

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release | April 2025

Contact: Michele Aguilar Kahrs, empathygrants@zoo.org

Woodland Park Zoo announces \$3.3 million in fifth round of grant distribution to support transformative empathy for wildlife projects

SEATTLE— Woodland Park Zoo is pleased to announce it will distribute \$3.3 million in new empathy for wildlife project grants to build organizational capacity at 14 zoos and aquariums across the western U.S.



This fifth round of grantmaking builds on the long-term commitment of Woodland Park Zoo and its Association of Zoos and Aquariums' (AZA) accredited grantees to drive positive social change. In partnership with Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies (MACP), Woodland Park Zoo developed the capacity to become a grantmaking intermediary in 2020; the grants are distributed through the zoo's Advancing Empathy Grant Program. This fifth round of funding is the largest and longest to date and focuses on trust-based philanthropy that supports grantees taking on ambitious, multi-year projects to foster empathy and build zoo and aquarium guest connections with wildlife.

"Our grantees are helping transform zoos and aquariums into places where research-based empathy practices shape how people connect with animals and with their communities," said Dr. Marta Burnet, Director of Advancing Empathy at Woodland Park Zoo. "This round of grants reflects a collective shift towards creating spaces where empathy leads to action, and where visitors of all ages can build meaningful connections with wildlife. Visiting a zoo is not just about seeing animals—it's about cultivating care, understanding and a shared responsibility for our natural world."

Grants made through the [Advancing Empathy Grant Program](#) support AZA-accredited organizations in Alaska, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin. Lessons learned and new tools and resources produced by grantees are shared with the Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE) for Wildlife Network™.

Innovative Grant Funded Projects

Fostering relationships is a focus of Lake Superior Zoo's Big Cat Connections grant, which aims to enhance both guest engagement and animal welfare through the construction of three new training walls designed for their Amur tiger, Taj; snow leopard, Kiran; and cougar siblings, Tacoma and Olympia. The project will allow keepers to demonstrate animal care and enrichment practices alongside new interpretive tours and improved visitor accessibility design. Big Cat Connections builds on their history of empathy-infused habitat design, including a past grant-funded project that allowed both red pandas and children to display their natural play behaviors, side-by-side, on the same types of climbing structures, swings and rope systems. "Building the habitat with

empathy at our forefront made the process smoother, as there was a common goal that all staff were working toward,” said Lizzy Larson, Director of Animal Management. “This process has been incredibly rewarding for the staff because not only did we design the habitat and parallel play intentionally, but we have seen both our guests and red panda enjoying the same play structures at the same time.”



Taj the Amur Tiger and the Red Panda playscape at Lake Superior Zoo

Innovation is a hallmark of many grant-funded projects, whether they are infusing empathy into experiential and interactive learning, rethinking storytelling through physical and digital interpretive design, or integrating culturally responsive practices to engage underrepresented communities.

For example, Minnesota Zoo’s past grant-funded work has included finding ways to engage with nonverbal guests, including seniors with Alzheimer’s disease and people with autism, and adapting programming to help these guests interact with animals within their comfort level. In the current grant round, Minnesota Zoo continues its people-centered investment by focusing on training its staff in effective storytelling techniques and incorporating empathy principles into zoo classes, outreach and wildlife trafficking education. “We’re recognizing how empathy can be expressed through movements, gestures, reactions—not just words,” said Liz Gilles, Education Curator at the Minnesota

Zoo. “This work is helping us connect more meaningfully with guests of all abilities and communication styles, making empathy programming more accessible and inclusive.”



Wildlife Trafficking Community Booth at Minnesota Zoo

Several organizations have continued to shift perspectives of both guests and staff members through multiple funded project rounds. At Dakota Zoo, their community outreach and animal ambassador programs have invested in providing up close experiences with animals that guests may have inherent fear of, such as the zoo’s Ball Python, Monty. Education Assistant Shannon Chaussee shares, “On more than one occasion I’ve seen adults – sometimes for the first time – begin to see snakes in an entirely new light. Their faces light up in awe and appreciation. It’s also rewarding to watch children overcome their initial hesitation and, in many cases, gently reach out to touch.”

Dakota Zoo’s newest grant-funded project prioritizes advanced animal ambassador training to strengthen staff capacity and expand the reach of their Wild EncouTOURS and Wild Expeditions programming to bring meaningful, empathy-centered encounters to guests both on-site and throughout the community. Allison Malkowski, Assistant Director at Dakota Zoo explains, “We’ve had a mindset shift here around engaging with guests. Animal care staff are explaining their jobs in ways that help guests become more aware and understand the impact that we have on conservation.”

Professionals who are interested in learning more about the connection of empathy to wildlife conservation are invited to explore the ACE for Wildlife Network’s free online introduction to empathy at introduction.aceforwildlife.org.

Project sites in the current grant round include Alaska SeaLife Center in Seward, Alaska; Zoo Boise in Boise, Idaho; Minnesota Zoo in Apple Valley, Minn.; Como Park Zoo and Conservatory in St. Paul, Minn.; Lake Superior Zoo in Duluth, Minn.; ZooMontana in Billings, Mont.; Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone, Mont.; Dakota Zoological Society in Bismarck, N.D.; Northwest Trek Wildlife Park in Eatonville, Wash.; Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in Tacoma, Wash.; Henry Vilas Zoo in Madison, Wis.; International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wis.; Zoological Society of Milwaukee in Milwaukee, Wis.; and Racine Zoo in Racine, Wis.

About Woodland Park Zoo

Founded in 1899, Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle engages more than a million visitors of all ages, backgrounds, abilities, and walks of life in extraordinary experiences with animals, inspiring them to make conservation a priority in their lives. The zoo is helping to save animals and their habitats in the wild through more than 35 wildlife conservation projects in the Pacific Northwest and around the world. Woodland Park Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums and certified by the rigorous American Humane Conservation program. The Humane Certified™ seal of approval is another important validation of the zoo's long-standing tradition of meeting the highest standards in animal welfare. Visit www.zoo.org and follow the zoo on [Facebook](#) [YouTube](#) [Instagram](#) [Bluesky](#) [Blog](#) [TikTok](#)

###