

WAZA Guidelines for the Use of Animals in Visitor Interactions



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This document outlines the position of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) on the use of animals in zoos and aquariums for interactions with visitors to these institutions. These guidelines are based on the 2003 *WAZA Code of Ethics and Animal Welfare*¹, the 2015 *World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy*² and the 2015 WAZA resolution on animal interactions³. This resolution recommends that WAZA members adopt a policy on visitor–animal interactions in zoos and aquariums and follow the recommendations as published in the *World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy*; such a policy and recommendations are provided in this document.

Introduction

Zoos and aquariums have a responsibility to achieve high standards of animal welfare in support of their goals as modern conservation organisations. This includes the use of animals in visitor interactions – hereafter referred to as ‘programme animals’. The guidelines presented here are based on the scientific evidence provided in the *World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy*.

Visitor Interactions

Zoos and aquariums have seen a rapid growth in interactive experiences in recent years. The progression from simply exhibiting zoo and aquarium animals for visitors to observe, to present approaches that bring humans and animals into close proximity, has rapidly gained momentum as zoos and aquariums have evolved. From walk-through, swim-through or drive-through exhibits to direct animal contact, such as touch pools, hands-on education or petting areas/touch paddocks, the interactive experiences are varied. Although such visitor–animal interactions are popular, the effect of visitor presence or direct contact on the programme animal’s well-being must also be considered, as ensuring positive welfare at all times is of paramount importance. Other responsibilities include considering the safety of the public and the animals, regular evaluation of the relevance of the interactive experience and the ability of the message being delivered to encourage subsequent responsible behaviours.

As more zoos and aquariums adopt the intuitively attractive principle of ‘connect, understand, act’, there will be increasing opportunities to rigorously evaluate the effects of different approaches towards environmental education, and also to consider carefully the welfare of animals in these programmes. Importantly, there is evidence that some animals find some interactive experiences unpleasant and stressful. More research is required to directly evaluate the impacts of such experiences, and it is the responsibility of the zoos and aquariums providing visitor–animal interactions to undertake this work and to provide visitors with interactions that do not impede the animals’ welfare.

¹ [WAZA \(2003\) *WAZA Code of Ethics and Animal Welfare*. Berne: WAZA.](#)

² [Mellor, D. J., Hunt, S. & Gusset, M. \(eds\) \(2015\) *Caring for Wildlife: The World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy*. Gland: WAZA.](#)

³ Resolution 70.1 adopted at the 70th WAZA Annual Conference (2015).

Monitoring and Assessment

All interactive experiences should be regularly assessed for their impact on the welfare of the animals, by animal-focused assessments that measure the physical and psychological impact on the programme animal, as well as the possible impact on other members of a social group or exhibit companions, if the programme animal is periodically removed for visitor–animal interactions. Special care should be taken when animals are removed from their enclosures for these experiences, as all the animals can become stressed and their behaviour less predictable.

For programme animals that are housed in separate enclosures for the purpose of this opportunity, the impact of differences in housing and husbandry needs to be carefully evaluated. Any animal used for a visitor interaction should have the same opportunities for positive welfare outcomes (such as appropriate enclosure size, infrastructure and enrichment) as other animals held within the zoo or aquarium that are not involved in interactive experiences.

Each interactive experience should also be monitored and documented, as appropriate, including measuring the frequency, duration and timing (time of day) of the visitor–animal interaction; noting whether direct contact is necessary and, if it is, evaluating the appropriateness of the number of visitors, their ages and the consistency of the experience provided.

Suitability of Species

Interactive experiences should be appropriate for the programme animal's physical and mental capability with careful evaluation of the species involved, and its age and current condition. Some species or individuals are more appropriate for visitor–animal interactions, so the choice of programme animals can reduce the stress of these interactions. An institution must never modify an animal's behaviour through aversive conditioning or drugs, or carry out mutilation procedures in order to make an animal safe for handling in interactive experiences.

Visitor–animal interactions should not impede any efforts to conserve a species (e.g. reintroductions). Breeding programme animals may be used in interactive experiences only when this does not interfere with breeding programme goals. Animals should not be prematurely removed from their mothers in order to be hand-raised for use in visitor interactions, if this causes psychological distress to either animal.

Staff Expertise

Effective staff management in interactive experiences is paramount for the safety (and welfare) of both the animal and public. All staff involved in visitor–animal interactions should have appropriate training, which should be documented and monitored regularly. Any contact among animals, visitors and staff should be done within restricted timeframes to allow sufficient rest periods for the animals away from the public. In non-direct contact situations, appropriate and experienced staff should always be present to look after the safety of the public and animals involved.

Messaging

Alongside conservation messaging, zoos and aquariums should also consider explaining the animal welfare and management processes to visitors to build understanding of and respect for animals and the natural world. This can be done through talks, an animal welfare charter, signage and/or environmental education programmes. Zoos and aquariums should be clear that while trained animal interactions can build connections with wildlife, certain exotic wild animals do not make good pets.

Safety

Interactive experiences can be unpredictable and potentially dangerous, and the public and staff involved should be advised of the possible risks and indemnities associated with such experiences. All institutions offering visitor–animal interactions should conduct reviews and keep appropriate records. An institution should also consider and mitigate the risk of zoonotic infections and exposing animals to infections. Hand washing prior to contact is especially critical in contact situations that involve invertebrates, which are particularly sensitive to nicotine poisoning. Hand washing is critical after contact with reptiles and amphibians.

Several zoos, aquariums and their professional associations have developed guidelines for the use of animals in visitor interactions. In addition to the present WAZA guidelines, these are useful guides for individual zoos and aquariums considering or undertaking interactive experiences, in order to make sure that they are compliant with any relevant national standards and legal requirements.

In conclusion, many zoos and aquariums use interactive experiences to support their conservation, research and education goals. These visitor–animal interactions are provided in a manner that prioritises good animal welfare; requires the adoption of evidence-based animal management practices; is informed by systematic and objective animal welfare research; and offers a responsible take-home message. Interactive experiences should be non-invasive, safe and non-stressful for the animals. Monitoring of all animals involved in visitor interactions must be ongoing and have professional oversight. Risks to animal welfare should be minimised by carefully considering whether interactive experiences are appropriate or necessary, and if they are, by accommodating the programme animals' particular needs.

Based on this policy, WAZA calls on its members to follow these recommendations:

Visitor Interactions

1. Avoid using animals in any interactive experience that would compromise their welfare.
2. Animals involved in direct contact situations should receive appropriate and positive training or be habituated to visitor interactions in order to reduce potential stress.
3. Make no abnormal demands on animals and assure that visitors or their associated noise do not provoke or unduly stress the animals.
4. Allow adequate rest time and assure that animals displaying distress are removed immediately from the interactive experience.
5. All walk-through exhibits, touch pools and petting areas/touch paddocks where animals are in close proximity to visitors should have a suitable size, provide for species-appropriate needs and have suitable refuge areas that the animals can retire to away from visitors.

Monitoring and Assessment

1. Regularly assess and document the potential impact of the interactive experiences on the animals' physical and psychological welfare. Withdraw animals from such experiences if behavioural and other indices of distress are demonstrated.
2. Regularly assess and document the appropriateness of the interactive experiences and their relative contribution to the institution's mission and vision.
3. Regularly assess and document staff expertise and apply training when necessary.
4. Carry out appropriate ethical reviews on the suitability and impact of the interactive experiences on the species used.

Suitability of Species

1. Consider the species used in interactive experiences. Young, breeding and elderly animals may be particularly susceptible to stress and should not be used for direct contact, if problems occur.
2. Do not use species or individuals in interactive experiences that are vulnerable or intolerant of human contact.
3. Do not modify the behaviour through aversive conditioning or drugs, or undertake the mutilation of any animal to make it safe for handling in interactive experiences.
4. Do not use animals destined for reintroduction for interactive experiences.
5. Provide suitable, species-appropriate environments and refuge areas for enclosures where animals are in close proximity to visitors.

Staff Expertise

1. All staff handling or in close contact with animals should be suitably trained, experienced and able to recognise signs of injury, disease and distress. They must be authorised to remove animals from interactive experiences, if necessary.
2. In non-direct contact situations, appropriate and experienced staff should always be present to look after the safety of the public and animals involved.

Messaging

1. Messaging that accompanies all interactive experiences and any related presentations should raise conservation awareness and/or achieve conservation outcomes and encourage respect for animals and the natural world. Species conservation should be the overriding message and/or purpose.
2. Do not undertake, contribute to or participate in interactive experiences where animals perform in a manner that does not constitute normal and natural wild-state behaviour. Do not present animals in a way that the visitors could perceive them as exotic pets or 'performers'.
3. Appropriate animal welfare and conservation messaging must accompany any photo opportunities, in order to raise visitor awareness and encourage subsequent responsible behaviours.
4. Establish procedures that ensure that all animals are treated with respect, allowing and supporting species-specific behaviour in their depiction and presentation.
5. If possible, explain, via talks, signage and/or interpretation, how animal welfare improvements have been made in the institution.
6. When considering the development of interactive experiences, access and use the research, knowledge and expertise regarding the effectiveness of environmental education.

Safety

1. Develop an institutional visitor–animal interactions policy that is compliant with all relevant national standards and meets or exceeds the present WAZA guidelines.
2. Acknowledge the legal ramifications and responsibilities associated with the use of animals in visitor interactions.
3. Ensure that interactive experiences are always supervised by experienced and authorised staff for the safety and well-being of the animals and visitors involved.
4. Provide visitors with opportunities to wash their hands before and after direct animal contact.