

Learning & Engagement Activities 2025

Date: February 2, 2026

To: Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo

From: Chief Operations Officer

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides an update of the primary activities and achievements of the Learning & Engagement unit for 2025. Learning & Engagement oversees a wide variety of different programs throughout the year that support key components of the Strategic Plan and further educational goals, including school programs and teacher resources, a roster of public programs for a variety of audiences/ages, virtual experiences, summer camps, and overnight experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Operations Officer 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

The Learning & Engagement department plays a fundamental role in shaping how guests understand and value wildlife by fostering meaningful connections and sharing

powerful stories of our conservation and science efforts. Through intentionally designed experiences aligned with the Zoo's strategic plan, our programs are designed to influence not only what guests know, but how they think and feel about conservation, building empathy, inspiring curiosity, and strengthening science and conservation literacy across all ages. Ultimately, our work cultivates conservation-minded attitudes and perspectives that motivate lifelong care for wildlife.

Programs are offered to a variety of groups, including children in our day camps, youth groups participating in overnight experiences, school groups seeking curriculum enhancements on field trips, families looking to engage their children and parents at the same time, and adult only programs that provide unique opportunities to explore wildlife and science.

These experiences also provide an important revenue source for the Zoo's operating budget. In 2025, through the combined programs offered, the Learning & Engagement department connected with 29,478 participants generating \$1.624 million in revenue, which is the most successful year to date (see Appendix 1).

Incorporating WOW into Programs

In 2025, our Serengeti Bush Camp summer overnight program welcomed 4,808 guests and generating \$588,176 in revenue. We also worked to further enhance our PJ Party Overnights for guides, scouts, and youth groups in our winter and fall months. This program, designed to have children play the role of field researcher for nocturnal species has been a growing success. In 2025 we had 963 youth participate, generating \$83,863 in revenue. This program has been growing consistently from year to year, experiencing a 135% growth in the number of participants since 2023.

To enhance learning opportunities for our youngest program participants and guests, a new play-based learning experience was developed. Within the Canopy Classroom, we transformed a former wildlife habitat to a space where children are able to set up and explore/play using manipulatives and toys to simulate the wildlife keeper experience. Adjacent to the simulated animal play habitat is a 'junior keeper kitchen' allowing children to prepare faux food and materials as part of the daily care of the animals in the play habitat, and/or conduct wildlife health exams as part of their learning. This project is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2026 for use in camps and programs.

Education for Learners of All Ages

The Learning & Engagement department develops a roster of programs to ensure we are connecting with all of our guests, from Parent & Tot programs, to programs geared towards older adults. In 2025, we delivered nine different Parent & Tot themes that have become a popular draw with a total of 906 participants generating \$4,510 in revenue. Building off of the long-running success of our adult *Love at the Zoo* Valentine's Day dinner and program, a new family program called *Love at the Zoo – Kid's Edition* was delivered teaching children that we can love all animals, no matter if at first they might be a bit smelly, look different, or are just unusual to us. This program sold out in its first year and will return again in 2026.

Evening programs have proven to be a strong draw for our guests who are looking to see the Zoo in a different light. To connect with these audiences, we delivered a number of evening programs in 2025 including *Bats & Beverages* and *Zoo After Dark: An Evening with Native Bats*, both of which are delivered in conjunction with the Zoo's Native Bat Conservation team, and also our annual sold-out program *Bump in the Night: Wolf Howl*. Combined our themed children's, family, and adult programs generated \$46,487 in revenue in 2025.

The Learning & Engagement department also develops and delivers programming for school groups visiting the Zoo on field trips. While we connect with all students from kindergarten through to post-secondary level, our fastest growing segment has been our custom Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) programs for high school students. These programs offer high school students a deeper look into careers and the skills required within specific sectors, such as customer service training and for some of the programs students are able to achieve a certificate of completion. Combined with Zoo School, the Toronto Zoo's grade 11 biology private school, our school programs generated \$138,451 in revenue in 2025.

Planting the Seeds of Conservation through Imparting Science Knowledge and Skills

In 2025, the Learning & Engagement department continued with the co-delivery of the University of Guelph's Madagascar Field School - One Health Approaches to Conservation. In this program, we welcomed students for a three-day visit to the Zoo, where staff taught university level students how to complete science research in the field. In 2025, the Field School course was recognized by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) for its efforts in international education and received the Panorama Award. This award recognizes innovation and excellence in design, planning, implementation, and management of high-quality endeavours in international education, with programming that focuses on academic, extracurricular, capacity-building and/or learning abroad.

The Learning & Engagement department expanded our efforts to share field science skills by developing a similar offering to the above, but targeted at youth ages 14-17, called *Introduction to Ecological Field Skills*. This program is part of the broader efforts of our educational programming, along with our BioCamp (ages 13-16) cohort of Zoo Camp, and March Break Camps, to move from communicating science knowledge to developing scientific skills that can be later be applied to real world conservation. For older adults, we continued to deliver Nature Journaling training, where we work with both new and seasoned naturalists to develop skills to document that which they observe in nature. These programs and experiences are all part of our efforts to plant and grow the seeds of conservation in the varied audiences we serve.

Assessing Our Impact

As part of the requirements of education programs under the standards of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and to ensure that the programs we design are working towards achieving our goal of developing guardians of wildlife and conservation, assessment and evaluation is conducted to ensure we are having an

impact towards meaningful change. In 2025, we further expanded our assessment efforts to measure impacts and to help guide program design for the future. Assessment takes various forms, from participant satisfaction surveys to planned activities or worksheets that are designed as a program element, and also used to determine if the established goals and outcomes of our programs are being actualized by the participants. Assessments are conducted specific to each program or weekly camp theme, and data suggests that we are meeting our identified outcomes. For example, as a result of their participation in the program, 83% of Bush Camp guests reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more connected with nature, and 85% agreed or strongly agreed that they were provided with new knowledge that enabled positive changes. From their children's participation in Zoo Camp, 82% reported that their children are now more aware of wildlife and conservation. In addition to the assessments, parent feedback provides additional evidence towards understanding whether our educational experiences resulted in behaviour change, as evidenced by the following feedback about our Zoo Camp program:

"Both my children consider Zoo Camp one of their all-time favourites. They loved the behind-the-scenes experiences and came home with greater appreciation for animals and the planet."

"Jordan loves all the content in Zoo Camp! He comes home singing songs and sharing stories about animals... and it's clear he's learning about wildlife and empathy for animals."

"Logan doesn't want to leave at the end of the day! He talked about Zoo Camp all year. He's learning about Mother Earth and is no longer afraid of insects and bugs. Exposure has been great for him — he's developing respect for nature."

"She was in Adventurers and learned about Guardians of the Wild. She even asked whether the Zoomobile runs on gas and suggested switching to something else — a great sign she's thinking critically about conservation and sustainability!"

Zoo Camp was operated over 9 weeks in 2025 and welcomed 1,769 campers aged 4-16 with weekly camp themes for each age-group. Zoo Camp was highly successful, selling out very shortly upon opening, and generating \$747,820 in revenue.

Looking Ahead on Collaboration to Further Our Understanding of our Audiences

In 2025, the Learning & Engagement team has re-connected with the professor of York University's Memory Development Lab to conduct learning and memories studies throughout the Zoo Camp 2026 season. The study will build upon initial studies completed in collaboration with York University in 2018, and will look to determine the ability of children across various age groups in self-deriving new knowledge through combined semantic memory (i.e. animal facts) and episodic memory (i.e. memory based on events). Through this research we also hope to look at longer-term pro-environmental behaviours following a child's Zoo Camp experience.

Going into 2026 the Learning & Engagement department plans to keep building on our successes with our core programs and camps and will continue to seek new opportunities to reach all audiences while also building capacity to expand offerings with the opening of the new Community Conservation Campus in partnership with the University of Toronto Scarborough. These efforts are fundamental in helping to develop

science literacy and skills in our program participants and are planting the seeds of conservation as we strive to grow more Guardians of Wild for the future.

CONTACT

Heather House
Manager, Learning & Engagement
hhouse@torontozoo.ca
416-392-5937

Steve Jones
Supervisor, Learning & Engagement
sjones@torontozoo.ca
416-393-6376

SIGNATURE



Jennifer Tracey
Chief Operations Officer

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Learning & Engagement Programs 2021-2025