

# STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE WELLBEING OF ANIMALS



ASSOCIATION  
OF ZOOS &  
AQUARIUMS

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## A LETTER FROM DAN ASHE

Every Association of Zoos and Aquariums member places first priority on compassionate care of their animals. As Bill Conway said, “If you keep animals, keep them well.” AZA’s Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals will help us live these words, commit to continuous improvement, and seize and secure the crucial high ground of leadership in animal care.

In the future, the laws and regulations governing the display of animals are certain to be more stringent. Even more important, the social license necessary to maintain the public’s trust will be increasingly challenging. This strategy allows us to meet people on their terms, and show them that we hold ourselves to the very highest standards, and that we do not simply follow best practices, but we define them.

We all owe our appreciation and admiration to Dr. Scott Terrell, Disney Animals, Science and Environment, and all the members of AZA’s Animal Welfare Taskforce.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan Ashe". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

President and Chief Executive Officer  
Association of Zoos and Aquariums



## THE WHY

Members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums are experts in caring for the needs of thousands of species of animals. Caring for animals is the foundation of everything that AZA members do to inspire people to appreciate animals and nature, create compelling visitor experiences, maintain healthy animal populations, and save animals from extinction. AZA member facilities and committees have helped the zoo and aquarium community make great strides in the science of animal welfare, and AZA accreditation standards are stringent, all encompassing, and transparent. Given this, why does AZA need a strategic framework to focus on animals and animal wellbeing?

We believe that, for this foundational topic of animal care and wellbeing, the AZA community must continue to innovate, learn, share, partner, and lead. There is value in

continually and strategically investing in the wellbeing of animals; in defining the priorities and goals related to the wellbeing of animals in a way that facilitates collaboration and leverages the wide expertise and resources across AZA; in declaring our “animal wellbeing identity” to elevate our presence, reputation, and impact in the animal wellbeing space; and, in dedicating the focus and resources needed to take our profession to the next level to enhance the wellbeing of animals.

This strategic framework builds upon the successes of AZA and its members and charts a course forward that will require coordinated and cooperative effort and expertise from across the profession. The framework defines an identity and demonstrates AZA’s commitment to animal wellbeing. It is both our moral responsibility and foundational to AZA’s mission.

## THE WHAT

AZA's Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals includes a position statement and five strategic priorities. The position statement defines AZA's "animal wellbeing identity" and aspirational goals to continue to promote the wellbeing of animals and be a globally trusted leader in this space. Each strategic priority defines outcomes and identifies objectives to help achieve those outcomes.

The strategic priorities identified in the framework were derived directly from listening to the AZA membership. There was remarkable consistency in input across a wide range of professional expertise and leadership roles, institutional types and sizes, and AZA committees. The primary desires were to continuously enhance the ability to provide great welfare for animals; to use AZA's collective knowledge to create better, fuller lives for the animals in zoos and aquariums; and to share that knowledge across AZA through training and education. Additional feedback included the desire to be known widely as a community that provides the gold standard for animal welfare; for the public to understand and trust that we take great care of animals; for consistency in language, communication, and principles on animal welfare; and to seek out and work with advocates and partners who can help AZA enhance the lives of animals and elevate AZA's impact and reputation in the animal welfare space.

## THE HOW

The development of the strategic framework was guided by the AZA membership. Similarly, implementation of the strategy will be influenced and driven by the membership. AZA staff will focus on communication, coordination, and continued forward progress on the strategic framework as well as other important animal care, population sustainability, animal wellbeing, and animal welfare initiatives. The specific tactics, processes, and policies required to achieve each of the strategic framework priorities and objectives will be determined by member-driven AZA committees, working groups, professionals, and partners.

### Goals of the strategic framework

- » enhance the wellbeing of animals;
- » provide additional tools and resources to AZA member facilities to contribute to their overall success; and,
- » elevate AZA's impact and reputation as a leader in animal care and wellbeing.

## WELLBEING: THE CONCEPT

At the core of AZA's Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals is the word "wellbeing." Wellbeing was intentionally chosen as the central concept of the strategic framework as a means to "meet people where they are" with regard to relatable language that answers the basic question that many people have: "are the animals happy?"

While there are many definitions of wellbeing, the simplest and most common is: "the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy." All three aspects of wellbeing are understandable to a broad audience and wellbeing implies a positive state. Individuals (humans and other animals) experiencing a high level of wellbeing are described as flourishing or thriving. We acknowledge that there has been a reluctance to use terms like "happy" to describe animals in a professional setting. This framework firmly takes the position that the use of a term like "happiness" is appropriate for professionals working with and caring for animals based on science, morals, and logic. Anyone who has ever interacted with tail-wagging dog or purring cat can understand and appreciate happiness in those animals.

The concept and language of wellbeing will not replace the language of animal welfare. Animal welfare is an established science that can inform the conversation about animal wellbeing. For a profession that works with and cares for a wide range of diverse individuals and species, the concept of wellbeing may provide a basic framework for species for which little scientific information may be known. It may be difficult/impossible to describe or scientifically understand how a sea star shows us that it is "happy," but it is within the expertise of aquarium professionals to understand the physical environment, water quality, and health parameters that should allow that animal to experience a positive state of wellbeing.

Wellbeing is a concept that provides common ground for conversations that focus on the key questions and core concepts related to animals in a strategic framework that has the primary goal of enhancing the lives of animals. Wellbeing is a simple and relatable term that creates a bridge to the science of animal welfare and to the end goal of professionals across AZA zoos and aquariums: that animals are thriving.



## STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE WELLBEING OF ANIMALS

AZA is the gold standard for the wellbeing of animals.

Saving animals anywhere begins with the wellbeing of the animals in our care.

**Wellbeing (well-being)** well-be·ing | 'wel-'bē-īŋ – a state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy.

*Oxford English Dictionary online*

### AZA's Position Statement on the Wellbeing of Animals

Members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) believe that the wellbeing of the animals in our care is both our moral responsibility and foundational to AZA's mission. To support this belief, AZA members commit their diverse expertise to continuously advance and share knowledge, tools, and actions that promote the wellbeing of animals. We aspire to be globally trusted leaders in enhancing the wellbeing of animals.

### Strategic Priorities Supporting AZA's Commitment to the Wellbeing of Animals

#### **CULTIVATE A CULTURE**

Cultivate a common culture of commitment to the wellbeing of animals across all member facilities and partners.

#### **ENHANCE LIVES**

Enhance the lives of all animals in our care by focusing on applied animal welfare science and science-based staff training and education.

#### **RAISE THE BAR**

Advance AZA accreditation standards and processes focused on the wellbeing of animals.

#### **BUILD PARTNERSHIPS**

Increase and diversify external collaboration and find more common ground to promote the wellbeing of animals.

#### **FURTHER CREDIBILITY**

Promote awareness of and trust in AZA's commitment to and expertise in enhancing the wellbeing of animals.

# PRIORITY 1

## CULTIVATE A CULTURE

Cultivate a common culture of commitment to the wellbeing of animals across all member facilities and partners.



### Outcomes

- » The elements of a unified AZA culture related to the wellbeing of animals are defined.
- » The culture related to animal wellbeing is ingrained into our individual identities and collectively embraced throughout AZA.

### Objectives

- A. Dedicate leadership resources to support the implementation, coordination and sustainment of the Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals.
- B. Define the elements of culture related to the wellbeing of animals.
- C. Define a brand that informs AZA's focus on animal wellbeing and complements existing AZA brands.
- D. Actively communicate, promote, and integrate elements of a culture of animal wellbeing into all facets of the AZA community.



## PRIORITY 2 ENHANCE LIVES

Enhance the lives of all animals in our care through a focus on applied animal welfare science and science-based staff training and education.

### Outcomes

- » There is an increase in collaborative research and sharing of animal welfare science across the diversity of AZA facilities and taxa in our care.
- » A diverse and accessible staff training/education curriculum is developed and implemented to enhance the wellbeing of animals and support the culture related to the wellbeing of animals.

### Objectives

- A. Identify funding and fundraising resources dedicated to the enhancement of the wellbeing of animals through science and education.
- B. Identify gaps and opportunities related to animal welfare science and research across AZA.
- C. Advance zoo/aquarium animal welfare science, particularly for less studied species/taxa.
- D. Provide information on the latest animal welfare science across AZA facilities to turn findings into practice.
- E. Identify key audiences and expected learning outcomes related to animal welfare and wellbeing at AZA facilities.
- F. Complete a gap analysis of audiences, expected learning outcomes, and existing training resources.
- G. Develop a diversified and accessible education curriculum focused on animal welfare/wellbeing based on the training and education gap analysis.



## PRIORITY 3 RAISE THE BAR

Advance AZA accreditation standards and processes focused on the wellbeing of animals.



### Outcomes

- » The accreditation process, standards, and resources represent an ever-evolving scientifically based, impactful, and transparent focus on the wellbeing of animals.
- » AZA inspectors are better prepared and trained to focus on the wellbeing of animals during the accreditation process; AZA facilities are better prepared to meet or exceed accreditation standards focused on the wellbeing of animals.

### Objectives

- A. Periodically review the scientific validity, impact, and measurement of accreditation standards related to the wellbeing of animals.
- B. Review and revise the accreditation process to provide an enhanced focus on animal wellbeing as part of the overall process.
- C. Establish a process for regular review (scientific validity, modern practices, up to date materials) and revision of the accreditation resource center related to animal wellbeing and welfare.
- D. Provide training and resources for inspectors to equip them with the tools to effectively evaluate accreditation standards related to the wellbeing of animals during the inspection process.
- E. Focus on tools to enable facilities to be better prepared to meet or exceed evolving accreditation standards related to the wellbeing of animals.



## PRIORITY 4 BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

Increase and diversify external collaboration and find more common ground to promote the wellbeing of animals.

### Outcomes

- » Existing relationships with external organizations are strengthened, and new relationships are cultivated, both of which meaningfully contribute to the wellbeing of animals.
- » AZA's position on and expertise in specific issues related to the wellbeing of animals is known and is a driver of collaborations that benefit animals.

### Objectives

- A. Build a comprehensive understanding of existing collaboration and successes between AZA facilities and other animal welfare organizations.
- B. Prioritize creating or strengthening mutually beneficial collaborations to enhance the wellbeing of animals.
- C. Develop an "issue-based" approach to promote active collaboration with external animal welfare organizations focused on the wellbeing of animals.
- D. Convene stakeholders to demonstrate collaboration, build partnerships, share knowledge, and take action on identified issues.
- E. Communicate and celebrate our successes internally within AZA and externally with collaborating organizations and the public.



## PRIORITY 5 FURTHER CREDIBILITY

Promote awareness of and trust in AZA's commitment to and expertise in enhancing the wellbeing of animals.

### Outcomes

- » AZA is positioned as an animal welfare organization and is widely trusted as a resource for the topics of animal wellbeing, animal welfare science, and animal care.
- » AZA's "animal wellbeing brand" is recognized and promotes the reputation and success of AZA and its members

### Objectives

- A. Proactively communicate the Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing of Animals internally and externally.
- B. Focus on communicating and integrating AZA's animal wellbeing brand to make it easy for members, partners, and the public to understand and convey AZA's commitment to the wellbeing of animals.
- C. Develop a communication plan specific to AZA's efforts and impacts on animal wellbeing, including successful collaborations with other organizations.
- D. Share and exchange knowledge in the global animal welfare realm outside the zoo/aquarium profession.

\* Each of these objectives supports/complements objectives identified for other priorities.

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