



## DEVELOPING EMPATHY FOR CONSERVATION OUTCOMES CONFERENCE

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On November 18 and 19, 2020, a group of over 130 professionals representing zoos, aquariums, museums, universities, consultancies and other conservation organizations across four countries gathered for the virtual *Developing Empathy for Conservation Outcomes* conference. Facilitated by Dr. Jessica Luke of the University of Washington and hosted by the Seattle Aquarium, the conference sought to bring together both researchers and practitioners interested in how fostering empathy may support attitudes and actions related to environmental conservation.

### ***Purpose***

Conference coordinators articulated three main purposes for convening:

1. Collectively summarize what is and isn't known about the research on empathy and conservation;
2. Generate preliminary research questions on empathy and conservation;
3. Create connections between researchers and practitioners.

### ***Conference speakers***

#### *Keynote*

Dr. B.N. Horowitz, M.D. provided an engaging and fascinating keynote address on the neural bases for empathy. Dr. Horowitz reminded us that it's more important not to be anthropocentric, rather than worrying about being anthropomorphic—in other words, human exceptionalism is problematic, but accepting that other animals might have emotions and behaviors can actually be accurate. Biology tells us that some of these emotions and behaviors are rooted in shared neurobiology. And lastly, Dr. Horowitz told us that anthropomorphism can be a useful tool in helping to develop connections between people and animals, when used correctly!

#### *Lightning talks*

We heard five insightful lightning talks from scholars and practitioners in our field.

- [Sara Konrath](#) taught us that empathy increases in complexity, from physiological empathy to cognitive and emotional. Much like a Russian nesting doll, we can picture the construct of empathy as being layered. Sara also told us that empathy is teachable can be generated through experiencing wildlife, creating emotional contagion, building empathic concern and perspective-taking.
- [Susan Clayton](#) asked us to consider generating data on the kinds of zoo exhibits that promote empathy—this is a necessary space for further research and exploration that can help us understand how empathy work can specifically be applied most effectively to our work.
- [Jerry Luebke](#) talked about his research indicating that adults who visit zoos and aquariums are predisposed to experience empathy and also more receptive to pro-environmental action. These findings suggest some intriguing opportunities with this audience.



### *Lightning talks, continued.*

- Nette Pletcher shared the findings from an evaluation she conducted wherein normal growth and development paired with empathy practices enhanced environmental stewardship in children. She also shared that embedded assessments that collect both qualitative and quantitative data revealed different empathic abilities in students.
- Louise Chawla taught us that empathy is both distinct from and overlapping with the construct of connectedness to nature. She discussed the concept of constructive coping, which consists of sharing what an individual can do as well as what others are doing and what we can do together as a way of scaffolding empathy development.

### *Case studies*

On the second day of the conference, we heard two case studies of empathy being used and studied in the field.

#### Autumn Russell

Autumn discussed her project exploring how the language we currently use in zoos may contribute to a disconnect between people and nature. To test this, she trained her staff to replace four commonly used words with more empathic language. She found that those new to the field were the first adopters of this shift, but that overall the study prompted them to be intentional about their language use with guests.

#### Inger Lerstrup

Inger talked with us about how we might design richer outdoor settings for preschool students in service of empathy development. She suggested that we make habitats for diverse creatures, let children share and learn from one another, support their interest with tools and stories, and allow experimentation, within reason.

### ***Conversations***

Throughout the two days of the conference, participants engaged in conversation. Topics included how we might bridge the divide between researchers and practitioners, including improving access to resources for those not aligned with an academic institution. Participants agreed that there was a necessity for more work done at the intersection of equity and empathy, and across cultural settings. Participants also wanted to see more research on empathy for non-living and non-animal subjects, including plants and taxidermy. We also agreed that intersections with other disciplines, like psychology and sociology, are particularly interesting places to increase research.

### ***Next steps***

At the finale of the conference, we identified three areas for further efforts. More research and evaluation, particularly in the areas listed above, would be welcomed by our field. We also need to increase opportunities for researchers and practitioners to collaborate. Lastly, it is critical that we continue to think about and implement the empathy work in an inclusive way to encourage multiple viewpoints and experiences to influence our understanding of this construct.