

## **Volunteering & Engagement Activities 2025**

Date: February 2, 2026

To: Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo

From: Chief Operations Officer

Wards: All

### **SUMMARY**

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This report will update the Board of Management on the activities of the Volunteering & Engagement Unit for the year 2025. The volunteer team consists of Year-Round Volunteers, Summer Volunteers, Wildlife Health & Science Centre Volunteers, and Zoo Ambassador Student Volunteers.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The Chief Operations Officer recommends that:

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

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT**

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

### **DECISION HISTORY**

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There is no decision history available for this item.

### **COMMENTS**

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#### **Toronto Zoo Volunteers - Delivering our Mission, Vision, and Strategic Plan**

As part of our team of Guardians of Wild, Zoo volunteers are champions for conservation, connecting with guests to inspire a passion for wildlife, delivering

messaging that supports our strategic priorities, and ensuring a high-quality guest experience. You will find them educating guests on-site year-round at educational interpretive stations in key areas, as well as providing directions and information at various wayfinding hubs, and supporting Zoo events and outreach activities.

### **Showing passion and dedication through hours donated and guest contacts**

In 2025, our roster consisted of a team of 378 volunteers including 265 Year-Round Volunteers, 54 Zoo Ambassador Student Volunteers, and 59 seasonal volunteers. Each year, this group of knowledgeable and dedicated individuals contributes increasing hours to the cause, reaching and educating an ever-growing number of guests. That tradition continued in 2025, with a record 46,443 hours donated by volunteers and an estimated reach of 1,145,725 people.

### **Creating Wow for Good**

As highly knowledgeable, passionate, and dedicated people, our volunteers increase our capacity to provide a personalized experience for each Zoo guest, helping them to feel more connected to wildlife and our stories, leading to a deeper learning and understanding. In 2025, we debuted a Backyard Wildlife Station during peak season, which allowed us to showcase our newly designed Indo-Malaya boardwalk while connecting over 25,000 guests with local wildlife. We also added educational activities in the Greenhouse, helping uncover the mystery and magic of plants to the over 31,000 guests who volunteers engaged with in that space. We continued to offer Members' tours as a value-added benefit and a chance to deepen conservation messaging to our dedicated Toronto Zoo Members.

Volunteers continue to receive rave reviews from guests and positively impact the guest experience. Comments show the value of Zoo volunteers to each visit. For example:

*"The volunteers are fantastic and added so much to our visit."*

*"The zoo volunteers are excellent. We love chatting with them each visit, they always tell us something new that we didn't know."*

*"I want to say that the volunteers always add so much value every time we go. My girls were so excited to see the Komodo dragons this visit... it's my girls' favourite animal and they already know a lot about Komodos but the volunteer provided info my girls didn't know and we were all really impressed."*

### **Connecting guests and community to science**

Zoo volunteers amplify our capacity to deliver our conservation science messaging to guests. Whether it is getting a chance to incubate faux Blanding's turtle eggs, examining animal x-rays through the lens of a Zoo vet, or hearing about our research on polar bear diet seasonality, volunteers make critical connections between our guests and our behind-the-scenes science work every day.

We also count on our incredible volunteer team to successfully deliver a huge range of on-site initiatives and activities. Our 10k Oasis ZooRun, Move Your Paws run, Wild Toy hospital, e-waste collection, animal awareness days, Zoo Members events, and many more, are strengthened by Zoo volunteer assistance.

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 2025, volunteers connected with an estimated 14,880 people through participating in dozens of events including the I Love Scarborough Festival, Canadian National Exhibition (CNE), grand opening of Biidaasige Park at the Toronto Port Lands, Rhythms of Canada Festival at the Aga Khan Museum, and Spring Bird Festival at Colonel Samuel Smith Park, to name just a few, as well as various community barbecues, and much more.

### **Diversifying our volunteer team**

To further our strategic plan goal of adopting “evolving diversity, accessibility, and inclusion practices for staff and volunteers to better reflect and serve our communities” we rolled out an updated (equity, diversity, inclusivity and accessibility) EDIA survey to current volunteers. This baseline data will help us understand areas of strength and growth and help us gauge the success of our efforts in the coming years. Overall, our roster reported that they feel safe, respected, and included, and recognized strong EDIA values in training and daily interaction. We also employed a new tool to help address EDIA when recruiting new volunteers.

### **Providing leadership opportunities for volunteers**

We offer various opportunities for individuals who are interested in deepening their volunteer role at the Zoo. These contributions make our organization stronger while allowing volunteers to use and develop their skills. In 2025, we recruited a new group of day captains for each day of the week. The two-year day captain term includes motivating and communicating with volunteers on their day, identifying volunteer needs that can be supported by staff, and organizing social events for their teams.

In addition, our pilot group of 12 volunteers from 2024 continued with the Zoo Monitor animal welfare science observations, conducting animal behaviour observations using the Zoo Monitor app, ensuring rigorous data collection results in monitoring the welfare of a variety of species at the Zoo.

### **Celebrating our Guardians of Wild**

As a respected part of the Toronto Zoo team, volunteers receive regular and timely opportunities for professional development throughout the year. Notable training for 2025 included Greenhouse tours with experts from our Horticultural department, a session on "The Power of Human Connection" with GenWell, and KultureCity Sensory Inclusive program training. This is in addition to our regular monthly meetings with a variety of guests speakers and town halls with the CEO, which ensure volunteers have the most current animal and organizational information to provide a high-quality guest experience.

At our annual volunteer recognition event in June 2025, 92 volunteers received recognition awards for their dedicated service to the Zoo. This included the following categories:

- 15 years of service (7 volunteers)
- 20 years of service (3 volunteers)

- 25 years of service (2 volunteers)
- 45 years of service (1 volunteer)

In addition, one volunteer reached an incredible 50 years of service milestone in 2025, a first for our volunteer program!

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. These categories included:

- 350 hours (23 volunteers)
- 750 hours (16 volunteers)
- 1,150 hours (12 volunteers)
- 1,500 hours (9 volunteers)
- 1,850 hours (6 volunteers)
- 2,250 hours (4 volunteers)
- 2,600 hours (3 volunteers)
- 3,000 hours (3 volunteers)
- 3,500 hours (1 volunteer)

Plus, one exceptional volunteer who achieved 6,150 hours of service over her 14-year (and counting) Zoo volunteer career.

In addition to these formal recognition awards, we always find meaningful ways to make sure each of our volunteers feels celebrated and appreciated. In 2025, we had three volunteers recognized through the Ontario Volunteer Services Awards for 20 years of service. During National Volunteer week in April, we thanked volunteers with coffee and goodies at the start of their shift and acknowledged them on the Zoo's social media channels. 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 2025, 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 680 volunteers collectively gave 2,370 hours of their time to support these valuable environmental projects to enhance our Zoo site.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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