

Indigenous Relations Report on 2025 Activities

Date: October 1, 2025

To: Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo

From: Director, Indigenous Relations

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report updates the Toronto Zoo Board of Management on 2025 initiatives led by Toronto Zoo's Indigenous Relations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Director, Indigenous Relations recommends that:

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

FINANCIAL IMPACT

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

DECISION HISTORY

On October 2, 2024, the Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo adopted the report providing an update on 2024 Toronto Zoo Indigenous Relations activities.

[Toronto Zoo - Meeting 12 - TMMIS](#)

On May 31, 2024, the Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo adopted the report establishing the Toronto Zoo Indigenous Advisory Circle. [Agenda Item History - 2024.ZB10.4 \(toronto.ca\)](#)

On October 23, 2023, the Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo adopted a Strategic Framework for Indigenous Relations at your Toronto Zoo.

On October 23, 2023, the Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo adopted Values & Principles to guide Indigenous Relations at your Toronto Zoo.

[Agenda Item History - 2023.ZB6.3 \(toronto.ca\)](#)

COMMENTS

The Indigenous Relations unit is actively engaged across all operations of your Toronto Zoo to advance the Strategic Priorities set out in the 2025-2027 Strategic Plan and the Zoo's Mission to "connect people, animals, conservation science traditional knowledge to fight extinction". The following are highlights of 2025 activities led by the Toronto Zoo's Indigenous Relations unit.

Belonging

Renewal of Memorandum of Understanding with Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST)

In January, the Zoo renewed its Memorandum of Understanding with Native Child and Family Services of Toronto. The MOU sets out areas for mutual cooperation and sharing, including opportunities for Indigenous children and their families to engage in Zoo experiences and programming, increasing community awareness and support for each organizations' work and exploring opportunities to develop on the land experiences for members of the Indigenous community that may be shared with Zoo guests including storytelling, summer camp, hide tanning, and other opportunities as they are identified and agreed upon.

Hosting Indigenous Community

Your Toronto Zoo continues to be a welcoming space for Indigenous community. Since the beginning of the year, the Zoo has been a host space for a number of Indigenous organizations and communities, including:

- Several days in the spring saw over 500 members of First Nations communities evacuated due to seasonal flooding and wildfires spending time at the Zoo, enjoying the site and engaging in Zoo programming and learning activities. These visits were coordinated in cooperation with support agencies in the GTA, including ISN Maskwa.
- Dnaagdawenmag Binnoojiyag Child and Family Services (DBCFS) held three On the Land Cultural Days at the Zoo over the spring and summer, providing over 100 Indigenous children and youth with the opportunity spend the day engaged in cultural and land-based programming and Zoo learning experiences.
- Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) held site activations and programming on key days of significance June 19th (National Indigenous Peoples Day) and September 27th (National Day for Truth and Reconciliation). Members and guests engaged in activities included smudge ceremonies, drumming, story-telling and activity tables. The Zoo also hosted a number of "Zoo Days" for Indigenous youth and their caregivers throughout the year.
- 50 youth from NPAAMB Indigenous Youth Employment and Training spent the day at the Zoo in July and engaged in tree planting and invasive species removal. The

Director of Indigenous Relations presented on various seasonal employment and career opportunities available at the Zoo.

Indigenous Recruitment

Indigenous Relations and Human Resources (Talent Acquisition) have developed an outreach strategy to First Nations communities and Indigenous organizations to increase the awareness of job readiness and career opportunities at the Zoo.

Toronto Zoo Indigenous Advisory Circle (TZIAC)

The TZIAC is an integral part of the Zoo's organizational structure, providing a crucial link to First Nation community partners and guidance on implementing the Zoo's strategic goals in accordance with the Principles of Reconciliation as set out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission¹. The TZIAC meets quarterly, and this year, TZIAC has provided input and feedback into key Zoo strategic initiatives, including the Toronto Zoo Community Conservation Campus medicine garden, onsite programming, Indigenous recruitment, and potential partnerships with First Nations on in-situ conservation initiatives. Over the next few months, the TZIAC will play a significant role advising on the process for the Zoo's Campus Plan.

Indigenous Summer Leadership Program (ISLP)

In July, two students from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Indigenous Summer Leadership Program were given the opportunity to gain employment experience at the Zoo. They not only were introduced to various branches such as Horticulture, Nutrition and Learning and Engagement, but gained valuable outreach experience through the Turtle Island Conservation program. Such activities included the development and presentation of interactive activities as part of Arctic Sea Ice Day set up outside the Polar bear habitat, research and presentation on the pawpaw tree (a fruit tree native to the Carolinian forest zone) and removal of invasive species.

Forward Summit East 2025

On October 9, the Director of Indigenous Relations will participate in a panel focused on implementing reconciliation action plans at Forward Summit East in Orillia. This is an annual event taking place across the country, where Indigenous voices and Canadian industry come together to build a stronger, more inclusive economy. This event will be an opportunity to highlight the Zoo's efforts to build stronger relationships with First Nations and Indigenous communities.

Nature's Insurance Policy

Caribou Biobanking - partnership with Weenusk First Nation

In May, staff from the Zoo's Indigenous Relations and Reproductive Science units traveled to Peawanuck (Weenusk First Nation), a community approximately 1,300 km north of Toronto on Hudson Bay, to collect samples of genetic material from caribou as part of the community's regular caribou hunts. The trip was part of the Zoo's caribou biobank initiative, a pilot study testing cryobanking protocols using post-mortem

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation. [Principles English Web.pdf](#)

samples. In 2024, the Zoo entered into an Agreement with Weenusk First Nation for the project, which provides funding to the community to assist Zoo staff with collecting samples from hunted caribou, training for community members on sample collection and the opportunity for partnership and collaboration on other initiatives of interest and benefit to the community. During the visit, Zoo staff held a community workshop with local partners to provide information on the project, the Zoo and the Zoo's Strategic Plan as well as a presentation with high school students, with the prospect of future opportunities for educational programming.

Canada's Wildlife Cryobank - Framework for Partnering with Indigenous Communities Indigenous Relations is leading efforts to develop a framework for ethical partnerships with Indigenous communities, as a key part of the Zoo's national wildlife cryobank. A network of thought leaders and experts in the areas of Indigenous data sovereignty and access and benefits sharing have been regularly engaged over the course of this year towards the development of this framework.

Wildlife Advocates

Species At Risk Stewardship Project: Indigenous Youth Guardians Camp & Summit (YGCS)

A camp of First Nations youth was held at the Zoo in June focused on the sharing of traditional knowledge and conventional science with respect to target species at risk (Blanding's turtle, Eastern small-footed myotis bat and Eastern Massasauga rattlesnake). Over the next few months, the program will shift to in-community events to engage youth in programming.

Wow for Good

Horticulture Knowledge Exchange

Staff from the Zoo's Horticulture and Indigenous Relations units hosted representatives from Kayanase Greenhouse (Six Nations of the Grand River), to share knowledge and practices on native plants, horticulture practices and management of invasive species. It is anticipated that this knowledge exchange will continue and inform the Zoo's annual horticulture planting plans.

Anticipated Activities October - December 2025

Eagle Feather Ceremony

A ceremony will be held in late October with partner First Nations to transfer eagle feathers shed by our Zoo's two resident bald eagles. Eagle feathers are sacred items for First Nations People, who gift them according to their own Nation's protocol and teachings.

Caribou Biobanking Project

Indigenous Relations and Reproductive Science staff are planning to travel to Biigtigong Nishnaabeg First Nation to conduct a community workshop on the Zoo's caribou biobank initiative and provide an opportunity for community partners from Weenusk First Nation to share their experience with the project as a community exchange of traditional

knowledge on caribou. Staff will also be travelling back to Weenusk First Nation in November to engage in caribou sample collection and training for community hunters.

Ethical Framework Workshop - Canada's Wildlife Cryobank

Indigenous Relations, with support from Reproductive Science staff, is planning to hold a workshop at the Zoo in early December to create a "road map" for the development of an ethical framework for working with Indigenous communities, as part of the Zoo's national wildlife cryobank. It is anticipated that thought leaders and experts in data sovereignty, access and benefits sharing and the application of intellectual property rights and traditional knowledge will be in attendance.

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SIGNATURE

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