

Felid TAG Guidelines on the Use of Felid Ambassador Animals

Overview

The focus on the guest experience at AZA accredited zoos and aquariums has increased dramatically in recent years and ambassador animals play an integral role in these activities. The interest in using felids as ambassador animals has also increased during that time and the Felid Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) has developed these guidelines to assist institutions that are considering initiating a felid ambassador program or already have one in place. These guidelines are intended to complement the AZA Ambassador Animal Policy and the position of individual felid SSPs.

Definition

The Felid TAG defines a *felid ambassador animal* as a non-domestic felid used outside of its enclosure, on or off site, with the primary purpose of educating the public.

Recommendations

Any institution currently using or considering using felid ambassador animals should address the following:

1. Thorough institutional **collection planning** prior to acquisition that includes:
 - a. Provision for housing that provides **species-appropriate space** for exercise, privacy, and enrichment.
 - b. Evaluation of **staff expertise**, including husbandry, hand-rearing and free contact training. Institutions lacking such expertise should pursue additional staff training and/or employ an experienced consultant.
 - c. Commitment to providing the necessary staff **time and resources** for hand-rearing, socialization, and training.
 - d. Establishment of a **management and housing plan for the lifetime of the animal**, including a contingency plan if it does not remain an ambassador animal.
2. **Acquisition** of animals should be arranged in cooperation with the appropriate SSP program leader for the species after consulting the Felid TAG RCP to ensure the acquisition complements or enhances the management plan of the population.
3. Establish written protocols to address the following:
 - a. Guest, staff, and animal **safety** issues, including compliance with USDA regulations and AZA accreditation standards
 - b. **Staff training**, integration of new trainers, and staff evaluation procedures
 - c. Proper **use of equipment** (leashes, harnesses, collars, etc.)
 - d. Procedures and equipment for the **transport of animals** to presentation site
 - e. **Emergency procedures** to manage injury or escape
 - f. Criteria for determining if a **venue** is appropriate for presentations
4. Ensure the use of progressive animal **training methods** with an emphasis on positive reinforcement. Each animal should be regularly **evaluated** to ensure that it is appropriate for use as an ambassador animal.
5. Ensure all **staff involved are adequately trained** and sufficiently experienced to handle the cats, and that their relationship with each animal is regularly evaluated to ensure an ongoing positive affiliation and responsiveness to the trainers.
6. Development and use of **conservation education messages** to be incorporated into presentations using the Felid TAG Key Messages that encourage conservation action and discourage ownership of wild cats as pets.
7. Participation in research **evaluating** both the welfare of ambassador animals and their impact on visitors' perceptions and actions is strongly encouraged.

Resources may be available to help with any of the above recommendations. Please contact the felid SSP program leader to find out what is available.