

Volunteering & Engagement Report 2024

Date: February 14, 2025

To: Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo

From: Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report will update the Board of Management on the activities of the Volunteering & Engagement Unit for the year 2024. The volunteer team consists of Year-Round Volunteers, Summer Volunteers, Wildlife Health Centre Volunteers, and Zoo Ambassador Student Volunteers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience recommends that:

1. The Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo receives this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

There is no decision history available for this item.

COMMENTS

As we celebrated our 50th anniversary there was also much to celebrate in terms of our volunteer activities for 2024. Since the program began in 1975 volunteers have played a

critical role in engaging our guests, bringing our stories to life, and helping to advance our mission. As Guardians of Wild, Zoo volunteers are champions for conservation, connecting with guests to inspire a passion for wildlife and ensure a high-quality guest experience. You will find them educating guests on-site 365 days a year at educational interpretive stations in key areas, as well as providing directions and information at various wayfinding hubs.

In 2024, our roster consisted of a team of 249 Year-Round Volunteers, 54 Zoo Ambassador Student Volunteers, and 55 seasonal volunteers (35 Summer and 20 Wildlife Health Centre), donating 44,129 hours of their time, reaching an estimated 1,350,104 people, the highest number of hours and contacts in the history of the program!

In addition to our regular activities, which includes a need for 65 volunteers per day in the peak season, 2024 saw many notable highlights for the Volunteering & Engagement Unit to support the Zoo's mission of connecting people, animals and conservation science to fight extinction. These highlights include:

Volunteers continue to positively impact the guest experience and receive positive reviews from guests

In our 2024 guest surveys, volunteers continue to be highly rated for their helpfulness and knowledge, receiving a rating of 4.4 out of 5, a score that has remained consistent over many years. High ratings are supported by positive comments such as *"The volunteers posted through the zoo trails were amazing...they seem to be right where you need them and appear out of nowhere when you get that lost look on your face. They are also super knowledgeable and friendly"* and *"Every single volunteer we ran into went above and beyond to teach us something new. They approached us and offered knowledge without us having to ask and really brought our experience from average to great"*.

New interpretive signage and volunteer station debuted in the renovated Greenhouse

The Volunteering & Engagement unit has been integral in bringing the mystery and magic of plants to life in the newly renovated Greenhouse, which officially opened in April 2024. Through our interpretive signage, activities, and a new volunteer interpretive station, guests discover that plants are the foundation of healthy ecosystems and support human health as well. Volunteers interacted with over 24,000 guests in the Greenhouse this past year.

Volunteers selected and trained as Zoo Monitor animal welfare science observation specialists to support the Welfare Science team

Beginning in 2021, we tapped into the incredible skills and knowledge of our volunteers to assist the Wildlife Care & Welfare Science teams with organized animal welfare observations. In 2024, these activities were further formalized by selecting and training a pilot group of twelve Volunteers as Zoo Monitor welfare science observation specialists. These Volunteers were specially trained, including undergoing reliability testing, to conduct animal behaviour observations using the industry-standard Zoo Monitor app, ensuring rigorous data collection results in monitoring the welfare of a variety of species at the Zoo.

Volunteers integral to the success of cross-departmental initiatives

The Zoo continues to rely on our incredible volunteer team enabling us to successfully deliver a huge range of on-site initiatives and activities. Events ranging from Dream Day for paediatric patients, our flagship 10k Oasis ZooRun, e-waste collection, animal awareness days, Zoo Members events, the City of Toronto's Doors Open initiative, and many more, are dependent on the assistance of the Zoo's volunteers to offer these experiences.

Volunteers show dedication in supporting our commitment to our community

Our enthusiastic and knowledgeable volunteers also enabled us to bring the wonder of the Zoo out beyond our boundaries through community and corporate events. In 2024, volunteers connected with an estimated 11,351 people through participating in dozens of events including the CNE, Downsview Park Earth Day Celebrations, Toronto Community Housing's PRIDE Community Connect, Toronto Police Services' 43 Division Community Open House, various community barbecues, and much more.

Volunteer professional development highly valued and supported

As a respected part of the Toronto Zoo team, volunteers receive regular and timely opportunities for professional development throughout the year. Notable training for 2024 included Workplace Respect and Anti-Harassment Policy workshops, KultureCity Sensory Inclusive Program training, and training in the new Greenhouse. This is in addition to our regular monthly meetings and town halls with the CEO, which ensure volunteers have the most current animal and organizational information to provide a high-quality guest experience.

Your Toronto Zoo continues to attract and foster dedicated long-service volunteers with 72 Volunteers awarded in 2024

Despite the general trend toward short-term and sporadic volunteering in Canada's volunteer industry, we continue to provide a program that fosters dedicated long-term volunteer engagement. At our annual volunteer recognition event in June 2024, 72 volunteers received recognition awards for their dedicated service to the Zoo. This included three volunteers awarded for 15 years of service, three volunteers who reached 20 years of service, three awarded for 25 years of service, and one who celebrated 30 years of service to the organization. We also recognized milestones in our hours-of-service program, which replaced the years of service awards for any volunteers onboarded after 2010 to provide more frequent recognition of volunteer service. Twenty-four Volunteers earned their 350 hours-of-service award, fifteen earned awards for 750 hours, nine for 1,150 hours, four for 1,500, and two for 1,850 hours. We also had four volunteers reach 2,250 hours of service, three attain 2,600 hours of service, and one exceptional volunteer achieve 5,750 hours of service over her 13-year (and counting) Zoo volunteer career.

In addition to these formal recognition awards, volunteers are also nominated and recognized through various external community award programs. In 2024 we had four volunteers recognized through the Ontario Volunteer Services Awards (three for 20 years, one for 15 years, plus one youth volunteer), as well as one volunteer who

received the John McKay, Member of Parliament Scarborough Guildwood Community Award.

Your Toronto Zoo supports a variety of recognition events and programs for volunteers

We always find meaningful and innovative ways to recognize the incredible contributions of our volunteer team. During National Volunteer week, April 14-20, we thanked volunteers with coffee and goodies at the start of their shift and acknowledged them on the Zoo's social media channels. In June, we held our Strawberries & Wine volunteer appreciation event, and in December we hosted our annual Holiday Party as a thank you and to kick off the holiday season. Volunteers also receive uniforms partially subsidized by the Zoo.

Extended corporate/community volunteer activities at the Toronto Zoo
Outside of the activities of the Volunteering & Engagement Unit, the Toronto Zoo also engages corporate and community groups/individuals in various volunteering opportunities. In 2024 these activities included removal of invasive plant species, restoring of native habitats on Zoo grounds, and with a generous donation, mini forest plantings, all which serve to engage communities in helping to enhance habitats for wildlife and protect overall biodiversity. This past year a total of 379 volunteers collectively gave 1,516 hours of their time to support these valuable environmental projects to enhance our Zoo site.

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SIGNATURE

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