

## **Woodland Park Zoo announces \$3.3 million in 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 capacity at 14 zoos and aquariums across the western U.S. In partnership with Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, 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 grantmaking builds on the long-term commitment (AZA) accredited grantees to drive positive social change by 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. "These grants reflect 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."

### **Example 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 tours and improved visitor accessibility design.

Innovation is a hallmark of many grant-funded projects, such as rethinking storytelling through physical and digital design, and integrating culturally responsive practices to engage underrepresented communities.

For example, Minnesota Zoo's past grant-funded work 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 their current grant, Minnesota Zoo continues its people-centered investment. "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.” 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](https://introduction.aceforwildlife.org).

Grants made through the [Advancing Empathy Grant Program](#) support AZA-accredited organizations in Alaska, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin.

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