the perceived emotions of another
- **Empathic concern (compassionate empathy)** – the ability to sense and be motivated to improve the life of another

Cognitive Empathy – the ability to identify and understand the perspective of others. Cognitive empathy is a learned mental skill developed over time through perspective taking and increasing our knowledge about another's experience.

Examples from photos:

- Caribou in the snow: As humans, we may look at this and perceive the animal as cold. But we can learn about the biology of caribou and see how the snow is sticking to the

outside of their coat and conclude that while we would feel cold in this scenario, the caribou is most likely not feeling cold.

- Mountain Goat jumping over the log: As humans, we may look at this and perceive a happy, playful animal jumping over the log. While calling this animal "happy and playful" might be an anthropomorphic stretch, we can observe the mountain goat and note their behavior. A mountain goat who is exploring their area with intent and without stress could be perceived as relaxed or content, and any additional stimulation they add (such as climbing and jumping when not necessary) is performed as an expression of relaxed or content behavior.

Affective Empathy – the ability to sense the perceived emotions of others. This process is made possible by "mirror neurons" which are hardwired into our brain to automatically respond to emotions in other people. This is why we often cry when someone else is crying around us. There is potential for affective empathy in most brains, but mirror neurons' strength and effectiveness must still be learned. In terms of empathy for wildlife, this is where we can use what we are observing with the animal to recognize how *we* feel about the animal.

Examples from photos:

- Grizzly Bears: we can watch the behaviors of the two adult male grizzly bears to determine if they are exhibiting play behavior or aggression. In Huckleberry and Hawthorne, we can observe how they interact with each other and empathize based on our own personal relationships, especially sibling bonds.
- Porcupine: we can see his eyes closed while eating and empathize with the "blissed out" feeling of enjoying a good meal. While we can't be sure that Thistle is experiencing the best meal ever, we are using our experiences to relate to how we perceive the animal is feeling.

Motivational Empathy- the ability to sense and be motivated to improve the life of another. We can think of motivational empathy as compassion. People are inspired to act in a compassionate way when they are strongly affected by an emotional response. This motivational empathy can come from a place of seeing suffering and wanting to improve a situation - think the commercials with sad animals waiting to be adopted. For our purposes, we focus on positive emotional empathy, which is the idea that seeing others experience joy leads to compassionate action. In the zoo and aquarium field, we see that people who both experience joyful moments and see animals experiencing joyful moments are motivated to take conservation actions.

What elicits empathy?

Animals have differing abilities to elicit empathy. Species such as charismatic megafauna have a natural tendency to inspire people in conservation, while many species are overlooked and may

not even be recognized as an "animal" by most people's perception. Knowing what elicits empathy can help us develop strategies to help people empathize with all animals.

- **Agency** – The animal presents behavior of moving, eating, playing, social roles, and grooming that are similar to human behavior.
- **Affectivity** – The animal experiences different vitality "modes", which we experience as emotions.
    - A naturally active animal presents as easier to connect with than a less active animal. As examples, visitors to Northwest Trek will feel more connected to the zooming otters than the stationary frogs. The animal's patterns and qualities of arousal over time can also affect how humans feel connected. A stationary frog who suddenly hops into the water will lead to more of a connection than a stationary lizard who slowly walks from one spot to another.
- **Coherence** – The animal is easily understood as a whole animal with recognizable body parts, such as arms, legs, body, and face. One impactful characteristic is the presence of a face, especially eyes.
- **Continuity** – More time and familiarity with the animal increases a person's understanding and empathy towards the animal and their species.

Barriers to Empathy

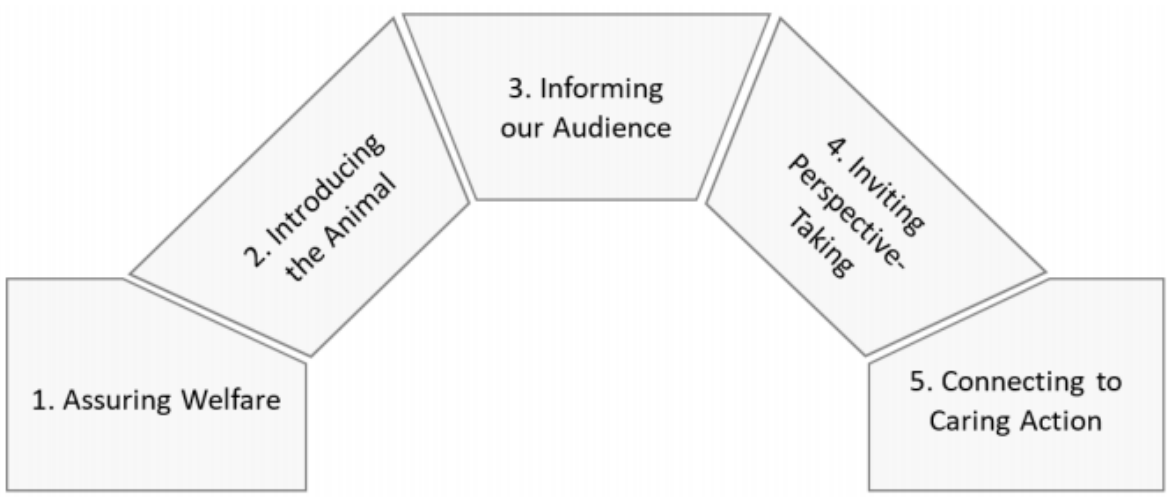
Being aware of the barriers to empathy can help us understand our audiences' perceptions. Common barriers to empathy include:

- **Cultural Stigmas** - When a lack of accurate species-specific knowledge is replaced with beliefs based on fear, empathy is blocked.
- **Conflicting Social Norms and Messaging** – There is a great disparity between how society views different types of animals. Some are family, some are outside pets, some are majestic wildlife, some are nuisances, some are food, and some are pests.
- **Narrative Framing** – The language and story we use to talk about an animal affects the development of empathy toward that animal. Introducing a crab to a group of beach goers as a biological example of a crab with be less likely to elicit empathy than introducing the crab with a name, personal pronouns, story, and unique needs.
- **Moral Disengagement** – Empathy triggering experiences can be too intense. If people are overloaded with highly emotionally triggering experiences, their minds can often protect them by disengaging.
- **Environmental –** When we remove animals' agency by teaching them to do tricks, not housing them in environments where they can participate in natural behaviors, or reducing them to mere scientific examples without seeing them as individual beings, we can decrease their ability to elicit empathy.

- **Projection** – Our own emotions or states of being can affect how we perceive others. If we are hungry, thirsty, or have recently experienced intense emotions, we are more likely to over-perceive similar emotions in someone else.
- **Anthropomorphism** – Anthropomorphism can both help and hinder one's ability to accurately empathize with others. Young children benefit from anthropomorphism and its ability to make animals relatable. However, as people mature, if they continue to project their experiences instead of trying to understand those of the animal, it can lead to incorrect empathy.

Empathy Bridge

There are several factors that influence a person's capacity to feel empathy and what they can feel empathy towards. Some of these factors are out of our control, but what we can do is use empathy to connect people to animals and inspire caring actions using an **Empathy Bridge**.



1. Assuring Welfare

- **Before we even think about empathy, there must be a strong, positive foundation of animal welfare and guest experience.**
- **Model an empathetic attitude and empathic behavior.** Don't be afraid to show people that you care about animals. If they see how much you care and are passionate about the animals, they will feel it too.

2. Introducing the Animal

- **Use personal pronouns and individual names.** Names are powerful indicators of sentience and individual value. "It's a brown bear" implies he's an inanimate object, but

"his name is Huckleberry, and he's a brown bear," tells us he is a living being with a personal story.

- **Give people the individual age or personal traits of an animal, if you know them.** These help individualize the animals even more than talking about a species as a whole.
- **Be accurate and productive when providing information.** People are prone to project their own emotions (and sympathize) rather than empathize with another's true perspective. Make sure to give correct information that will help people connect to animals, but be mindful of what you are saying since we do not want to promote misconceptions.

3. Informing Our Audience

- **Tell a story.** The most effective empathy-evoking stories are ones that highlight an animal's relationships and an animal's choice and sense of agency.
    - For example, "During a routine veterinary exam, radiographs revealed that Darcy, one of our female gray wolves, had swallowed a rock that was sitting in her stomach. To monitor the position of the rock, the animal care team began working with Darcy to get additional images in the forms of x-rays without having to move her to the clinic every time. At first they practiced with a fake x-ray plate and encouraged Darcy to stand still at a station by reinforcing her willingness to participate with yummy treats, and soon they were able to progress with using the actual equipment to get additional images of the rock's position with Darcy's voluntary participation. Eventually they determined the rock needed to be removed via endoscopy and the rock removal was a success! They named the rock, Dwayne." This shows the animals' choices, as well as our efforts to provide the best animal welfare.
- **Provide personal facts and natural history facts.** Include facts about an animal's way of sensing and acting, common misconceptions, and how they are similar or different to humans.
- **Avoid reinforcing fear or disgust.** It is okay to acknowledge another person's fear or disgust, but try asking the guest, "Why do you feel that way?" Oftentimes a fear or dislike revolves around a personal experience or a misconception. You can better connect with a person's fear if you understand it and you can clear up a misconception if you know why or where it came from. These are both helpful in helping the guest to learn more and possibly gain an increased feeling of empathy towards something they initially disliked.

4. Inviting Perspective-Taking

- **Give the guest an opportunity to observe the animal.** 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 he is flicking his forked tongue out. What do you think he is smelling right now?”

- **If safe and appropriate, encourage mimicry, storytelling and roleplaying.** This is especially great to engage younger audiences and have them take the perspective of another animal.

5. Connecting to Caring Action

- If a guest feels connected with an animal, often times a particular individual, they will be more willing to learn about the animal and take action toward saving the species.
- You can suggest some simple caring actions, like doing a litter pick-up at their local park, reduce the amount of plastic they use on a daily basis, or getting their backyard certified as a backyard wildlife habitat.

Applying the Best Practices

Framing

The concept of framing refers to the way something is presented to others. Framing is important for all of the best practices because it can influence a person’s perception and understanding of an animal, as well as lead a conversation towards a clear goal by bridging concepts that are familiar to the audience with the new information being shared. Narrative, language and action all have an impact on empathy development.

Practices you can try:

- Intentionally choose language that encourages people to see animals as individuals that have unique personalities, experiences and intentions.
- Highlight the interactions and relationships between animals, people and their environments.

Be aware of your audience and try to understand their perspective when conveying messages to have a larger impact.

Words to Avoid → Alternative Words to Use Instead

Captive, or in captivity → In human care

Exhibit → Habitat, or home

Diet → Nutrition

To pet → Touch, or feel

Modeling

Modeling positive, empathic behavior provides an example for others to learn how to build empathic skills. Valued role models play an important part in how their audiences develop empathic behavior. If the role models act, speak about or engage with animals in a certain way, they normalize empathetic behavior and encourage their audience to mirror that same behavior.

Practices you can try:

- Physically and verbally model the empathic behaviors you want people to achieve and reinforce positive behavior. Try to be aware of your nonverbal language (facial expressions, how you react to/interact with an animal, etc.) because your audience, especially children, will pick up on those clues and mirror that behavior.
- Support caregivers as role models by teaching them best practices so they can also model positive empathic behaviors with their children.

Increasing Knowledge

By increasing knowledge, people can more accurately perceive the emotions and intentions of others (people and animals). Knowledge becomes more impactful when people feel connected to an animal empathically. It leads to informed empathy which takes into account an individual animal's needs. This is important to prevent misconceptions and promote accurate understanding.

Practices you can try:

- Highlight the similarities and differences between the animals and people, including their needs, specific characteristics, behaviors or other comparisons.
    - Our naturalists often talk about an animal's needs and how they compare to our needs. We highlight what an animal needs to survive (basic needs - like food, water, shelter and space) and what they need to thrive (secondary needs - like enrichment, choice, and opportunities to be social). When people are able to understand an individual animal's needs, they are more likely to develop empathy for that animal.
- Narrate animal behaviors and connect them to (interpretations of) the individual animal's emotions and intentions. Share how and why an animal is or is not behaving a certain way.

- Storytelling is a powerful tool for fostering empathy in guests. The stories do not have to be long with a beginning, middle and end. They can be a short arc that gives people a glimpse of an individual animal's life. People often remember stories because they experience empathic responses when identifying with the characters. This document is full of stories about the animals meant to help guests connect our individual animals to the species as a whole.
    - Guests might first learn from you about the grizzly bears in our care to foster an appreciation for the individuals, and then you can layer on the conservation story of grizzly bears from past eradication practices and habitat destruction to the present-day recovery of the species, and share actions that people can do to help.
- Facilitate conversations to understand your audience's perspective as well and find out what they already know. That way, the conversation is more tailored to your audience and they can better connect to the information you are sharing.

Providing Experiences

Giving people the opportunity to interact with animals and the environment not only exposes people to new experiences, but they are also more likely to develop a deeper connection to the animals with whom they interact. The more time people spend with animals, especially animals that show agency and natural behaviors, the more opportunities to build connections. Experiences do not all have to be structured programs - they could include casual conversations, interpretive signage, online/virtual experiences or events.

Northwest Trek has created habitats (ex: Free Roaming Area) and offers experiences (ex: Elk Bugling Tours, Keeper Chats) that show or highlight the animals demonstrating natural behaviors (ex: Bear torpor) and showing a sense of agency. We strive to allow natural behaviors to be as visible as possible to help guests foster empathy for that animal.

Practices you can try:

- Prompt focused observation of an animal's physical characteristics and movements, and provide information for people to understand the animal more.
- If possible, provide repeated and extended experiences for people to engage with animals and learn new things about them.

Practice

Empathy development requires practice and it looks different for everyone. By providing more opportunities for people to practice empathic skills and giving positive feedback when it is observed, the more likely those skills will be repeated.

Practices you can try:

- Ask inquiry-based, open-ended questions to encourage people to have conversations about animals and take the animals' perspective.
- Verbally acknowledge people when desired empathic statements, questions and behaviors are displayed.
    - Ex: Compliment and thank guests for observing the amphibians in the Cheney Discovery Center quietly and not tapping on the glass.

Activating Imagination

Activating the imagination helps people to better understand the perspective of others. This involves cognitive empathy because it requires active empathic reasoning. When people take the perspective of another animal, we increase our concern for the animal's well-being. There are many ways to activate imagination, and some of the most common perspective-taking practices are storytelling, role-playing and mimicry.

Practices you can try:

- While children are especially good at role-playing and mimicry, try using those same techniques on adults too. People of all ages understand animals more when they make connections between the physical movements of animals and the animals' emotions or thoughts.
- Encourage people to imagine themselves as an individual animal, and then ask open-ended questions about their personal needs, wants and likes or dislikes from the animal's perspective in a given context. These questions will help the participant focus on the perspective of the animal and build empathy, rather than sympathy which does not involve a shared perspective.
