

Respect and authenticity in wildlife storytelling

Guidance for representing animals with accuracy, dignity, and care

When we communicate about wildlife, we have a responsibility to do so with dignity and respect. Zoos SA communications recognise humans as part of nature, not separate from it, and reflect animals as remarkable beings with their own intelligence and behaviours.

By presenting wildlife truthfully, honouring their stories on their own terms, and avoiding humanising animals, we protect their wellbeing, build respect for the natural world, and encourage people to see themselves as active contributors to conservation.

This guide offers practical direction for Zoos SA staff and volunteers on how to represent animals in ways that honour their true nature, strengthen credibility and authenticity, build trust, and educate people about the intrinsic value of wildlife.

Love, not loss

Conservation is most effectively conveyed through a lens of love, not loss – a positive, hope-driven approach to biodiversity communication. Frame wildlife stories with admiration, wonder, and hope. Celebrate animals for who and what they are, inspire connection, and motivate action without fear, guilt, or despair.

“The best way to rekindle a lost love is not to talk about what went wrong – extinction, habitat loss or resource scarcity. It’s to remember what we loved in the first place.”

— IUCN

The following considerations are helpful in maintaining a ‘Love Not Loss’ approach:

- Focus on positive emotions
- Avoid fear-based or alarmist messaging
- Celebrate positive outcomes and success stories
- Engage audiences emotionally through narratives that encourage empathy
- Offer clear, achievable ways to carry care and action into everyday life
- Promote agency and empowerment by encouraging audiences to see themselves as active participants in conservation efforts.

Examples:

X “If we don’t act now, these animals will disappear forever.”

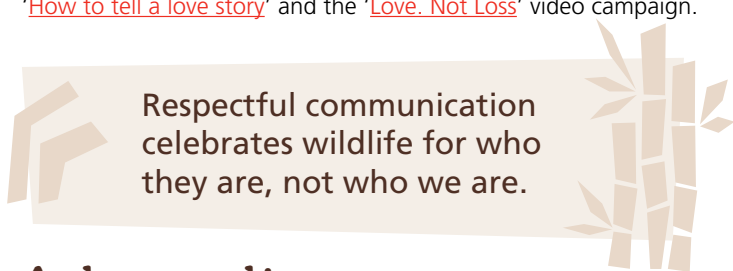
✓ “Many species are under threat, but through conservation science, habitat restoration, and community action, we can protect them for generations to come.”

X “Orangutans are losing their forests at an alarming rate.”

✓ “Orangutans depend on vast, connected rainforests, now threatened by deforestation. Supporting sustainable forestry helps secure the future of these primates.”

This approach aligns with best-practice guidance from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for effective and ethical wildlife communications.

For more information, see the IUCN’s resources, such as [‘How to tell a love story’](#) and the [‘Love. Not Loss’](#) video campaign.



Respectful communication celebrates wildlife for who they are, not who we are.

Anthropomorphism (noun):

The attribution of human characteristics, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities, especially animals, objects, or natural phenomena.

Anthropomorphism is the humanisation of animals. While it can feel natural and even affectionate, it’s important that we’re giving wildlife the dignity and respect due to all living beings – valuing them as themselves, not as imitations of us.

Speciesism (noun):

Speciesism is the assumption of human superiority leading to the exploitation of animals.

Speciesism is the learned belief that humans have greater moral rights than other animals. By rejecting speciesism, we recognise all animals for their intrinsic worth, valuing them beyond their usefulness to humans. This fosters dignity, respect, and ethical communication grounded in coexistence rather than dominance.

Guiding principles

Respectful wildlife communication

1 Communicate without humanising

Animals are not mini-humans – tell their stories as they truly are.

- Represent animals on their own terms – do not attribute human emotions, motives, or behaviour to animals.
- Focus on species-specific behaviours and natural instincts.

Examples:

An elephant wrapping its trunk around a companion is not “hugging” – it is using touch to communicate reassurance, bond, or explore.

A Chimpanzee baring its teeth is not “happy” or “smiling” – this is a method of visual communication that could signify play, uncertainty, or submission.

A parrot repeating words or sounds is not “talking” – it is using learned vocalisations to engage socially or signal its presence in a species-specific way.

2 Highlight and celebrate authentic behaviour

Celebrate what animals actually do – it’s fascinating on its own.

- Focus on species-specific behaviours that educate and inspire, showing animals as they truly are.
- Highlight what animals actually do, and where possible explain what a behaviour does - how it helps the animal interact with, respond to, and thrive within its environment.
- Share insights that educate audiences about natural behaviours, animal intelligence and social structures.

Examples:

Meerkats standing guard demonstrate cooperative survival skills.

Giraffes rubbing ossicones together strengthens social bonds.

Elephants dust bathing shows comfort and wellbeing.

3 Respect and prioritise welfare, dignity and agency

Give animals choice and control over participation. Represent them with respect and dignity.

- Avoid clothing, costumes, selfies, handling, or other activities that remove choice or compromise wellbeing.
- Enrichment and interactions should allow animals to choose participation and encourage species-specific behaviours, broadening the richness and complexity of their environment.
- Refer also to [Zoos SA Animal Welfare and Ethics Charter](#) for more detail on the Five Domains model and optimal welfare states.

Examples:

An animal in clothing, such as a Chimpanzee in a shirt, a giraffe in a hat, or a panda in a suit, distracts from natural behaviours and can cause stress.

Selfies, handling, or close physical interaction limit animals’ choice and agency. Always allow animals to choose whether to engage.

Enrichment and interactions should support species-specific behaviours and give the animal control over participation.

4 Educate and inspire audiences

The language and images we use shape how people understand, value, and act towards wildlife. Help save species from extinction by using your voice to teach, engage, and build connections with the natural world.

- Use communications as a tool to increase understanding of species, ecosystems, and conservation challenges.
- Encourage audiences to appreciate animals as unique beings, not mini-humans.

Examples:

Birds weaving nests highlight survival skills along with the importance of habitats and biodiversity.

Orangutans using tools demonstrates intelligence and problem-solving.

Penguins incubating eggs teach about resilience and adaptation.

5 Ensure accuracy and credibility

Facts matter. Be truthful and precise in every story.

- Represent animals and their behaviours factually, ensuring captions and stories are evidence-based and scientifically accurate.
- Maintain credibility and integrity by avoiding exaggeration or humanising behavioural interpretations.
- Analogies may be used to support understanding, provided they explain function rather than assign human behaviour or identity.

Examples:

Describing a Cheetah’s sprint as a hunting adaption rather than “racing for fun.”

Using correct terminology for social structures strengthens audience understanding.



Terminology guide:

What this looks and sounds like in practice

Try to Use...	Instead of...	Why
Displaying natural behaviour	Acting silly / cheeky / naughty	Avoids human motives; focuses on species-specific behaviour.
Exploring their habitat	Being nose / curious like us	Removes human comparison; respects animal agency.
Communicating with the herd/group	Talking / chatting	Reflects correct social structures and animal communication.
Expressing comfort / calm / contentment	Smiling / happy face	Prevents misinterpreting facial expressions through a human lens.
Resting / conserving energy	Lazy / bored	Frames behaviour through biology, not judgement.
Bonding behaviour / social interaction	Friends / best mates	Uses species-appropriate social terms.
Using problem-solving skills	Being clever like humans	Recognises intelligence without human-centric comparison.
Choosing to participate / opting in	Letting us pat / cuddle / take a selfie	Centres animal agency and welfare.
Species-appropriate enrichment	Toys / treats for fun	Focuses on welfare outcomes, not entertainment.
Hand-raised (when necessary)	Tame / domesticated / friendly	Avoids implying wild animals behave like pets.
Protecting and restoring habitats	Saving them before it's too late	Aligns with a "Love Not Loss" approach; avoids fear-based messaging.
A resilient species	Endangered and struggling	Maintains hope-focused, strengths-based communication.
Positive welfare indicators	They look happy	Encourages evidence-based welfare language.
Unique adaptations	Weird / odd behaviours	Frames differences positively.
Habitat / home / environment / precinct	Enclosure / exhibit / display area	Supports modern, respectful terminology; avoids objectifying.
Natural group structure (e.g., herd, troop, flock)	Friends / family (unless biologically accurate)	Promotes accuracy in describing social systems.
Showing a neutral or relaxed posture	Looks sad / depressed	Most species don't display sadness through facial expressions; avoids projecting human emotions and ensures welfare observations are based on body language and behaviour, not human interpretation.

