

WAZA Guidelines for Animal - Visitor Interactions



This document outlines the guidelines for members of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) on animal-visitor interactions in WAZA member zoos and aquariums. These guidelines are based on the 2003 *WAZA Code of Ethics and Animal Welfare* (WAZA, 2003), the 2015 *World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy* (Mellor, Hunt & Gusset, 2015) and the 2015 WAZA resolution on animal interactions¹. This resolution recommends that WAZA members adopt a policy on animal-visitor interactions in zoos and aquariums and follow the recommendations as published in the *World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy*; a position and recommendations for a policy 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 animal welfare in the context of animal-visitor interactions (AVIs). Any animal that participates in an AVI should have opportunities for positive welfare outcomes.

The guidelines presented here are based on the scientific evidence provided in the *World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy*.

Animal-Visitor Interactions

Zoos and aquariums have seen a rapid growth in interactive experiences in recent years. The progression from simply displaying zoo and aquarium animals for visitors to observe, to presenting experiences 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 experiences to direct animal contact, such as touch pools, hands-on education animals or petting areas/touch paddocks, the interactive experiences are varied. Some studies have shown that such interactions contribute to an increase in pro-conservation behaviours in people and to enhance conservation education (e.g. Skibins & Powell, 2013; Powell & Bullock, 2015). Although such AVIs are popular, the effect of visitor presence or direct contact on the animal's well-being must also be considered, as providing mechanisms to give the best possible chance for positive animal welfare at all times is of paramount importance. Other responsibilities include considering the safety of visitors and the animals, regular evaluation of the relevance of the interactive experience and the ability of the message being delivered to encourage subsequent positive responsible conservation behaviours.

As more zoos and aquariums introduce AVIs to their visitor experiences, there will be increasing opportunities to evaluate the effectiveness of animal interactions in regard to conservation education, and also to carefully consider the welfare of animals in these interactions. Importantly,

¹ Resolution 70.1 adopted at the 70th WAZA Annual Conference (2015).

there is evidence that in some AVIs some animals may display behaviours indicating discomfort or stress. More research is required to directly evaluate the impacts of such experiences, and it is the responsibility of the zoos and aquariums providing AVIs to undertake this work and to provide visitors with interactions that do not impede the animals' welfare.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Avoid having animals in any interactive experience that would compromise their welfare.
2. Animals involved in direct contact situations should receive appropriate training for visitor interactions in order to reduce potential discomfort or stress responses.
3. Make no unnecessary demands on animals and assure that visitors do not provoke or create discomfort or stress responses in the animals.
4. Provide animals with choice of whether to participate or not in the interactions. Allow adequate rest time and assure that an animal displaying any indication that it does not want to participate is immediately removed from the interactive experience.
5. 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.
6. Any feeding during an interaction must be regulated so it is consistent with the animal's overall appropriate diet and health care. This food must not be the only access to food or the whole diet for the animal and the animal must have choice whether to accept this food.

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 physical and behavioural impact, as well as the possible impact on other members of a social group or habitat companions if an animal is periodically removed for an AVI. Special consideration and observation should be taken when animals are removed from their usual habitats for these experiences, as some animals may be negatively affected by this removal. In these instances, the decision for an animal to not participate in the AVI may be required.

The *World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy* presents the Five Domains model as a comprehensive and systematic basis for an animal welfare assessment framework, which not only focuses on welfare compromise but also on enhancement of positive welfare states for individual animals. (Mellor, 2017). The model outlines four physical/functional domains of 'nutrition', 'environment', 'physical health' and 'behaviour', and the fifth domain, which is the animal's 'mental state'. Such domains should be carefully regarded when monitoring and assessing the welfare of animals participating on interactive experiences.

For animals that are housed in separate areas for the purpose of an AVI experience, the impact of differences in housing and husbandry to other animals within the organisation needs to be carefully evaluated.

Each AVI experience should also be monitored and documented, including measuring the frequency, duration and timing (time of day) of the AVI; 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. Where possible in walk through enclosures and petting areas a staff member

or volunteer should be present to supervise the level of interaction between visitors and the animals. Documents should be kept to track any instances of note in order to help with continual evaluation of the experience in order to avoid welfare compromise to the animals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Regularly assess and document the potential impact of the interactive experiences on the animals' physical and behavioural welfare. Withdraw animals from such experiences if welfare compromise is demonstrated.
2. Carry out appropriate welfare reviews on the suitability and impact of the interactive experiences on the individuals and species involved and make changes as required.
3. Regularly assess and document the appropriateness of the interactive experiences and their relative contribution to the institution's mission and vision.
4. Regularly assess and document staff or volunteer expertise and apply training when necessary.

Suitability of Animals

Interactive experiences should be appropriate for an animal's physical and mental welfare. Some species or individuals are more appropriate for AVIs, so the choice of a particular animal can reduce the impact of these interactions. There should be careful evaluation of the species and individuals selected for AVIs, taking into account age, gender and temperament.

An institution should never modify an animal's behaviour for an AVI through aversive conditioning, drugs or via methods of restraint inducing a negative welfare response in order to make an animal safe for handling.

AVIs 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 or population management program goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Consider the species and individual animals participating in interactive experiences carefully. Young, breeding and elderly animals may be particularly susceptible to discomfort or stress responses and may not be appropriate for direct contact.
2. Do not involve species or individuals in interactive experiences that are intolerant of human contact.
3. Do not modify an animal's behaviour for an AVI through aversive conditioning, drugs or via methods of restraint inducing a negative welfare response in order to make an animal safe for handling.
4. Do not use animals for interactive experiences that are destined for reintroduction or population management programs.
5. Provide suitable, species-appropriate environments and refuge areas within habitats where animals are in close proximity to visitors.

Staff Expertise

Effective staff or volunteer capability and competency in interactive experiences are paramount for the safety and welfare of the animal, staff and visitors. All staff or volunteers involved in AVIs should have appropriate training, which should be documented and monitored regularly. In non-direct contact situations, appropriate and experienced staff or volunteers should be present to look after the safety of visitors and animals involved. If staff or volunteers are not present, then the animals must have clearly delineated and appropriate respite areas away from visitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All staff or volunteers handling or in close contact with animals should be suitably trained, experienced and able to recognise signs of injury, disease and discomfort or stress. They must be authorised to remove animals from interactive experiences, if required.

Messaging

Alongside conservation messaging, zoos and aquariums should also consider explaining the animal welfare and management processes involved with caring for animals 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 conservation education programmes. Zoos and aquariums should be clear that while animal interactions can build connections with wildlife, exotic wild animals do not make good pets as their welfare will always be compromised in this situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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 assure that all animals are treated with respect, allowing and supporting species-specific behaviour in their depiction and presentation.
5. Explain, via talks, social media, signage and/or other interpretation, how animal welfare improvements have been made in the zoo or aquarium.
6. When considering the development of interactive experiences, access and use the research, knowledge and expertise regarding the effectiveness of conservation education. Staff and volunteers must not indicate in any way that the animals are their 'pets'.

Safety

Interactive experiences may be unpredictable and potentially dangerous, and visitors, staff and volunteers involved should be advised of the possible risks associated with such experiences. All institutions offering AVIs should conduct reviews, risk assessment procedures, and keep appropriate records so that any process can be adjusted if necessary.

An institution should also consider and mitigate the risk of zoonotic infections and exposure of 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 due to exposure to salmonella or toxins. The best option is for hand washing to occur *before* and *after* the AVI no matter what the species.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Assure that interactive experiences are always supervised by experienced and authorised staff or appropriate volunteers for the safety and well-being of the animals and visitors involved.
2. Provide visitors with opportunities to wash their hands before and after direct animal contact.

Conclusion

Many zoos, aquariums and their professional and regional associations have developed policies, guidelines and position statements for AVIs. In addition to the WAZA guidelines, these are useful guides for individual zoos and aquariums considering or currently undertaking interactive experiences, in order to make sure that they are compliant with any relevant national standards and legal requirements.

Many zoos and aquariums use interactive experiences to support their conservation, research and education goals. These AVIs should be provided in a manner that prioritises positive animal welfare; requires the adoption of evidence-based animal management practices; is informed by systematic and objective animal welfare research; uses best practice, adopts health and safety protocols and offers a responsible take-home message. Interactive experiences should be non-invasive and safe - for the animals and visitors. 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, necessary and are beneficial.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop an institutional AVI policy that is compliant with all relevant national standards, any local regional or country AVI policy, relevant guidelines or position statements and meets or exceeds the WAZA guidelines.
2. Acknowledge the legal ramifications and responsibilities associated with animals participating in visitor interactions.

References

Mellor, D. (2017). Operational details of the five domains model and its key applications to the assessment and management of animal welfare. *Animals*, 7(8), 60.

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WAZA (2003) *WAZA Code of Ethics and Animal Welfare*. Berne: WAZA. <https://www.waza.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/WAZA-Code-of-Ethics.pdf>