

Animal Visitor Interactions

Position Statement

1. Background

Zoo and Aquarium Association (ZAA) members, as contemporary conservation organisations, are ambassadors for community education and connecting people with nature.

ZAA-accredited zoos and aquariums aspire for their visitors to experience the awe of nature via interaction with animals and come away as conservation advocates in their communities. These experiences provide an opportunity for people to learn about various species, their natural behaviours and their conservation in a highly engaging way that encourages environmental action. An animal visitor interaction is any encounter where an animal and visitor have the potential to be in close proximity.

Animal visitor experiences can have a deep impression upon the subsequent attitudes, knowledge, and actions of peopleⁱ and should aim to be positive for both animals and visitors.

ZAA follows the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) science-based animal welfare strategy Caring for Wildlifeⁱⁱ, and WAZA's Guidelines for Animal Visitor Interactionsⁱⁱⁱ. ZAA members are accredited for positive animal welfare. Using the Five Domains Animal Welfare Model^{iv}, ZAA grants accreditation to zoos and aquariums that have clearly demonstrated their commitment to positive animal welfare. ZAA's Accreditation Program now includes a welfare assessment of a sample of animals that participate in visitor interactions.

2. Position

ZAA member zoos and aquariums aspire for people to admire and respect animals; both the species and individual animals. By helping people to connect with, understand and act for wildlife, members create the opportunity for community behaviour change for greater conservation and environmental sustainability action.

ZAA member zoos and aquariums are responsible for providing visitors with interactions that demonstrate respect for animals, and that inspire and educate, and do not impede an animal's welfare.

Animal interactions must have a clear conservation purpose and should be regularly assessed for their effectiveness.

An interactive experience may include:

- Animal encounters in areas of the zoo / aquarium that are not usually accessible to the public;
- Animal encounters which are up close individual encounters or group encounters;
- Pop-up encounters within a zoo or aquarium;
- Demonstrations including presentations and feeding;
- Animals taken off-site for outreach programs;
- Walk-through habitats; and
- Photo opportunities

To ensure animal visitor interactions facilitate safe, positive, and engaging experiences for both animals and visitors, ZAA members must consider the following elements.

2.1 Animal Visitor Interaction Program Design

When designing an animal visitor interaction program, be clear on the purpose and the conservation goals of the planned experience, and the considerations required to support the animal's welfare state.

- a. An interactive experience must not compromise an animal's welfare state;
- b. Activities in an animal visitor interaction must not compel an animal to perform unnatural behaviours i.e. behaviours that are not natural for the species;
- c. Activities must enable an animal to present species typical behaviours in their setting, wherever possible;
- d. Animals that are involved in direct contact situations should always receive appropriate training for visitor interactions to reduce potential discomfort or stress responses;
- e. Make no unnecessary demands on animals and always ensure people do not provoke nor create discomfort or stress responses in the animals;
- f. Animal visitor interactions must take place in a setting and context which encourages appreciation and respect for the animal;
- g. All walk-through habitats, touch pools and petting areas/touch paddocks where animals are in close proximity to visitors should be of a suitable size to provide for species-appropriate needs and have suitable refuge areas for the animals;
- h. If staff or volunteers are not present, then animals must have opportunity for refuge away from visitors;
- i. Any feeding during an interaction must be regulated to be consistent with the animal's overall appropriate diet and health care;
- j. Food provided in interactions must not be the only access to food or the whole diet for the animal. Animals must have the option whether they accept this food or not, and there must be the opportunity to seek food outside of the interaction; and
- k. Animal interactions must be compliant with relevant jurisdictional regulations and meet interaction frequency and duration standards.

2.2 Providing Options for Participating Animals

ZAA uses the science based Five Domains^{iv} model as a comprehensive and systematic basis for an animal welfare assessment framework. The model outlines four physical domains; nutrition, environment, physical health, and behaviour, and the fifth domain, which is the animal's mental state. The four physical domains should be carefully regarded when designing, monitoring, and assessing the welfare of animals participating in interactive experiences for having confidence in an animal's mental welfare state in the context of a visitor interaction.

- a. When designing or monitoring a visitor interaction program consider the physical domains; nutrition, environment, physical health, and behaviour;
- b. Present interactions in the context of these domains and enable an animal the option to participate or not, in an interaction;
- c. Allow adequate rest time between interactions and suitable opportunities for refuge for animals opting not to participate;
- d. If at any time during a visitor interaction an animal displays any known indication that it does not want to participate the animal (or person) is removed from the interactive experience.

2.3 Responsible Photography

Animal interactions are believed to facilitate enjoyable and meaningful connections between people and animals, and evidence of this experience – a photo – can capture the memory and provide a long-term reminder of any learnings and personal commitments.

To effectively attain conservation goals, ZAA member zoos and aquariums aim to meet recommended minimum standards necessary for responsible photography of animals in their care.

- a. The use of Photography must not adversely affect the welfare of any animals. For example, consideration must be given to relevant aspects of photography, such as use of flashes, to manage this;
- b. The use of Photography and associated images must not diminish respect for the animal being photographed, or the species represented i.e. their wildness or their natural selves;
- c. Individual animals should not receive an unfair share of benefit or burden through being used repeatedly in visitor interactions featuring photography;
- d. Use of photography in visitor interactions must contribute positively to conservation outcomes, whether directly or indirectly. Examples include education about, and promotion of, conservation values to visitors, allocation of income or other resources being directed towards the protection or enhancement of biodiversity or care for the species.

2.4 Conservation Messaging

In line with the conservation purpose of an interaction zoos and aquariums should provide clear messaging to accompany their interaction experiences. This can be done via talks, signage and / or conservation education programs.

- a. Messaging that accompanies all interactive experiences should raise conservation awareness and aim to drive conservation outcomes;
- b. Communication should focus the experience on the animals, provide unique insight about the individual animals, their behaviours, and the inherent value of the species in nature;
- c. Messaging should include information on the animal welfare and management processes involved in caring for the animals;
- d. Any photo opportunities must be accompanied by conservation and animal welfare information to raise awareness and encourage subsequent responsible behaviours;
- e. Showcase the conservation and sustainability work of the organisation.

2.5 Suitability and Selection of Animals

An animal's physical and mental welfare needs to be considered in the context of animal visitor interactions as does breeding planning and/or breed for release. Some species and/or individual animals are more appropriate for visitor interactions than others.

- a. There should be careful evaluation of the suitability of the species and individuals selected for visitor interactions, taking into account temperament, age and gender (young, breeding or elderly animals may be susceptible to discomfort or stress responses);
- b. Do not include species or individuals in visitor interaction experiences that are intolerant of human contact;
- c. Carefully consider the risk of disruption to social groups for the purpose of animal interactions; and
- d. Do not use animals for interactive experiences that are destined for reintroduction (AVIs should not impede any efforts to conserve species) or population management programs. Breeding

program animals may be used in interactive experiences only when there is no interference with breeding or population management goals.

2.6 Staff Expertise

Supporting animal welfare during animal visitor interactions relies heavily on staff or volunteer experience and expertise. The following is important to consider for safe, positive, and effective experiences for both animals and visitors.

- a. All staff or volunteers handling or in close contact with animals should be trained, experienced and able to read animal behaviour and recognise signs of discomfort or stress in interaction animals;
- b. Staff experience and expertise is needed for careful evaluation of species and the individuals selected for interactions;
- c. Staff or volunteers must be authorised to remove animals from interactive experiences if required; and
- d. Regularly assess staff and volunteer expertise and apply training when necessary;

2.7 Monitoring and Assessment

All animal visitor interaction programs should be regularly assessed for their impact on the welfare of the animals; both the animals in the interaction as well as other members of a social group or habitat companions if an animal is removed periodically for visitor interactions.

To support program assessments the ZAA Animal Welfare Management Tool, developed using the Five Domains Animal Welfare Model, is a useful framework to follow. The outcome of these assessments may help inform the ongoing suitability of individual animals for an interaction.

Daily records should document the animal visitor interaction schedule of each day (excluding walk-through habitats), including the frequency per animal, duration, time of day of an interaction, the number of visitors and the experience provided. These records support a continual evaluation process to avoid welfare compromise to the animals.

- a. Regularly assess animal interaction programs noting potential impact on an animal's physical and behavioural welfare. Withdraw animals from interaction programs if welfare is compromised.
- b. If an assessment of records indicates an unfair burden of repeated visitor interactions on a few animals, this must be rectified.
- c. Regularly assess the effectiveness of an animal visitor interaction to ensure the experience meets organisation and program conservation goals and provides positive learning experiences for visitors.

2.8 Safety

Interactive experiences may be unpredictable and potentially dangerous, and visitors, staff and volunteers must be advised of the possible risks associated with such experiences. Risk of ill-health or injury to the animal, visitor or staff must be minimised during interactions.

- a. A regular risk review should be carried out on all visitor interactions, with appropriate record maintenance;
- b. Risk of zoonotic infections and exposure of animals to infections should be considered, and opportunities for hand washing before and after direct animal contact must be provided;
- c. Interactive experiences must always be supervised by experienced staff or volunteers for the safety and well-being of animals and visitors involved.

2.9 Unacceptable Activities

Some activities are unacceptable when it comes to ensuring positive experiences for animals and visitors in an interactive experience. The following activities are not considered acceptable for the purpose of enabling an animal visitor interaction:

- a. Presenting animals in a way that visitors could perceive them as exotic (ie out of the ordinary) pets;
- b. Causing physical injury and/or mutilation;
- c. Sedation or other forms of chemical restraint intended to render the animal more docile to interactions;
- d. Physical restraint that results in negative animal welfare states or where an animal indicates it does not want to participate; and
- e. Interactive activities for which the conditioning may compromise an animal's welfare state.

2.10 Conclusion

All members should analyse their current animal visitor interactions as per the criteria provided in this Position Statement, as well checking compliance against all relevant regulatory standards. These criteria can also be used as a decision-making framework for developing new interaction programs.

Zoos and aquariums use interactive experiences to support their conservation and visitor education goals. Animal visitor interactions must be provided in a manner that prioritises positive animal welfare, be supported by evidence-based animal management practices, compliant with health and safety protocols and offer a responsible take home message. Visitor interactions should be regularly reviewed to be confirmed as effective and justified.

2.11 References

- i. Powell, D. M., & Bullock, E. V. (2014). Evaluation of factors affecting emotional responses in zoo visitors and the impact of emotion on conservation mindedness
- ii. Mellor, D.J., Hunt, s. & Gusset, M. (eds) (2015) Caring for Wildlife: The World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy.
- iii. WAZA (2020) WAZA Guidelines for Animal Visitor Interactions. <https://www.waza.org/priorities/animal-welfare/waza-animal-visitor-interaction-guidelines/>
- iv. Mellor, D.J., (2017) Operational Details of the Five Domains Model and Its Key Applications to the Assessment and Management of Animal Welfare

3. Approval and Review Details

Approval History	Details
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This document should be reviewed within five (5) years of the date of approval or last review.

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