

2026 Indigenous Relations Activities Report

Date: September 28, 2026

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 2026 initiatives led by Toronto Zoo's Indigenous Relations Unit.

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 15, 2025, the Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo adopted the report providing an update on the 2025 Toronto Zoo Indigenous Relations activities.

[Agenda Item History - 2025.ZB18.2](#)

COMMENTS

The Indigenous Relations unit is actively engaged across all operations of your Toronto Zoo to advance the Strategic Priorities set out in the 2025-2028 Strategic Plan and the

Zoo's Mission to "connect people, animals, conservation science traditional knowledge to fight extinction". The following are highlights of 2026 activities led by the Toronto Zoo's Indigenous Relations unit.

Wildlife Advocates

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

The YIGCS project engages youth from First Nation communities within target species at risk ranges and focuses on culturally grounded, land-based learning. Alderville First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation and Rama First Nation are three First Nations that share the same Lands as Blanding's Turtles, Eastern Small-footed Myotis and Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnakes, the key species of focus for the program. Since the beginning of the year, efforts have focused on engagement within their home communities. As transportation to the Toronto Zoo had been a barrier in 2025, providing more in-community outreach and engagement aims to bring conservation programming to youth and other community members.

Below are highlights of YIGCS activities in 2026:

- Indigenous Relations team facilitated two workshops with Hiawatha First Nation in Spring and Summer of 2026. A turtle nest protector workshop was held in the community's Gathering Space on April 25th, 2026, for youth ages 6-10. They learned about turtle species in Ontario and which species they might find around Hiawatha, putting together nest protectors and learning how and when to use them.
- The second workshop in the community took place on July 15th 2026 in the same space and open to the whole community to attend. This was a "Dinner & Learn" style event, in which 23 individuals of all ages participated. The focus of this workshop was learning about the many conservation efforts the Toronto Zoo is involved with right here in Ontario - i.e Field Conservation programs and rattlesnake breeding/reintroduction program, introducing community science to Hiawatha members and providing info and resources should they encounter these species when they are out on the Land.
- On July 9th, 2026, a workshop was held in Alderville First Nation with youth ages 5-10. The focus of this workshop was Ontario bats, their threats, how the Zoo helps, and a hands-on activity painting bat boxes that will be put up around the community. Toronto Zoo's Indigenous Relations team continues building these connections with these communities through this work and discussions continue to generate new ways of meaningfully engaging with First Nations partners.

Research

Indigenous Relations staff have been undertaking research on the local, national and international legal and regulatory frameworks with respect to gifting biocultural material from deceased culturally significant animals to Indigenous communities. Research was also undertaken on domestic and international feather repositories to collection information on governance, protocols and distribution of material. This research will be ongoing and will result in the development of a protocol unique to your Toronto Zoo that will provide guidance on transferring biological material from culturally significant animals in way that is respectful, fair and in compliance with regulatory and legal frameworks.

Belonging

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:

- Over the spring and summer, the Zoo hosted over 500 members of First Nations communities evacuated due to seasonal flooding and wildfires, 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.
- Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST) held site activations and programming on key days of significance June 21st (National Indigenous Peoples Day) and September 30th (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.

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. Indigenous Relations staff attended job fairs in First Nations communities and intend to increase outreach to urban Indigenous organizations for job recruitment.

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: gifting a name to the boardwalk in the Zoo's Core Woods, art and interpretive installations centering Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee ways of knowing and language, protocols to honour animals in our care who have passed away, onsite programming and engagement opportunities with First Nations communities. Over the next few months, the TZIAC will play a significant role advising on the process for updating the Zoo's Campus Plan.

Eagle Feather Ceremony

A ceremony was held on October 8th 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.

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

Indigenous Summer Leadership Program (ISLP)

In July, a student from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Indigenous Summer Leadership Program was given the opportunity to gain employment experience at the Zoo. They not only were introduced to various branches such as Horticulture, Nutrition and Strategic Communications, but gained valuable outreach experience through the Turtle Island Conservation program. Their special project focused on the traditional medicinal uses of the red dogwood tree, which is also a staple enrichment browse for a number of animals in the Zoo's care, including giraffes.

Nature's Insurance Policy

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 efforts to establish Canada's Wildlife Cryobank. A workshop was held late 2025 which brought together thought leaders and experts in the areas of Indigenous governance, data sovereignty, ethical frameworks, and access and benefits sharing, resulting in a report outlining emerging themes and key consideration. A post-doctoral fellow position has been posted to advance this work and discussions are occurring with academic institutions to identify opportunities for collaboration and partnership.

Wow for Good

Art and Interpretive

There has been a significant focus this year on increasing the visual representation of Indigenous knowledge, ways of being, art and language across the Zoo site through art and interpretive elements. Some notable examples are:

- The creation story of the Blandings Turtle (The Turtle with the Sun Under Their Chin) represented in the Glow in the Wild Lantern Festival. The art for the lanterns in this story was designed by Indigenous Relations Supervisor, Crystal Cowie.
- The Zoo's Indigenous Advisory Circle has gifted the name "Path of Our Relatives" to the elevated boardwalk that runs through the Core Woods. The name honours the Indigenous People who lived and stewarded that land since time immemorial and all the non-human relatives who live in the Core Woods. It also acknowledges the connectivity and accessibility the boardwalk offers Zoo guests and staff and interconnectivity between people, land, animals and waters. Signage was installed on October 8th with art by Anishnaabe artist August Swinson, and interpretive guidance from Advisory Circle members. The name "Path of Our Relatives" has also been given Anishnaabemowin and Seneca translations and a webpage has been created with the audio recordings of the names being spoken in the language.
- With guidance from the Zoo's Indigenous Advisory Circle, staff have been working with an Anishnaabe language speaker and knowledge keeper to develop an interpretive installation in "the Hive" area in The Learning Centre at the Community Conservation Centre. The interpretive panel will share knowledge on Clan animals and correlate to the Clan animal silhouettes that are a key wayfinding feature within the building.
- Acquired wood sculptures from Metis wood artist Sidney Gendron ("Sawmill Sid") that will feature prominently in the plaza of the new Community Conservation Centre.

- An Expression of Interest has been posted for an Indigenous artist to design a signature art installation in the “The Hive” area in the Learning Centre.

Events

- In June, Samantha Doxtator (Oneida Nation, Wolf Clan) gave a special presentation on Haudenosaunee Star Teachings, showcasing the connection between land and sky, traditional knowledge and science.
- In July, your Toronto Zoo hosted an event by Indigenous Tourism Ontario, featuring Indigenous cultural activations, Indigenous culinary experiences and a community drone show highlighting the Seven Grandfather Teachings and 150 Year of the Indian Act.

Anticipated Activities October – December

For the remainder of October through to December, activities will include: continuing to finalize the interpretive installation and artist selection for art in the Learning Centre, collaborating with the Zoo's Learning and Engagement team to integrate Indigenous knowledge and storytelling into educational programming, continuing research, engagement and building partnerships on the data sovereignty framework for the cryobank and planning ahead for 2027 events.

CONTACT

Jennifer Franks
Director, Indigenous Relations
jfranks@torontozoo.ca
(416) 392-0001

SIGNATURE

Jennifer Franks
Director, Indigenous Relations