Leader Engagement

Speaking Notes

This document contains suggested speaking notes to accompany presentation slides. Feel free to adapt these notes to your own voice, individual meeting priorities and outcomes, and/or any organization-specific terminology.

Slide 5

Provide an introduction of yourself, perhaps a personal story and the reason for presenting. For example:

"I remember the first time I witnessed a presentation by keeper Sally that utilized empathy practices. It was powerful to see her draw people in by sharing fascinating details about Windana the emu. Rather than stick to natural history, she highlighted the senior care we provide for Windana and drew parallels to the needs of older adults. Soon guests were asking questions beyond what we might usually expect. An animal who often gets ignored was suddenly a star. And I realized that empathy has the potential to transform what sticks with our guests after their visit."

Slide 6

Zoos and aquariums have always been places where people encounter animals in ways they simply cannot elsewhere.

Millions of people come through our doors every year curious, excited, and often already emotionally open to connection with nature and with each other. Their experiences with us can transform how our guests view animals and conservation issues.

Slide 7

Are we using the moments we have with our guests as intentionally as we could? What happens after they go home?

There is a leadership opportunity that is at the heart of why zoos and aquariums matter to wildlife conservation. It is about our relationship with the guests we welcome at our organizations, and what that relationship can inspire beyond our grounds or walls.

Slide 8

We can go even further than we already do, today. We have the power to leverage what is memorable and motivating about the experiences we provide as an intentional mission strategy that strengthens our public impact.

By using specific guest engagement practices that pair strong science with emotional connection, we can channel the perceptions people have and deepen how they see animals, our organizations, and their own role in conservation.

Slide 9

Our field has long relied on sharing facts about species and the threats facing them to inspire guests to contribute to taking conservation action. We know that learning matters, and that facts build credibility, but just the facts are not enough on their own.

Emerging conservation psychology research shows that providing information alone rarely changes behavior (see slide 28 for details, also in QR code on slide 34). Instead, people are often moved to act when they feel connected, when they understand why something matters, and when they can see a role for themselves. That is what effective empathy practices can help us foster.

Our society uses the word 'empathy' to describe a variety of emotions, but in empathy for wildlife work we mean something much more specific. The information I'm sharing today reflects the collective learning of the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife (or ACE for Wildlife) Network, a community of more than 1,300 professionals from primarily AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums who are developing techniques to improve guest engagement.

This Network promotes empathy as an emotional state that can be intentionally cultivated, helping people connect with the experience or perspective of another living being, including an animal.

Slide 10

Empathy is an ability that can be strengthened or diminished based on setting and context. Like building muscles, developing empathy takes effort and zoos and aquariums can be ideal empathy gyms.

By fostering empathy for wildlife during visits, we are using our skills as conservation advocates to move guests towards considering animal needs and how people can help animals both inside our organizations, and their counterparts in the wild.

Our organizations can foster a specific type of empathy with that goal in mind: to motivate guests to behave in ways that support animal wellbeing, either through caring or conservation action. Motivational empathy involves intentionally providing ways for people to understand another's perspective and needs and feel motivated to improve their life.

Slide 11

Empathy can be a spark or tipping point in getting guests both more enthusiastic, and more informed about conservation. Ultimately, feeling empathy allows visitors to connect their concern for the well-being of animals to the importance of acting in caring ways, including conserving an environment where animals can survive and even thrive.

Our work to foster empathy for wildlife also allows us to be seen as a leader in issues that people care about – which is good for practical needs like our long-term sustainability, our reputation with our audiences, our relevance in our community, and, ultimately, increasing our impact through greater collective investment in our work.

Slide 12

How do we know that positive outcomes can happen through greater adoption of effective empathy

practices and initiatives at the organizational level?

There is a growing community of accredited zoos and aquariums that are experiencing the benefits of this work.

Slide 13

Since 2019, the ACE for Wildlife Network has been learning, creating, and sharing effective practices that foster empathy for animals and people and lead to conservation action.

Over time this community has expanded to include professionals from organizations of many different sizes and geographies, both in the US and around the world.

The Network is a place for zoo, aquarium, and other conservation professionals to work together, share resources, and be in community together. That matters because no one institution has to figure this out alone.

All of the AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums that participate in the Network are learning through doing and collaborating. They are also evaluating and sharing what they learned with others – this includes sharing tested tools and resources, and stories of how their work is having an impact on guests.

Slide 14

Empathy for wildlife initiatives occur all over the globe. The Network (as of August 2026) currently comprises more than 30 AZA-Accredited Partner Organizations and over 1,300 Members and Affiliates across six continents – and growing. In fact, over 60% of AZA-accredited organizations have staff participating in the Network.

Network participants are trialing real-world programs and practices in ways both big and small. Here in the United States, empathy for wildlife initiatives run the gamut from short pilots with one or two team members involved, to collaborations across multiple organizations spanning years.

I wanted to share some examples with you of what this work looks like in our field, and some of the outcomes that our peers have experienced.

Slide 15

Dakota Zoo's Advancing Empathy through Animal Behavior and Education Enhancements
Dakota Zoo wanted to pilot a project that could transform how guests connect with animals and staff. Their goal was to improve guest experience. Specifically, they sought to move guest experiences from being solely about learning facts to creating more memorable and personal moments between people and the animals they encounter.

- Dakota Zoo relaunched their off- and on-grounds programs, infusing programming with up-close animal encounters and authentic stories about their animals.
- They also introduced 10 animal trading cards about key program animals and relevant conservation messaging. If you look closely, you'll notice these cards aren't about species biology – they're about individual animals that live at the Dakota Zoo.

- By using the unique individuals as a bridge to caring about the species, the cards offered new ways for guests to connect to the animals through a combination of fact-gathering, storytelling and direct interaction, not just observation from a distance.

The guest-first approach extended into staff culture. Staff coaching, and animal behavior training helped the team move from an inward, "animal-care-only" mindset to one equally centered on animal wellbeing and on the guest experience. This transformation equipped staff with more confidence, more consistent messaging, and a more collaborative, creative culture.

New tools such as ambassador animal fact sheets, innovative animal program spaces like a portable faux prairie dog mound, and consistent evaluation also gave staff a foundation to keep improving guest experiences.

Specific program results:

- Wild Expeditions reached more than 1,450 additional youth and families— including schools, nursing homes, libraries, daycares, and neighboring tribal reservations.
- Guests voluntarily took more than 3,000 trading cards in 2024, showing genuine interest rather than passive exposure.

Guest stories and staff observations collected since programming was implemented indicate these new experiences deepened emotional connections, encouraged word-of-mouth promotion, strengthened trust in the zoo's care practices, and expanded the zoo's conservation message into the wider community.

Slide 16

Lake Superior Zoo's Inspiring Motivational Empathy through Playful Connections
Lake Superior Zoo worked with staff from across departments to create seven empathy-focused interpretive signs and a parallel play area to encourage children to mirror red panda behaviors they saw in the red pandas' habitat.

The goal was to help guests, especially children, build empathy for endangered red pandas by creating an interactive space to develop new perspectives about the species and identify behaviors and characteristics that guests and red pandas may share. An evaluation tool was also developed, so that staff could assess the effects of the experience guests were having over time.

Staff and stakeholders were included in conversations from the beginning of concept development. This process ensured perspectives from across the organization were considered, organizational capacity was strengthened by increasing staff knowledge and skills in empathy-centered exhibit design, and enthusiasm was created for applying these approaches to future exhibits.

Specific program results:

- Built empathy for animals through interactive programming.
- Highlighted the value of designing exhibits through multiple perspectives.
- Equipped staff to design future empathy-centered exhibits.

Data collected from 50 guests showed adults actively used signage to guide children's play and help them identify red pandas' feelings. The zoo plans to use these findings to inform how future signage is designed across departments.

The red panda-themed play space became an opportunity to get leadership, guest experience, animal care, education, and marketing staff working together from a shared empathy-centered framework. Internally, the biggest payoff was capacity building, with staff across teams gaining knowledge and skills in empathy-centered exhibit design.

Slide 17

Minnesota Zoo's Increasing Empathy for Animals and Conservation Action through Use of Biofacts
Minnesota Zoo created opportunities for youth, families, staff, volunteers, and community members to practice taking real conservation action choices by pairing the zoo's biofact collection with empathy best practices and wildlife trafficking education.

A conventional wildlife program may tell visitors which animals are threatened and why it matters. Minnesota Zoo's project changed its approach by utilizing specific empathy-fostering techniques. Staff built and facilitated multiple programs to encourage simulated decision-making that helped them feel the consequences of their choices:

- A new Tropics Trail zone was established. Guests walk through a winding rainforest habitat, spotlighting tropical species and biodiversity hot-spot zones, and end their visit at a display which enables visitors to see how their own purchases and trip decisions could affect animals.
- A Vanishing Animals Zoo Class (grades 6-12) extended simulated decision-making into a structured educational setting, as children explored biodiversity and endangered species threats. These programs allowed zoo staff to deliver empathy-for-wildlife best practices to young people -- a key audience for building lasting conservation habits.
- Zoo Camp and booth programming provided audiences with opportunities to engage with the same material through age-appropriate activities. This approach gave Minnesota Zoo the ability to meet, connect with and teach visitors where they already were on their conservation journey.

The zoo also built resources to test and refine the effectiveness of educating guests in this way, including numerous evaluation tools, a literature review, and a biofact handbook. To extend its reach, the zoo shared the handbook with 12 other zoos. As participants in the Network, we can access these materials as well.

Zoo staff trained in using empathy techniques learned in real time the importance of utilizing volunteers as champions for empathy-centered biofact work, and about creating programming that enhances volunteer knowledge and knowledge-sharing skills in this space.

Specific program results:

- Reached youth, families, staff, and volunteers.
- Shared practical, responsible conservation action steps.
- Empathy-based education inspired guests toward real conservation action.
- Drove 56 requests for shared conservation resources.
- The project also produced 4 peer presentations, 1 AZA Connect Magazine feature on the Ivory Lab, and 2 additional webinars that drew 50–75 live participants per session, and 63 recording viewers to date.

Slide 18

Racine Zoo's Empathy and Ethograms
Racine Zoo's empathy ethogram project placed QR code signs adjacent to animal habitats, inviting guests to observe individual animals and answer brief surveys about their behaviors. The goal was to encourage visitors to share observations that would inform animal care decisions without requiring additional zookeeper staff time.

Guests recorded behavioral patterns, contributed welfare-relevant insights, and helped staff understand how animals responded to changes — functioning as an extension of the observation team onsite. About 29% of guest responses included empathy markers: guests using animals' names, describing how animals might feel, comparing animals to themselves, or expressing concern.

The project exceeded its original goal of 500 responses, collecting 831 guest responses over a year's time. All feedback was gathered passively through guest engagement with the QR code signage. Using guest data to validate and provide additional context to behavior changes observed by staff extended the zoo's capacity at no extra cost to their time. Learning to trust guests as meaningful observers also eased pressure on staff.

Specific program results:

- Feedback validated staff observations about behavioral patterns.
- Observations drove improvements without adding to staff workload.
- Created blueprint for the zoo to expand guest involvement.

The zoo plans to continue building a system that supports staff decision-making by expanding the tool to more species and new residents, refining survey questions, and using guest questions to shape future signage.

Slide 19

As you've heard from some of these experiences in the field, many organizations are starting to weave empathy into the daily work of caring for animals and connecting guests to wildlife.

Across the spectrum of AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, we are seeing empathy for wildlife become more central and present across many different professional conversations. This includes AZA's Connect magazine, scholarly journals, as well as peer-to-peer interactions in online and in-person spaces that share anecdote and learning about effective practices.

Just a few more examples of how an empathy for wildlife mindset shows up in the field:

- During live cockroach encounters at Racine Zoo, where students often have change of heart after learning about the personality traits of resident hissing cockroaches and having the chance to name them.
- At Idaho Falls Zoo's repeatedly sold-out Bat Nights, where staff highlight the bats as attentive mothers and helpful at controlling insect populations.
- In the snake-centered programming at Lake Superior Zoo, where the animals are able to move freely to demonstrate animal-led decision making.

Slide 20

There are a number of ways I think our organization can benefit from empathy for wildlife work to support our business and mission needs.

Slide 21

We foster empathy in our audiences because it is an effective way to support our conservation missions. But the benefits of incorporating empathy practices go beyond conservation action. This work mutually benefits animals in human care, wild animals, zoos and aquariums as organizations, and our visitors.

Slide 22

One of the most beneficial outcomes of empathy for wildlife initiatives is the changing relationship it can foster between zoos and aquariums and their guests.

The Network has shared many examples of how these types of programs and practices help guests go deeper and leave their visits feeling more invested both in animal wellbeing and in the work our organizations do.

Some of the benefits we see for guest experience can include:

- Boosting attendance and other types of financial investment, like donations.
- Better science learning and better engagement metrics for onsite and offsite visits.
- Better community word of mouth supporting the organization.
- Reported increases in guests' feeling connected with both nature, and the people and animals around them.

Slide 23

Our organization's staff are dedicated and experienced with making the most of the resources they have. But there are needs they may have, and supports they can access, that are unique offerings from empathy for wildlife initiatives.

Managing encounters with guests – both through formal education and through informal encounters – can sometimes be demanding for our staff. Empathy for wildlife tools provide ways for staff to manage both the emotional and practical challenges that can arise during guest interactions.

These tools can also lead to better outcomes for animals through fostering more caring behaviors from

guests onsite that support animal wellbeing (such as keeping voices down and not banging on glass). And these tools directly support education by increasing the longevity of what guests learn through engaging with us.

Slide 24

As the world changes there is no doubt that zoos and aquariums must change with it. However, public perceptions of our field can sometimes lag behind where we actually stand on issues like animal wellbeing and wildlife conservation.

We need people to participate in conservation alongside us, but we also need – reputationally – for people to understand we have a positive role to play in helping people and the environment.

Our field also has a huge opportunity to be a source of hope. People's time with our organizations can help generate a real sense of optimism for the future. This hope and optimism are something our society needs to effect ongoing positive change.

Slide 25

We don't have to start from scratch in implementing empathy for wildlife initiatives.

The ACE for Wildlife Network has already created and shared hundreds of practical tools and resources that we can use to implement this work, today.

And, because resources have been trialed by Network participants, we already have some knowledge about how effective they are.

I wanted to share a few examples of existing resources that can be helpful to our current work, to give you a sense of what exists now.

Slide 26

The Empathy Training Toolkit provides organizations with empathy trainings and similar resources created within the ACE for Wildlife Network. This is the Network's most widely used and well-known resource.

Trainings can be used inside organizations to familiarize staff with empathy practices and embed empathy within their organizations. For example, a department head could pilot a training series with their staff and have a follow-up team discussion about what they learned, and how it might fit into existing work.

Resources include templates and examples of:

- General Empathy Training
- Empathy Interpretation Training
- Empathy Infused Animal Fact Sheets
- Guidance for Empathy and Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion

Slide 27

The words organizations use will shape how the public perceives our care, expertise, and credibility.

This toolkit provides alternatives for traditionally-used words in the zoo and aquarium lexicon and aims to close the gap between outdated terminology and the high standard of care our organizations deliver.

It includes alternatives for language that no longer aligns with or does not fully express the thoughtfulness and professionalism of AZA-accredited organizations.

It also suggests alternatives for internal jargon, including language that visitors, donors, and media contacts will better understand. This matters for public engagement and support.

Terms and alternatives in this toolkit can be used as a starting point for choosing empathy-informed language and can be adapted to fit any organization's voice.

Slide 28

This guide equips organizations with the evidence needed to invest with confidence in programming that fosters empathy, connecting it directly to measurable conservation outcomes versus unproven ideas or assumptions.

It does not provide step-by-step implementation strategies, because effective programming looks different across different types of organizations.

Instead, it provides decision-makers with:

- Clear evidence linking empathy programming to conservation and caring outcomes.
- Direct access to current academic research and program evaluations, saving leadership and staff the time of vetting sources.
- A foundation for evidence-based decisions about where and how to fund empathy programming.
- A shared reference point for internal discussions, so conversations about incorporating empathy start from common evidence rather than differing opinions.

Slide 29

This report gives organizations a framework for using a particular kind of anthropomorphism in conservation messaging. Research has demonstrated that critical anthropomorphism, the use of scientifically accurate and relatable language, helps audiences connect with animals, change their perceptions, and increase their willingness to act on an animal’s behalf.

The report equips staff to make confident, defensible decisions by answering the questions others may ask:

- What type of anthropomorphism are we encouraging? — so messaging stays intentional.
- If anthropomorphism is controversial, why use it and when? — so staff can justify the approach to skeptics.
- What is the relationship between anthropomorphism and empathy? — so the technique is tied to conservation outcomes, not just emotions.
- What value, if any, is there in using anthropomorphism in promoting our conservation missions? — so its use is a strategic choice.

Slide 30

We all have a story of how easily someone connected to a mammal but recoiled at the sight of an invertebrate. This report evaluates 12 academic studies that explicitly compared how and why people feel differing levels of empathy across animal taxa. With this knowledge, we have the insights we need to help people understand, care, and act on behalf of all animals – not just the cute and fuzzy ones.

Beyond identifying general trends, this report unpacks the specific factors driving empathy difference across animal groups, giving leadership the details they need to support decisions about empathy-related programming.

This report:

- Examines how people's empathy levels vary across different groups of animals, so resource allocation is grounded in evidence.
- Explores the factors that influence empathy differences, so we can understand both "what" AND "why" these differences occur.
- Translates research findings into actionable strategies for zoo and aquarium professionals to tap into strategies that can foster empathy for underappreciated animals.
- Provides a summary of the report and lists possible next steps and directions for research and practice.

Slide 31

You may be familiar with a parallel program at Woodland Park Zoo, the Advancing Empathy Grant Program, that has awarded $9 million across 100 projects at 32 field-leading AZA-accredited organizations over the past five years. These grants help organizations plan, build, and expand empathy-based initiatives, and reshare outcomes, best practices, and resources with the ACE for Wildlife Network to fuel global collaboration.

To increase the accessibility of grant-funded resources, the Advancing Empathy team created a series of 10 toolkits that share projects and their impact. Toolkits include topics like interpretation, public programs, construction, training, animal husbandry, and long-term planning.

Full list:
Animal ambassadors
Construction
On-site interpretation
Animal care play spaces & young learners
Diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion
Educational programs & partnerships
Staff and volunteers
Animal husbandry
Long term planning
Signage

Slide 32

Across the Network, we are actively exploring not just how to tell stories, but why storytelling matters in conservation work. This toolkit is designed to support that exploration. It offers a shared foundation,

practical framing guidance, and real-world examples from across the Network to help organizations tell stories that are ethical, engaging, and effective.

All of the resources I shared today are linked via QR code at the end of this deck, if you would like to follow-up with a deeper exploration.

Slide 33

We suggest developing a concluding slide with a call to action that you identify, supporting your leader's continued engagement with empathy for wildlife work. This might be an exploration of the resources you presented, a specific project proposal for consideration, a suggestion for a larger group internal meeting, or other outcome/next step. Feel free to use this slide as a template and create a conclusion that is right for your needs.

Ultimately, empathy practices help people connect across differences and work toward a future where people, animals, and their shared environment are strong, healthy, and meaningfully connected. As more zoos and aquariums adopt these practices, we can improve public understanding of the links between animal and human wellbeing.

Together, we can create the right conditions that allow this work to flourish.

Slide 34

Reference slide if needed.