

WAZA Code of Ethics

(San Diego, October 2023)

Preamble

This Code of Ethics is framed in four foundational documents that guide WAZA’s position on Animal Welfare, Conservation, Sustainability and Social Change. These documents are:

Caring For Wildlife: The World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy (2015) [\[link\]](#) Guides WAZA members to establish and maintain suitable animal welfare standards, best practices, measures and professional conduct within the wider zoo and aquarium community. It encourages all WAZA members to achieve positive animal welfare for the animals in their care; to be animal welfare leaders, advocates, and authoritative advisers; and to provide environments that focus on the animals’ physical and behavioural needs.

Committing to Conservation: The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy (2015) [\[link\]](#) Guides WAZA members to commit to become effective conservation organisations. It provides steps toward conservation leadership and coordinates a “One Plan Approach” toward the integration of conservation efforts in wild and zoo and aquarium populations. It also catalyses zoos and aquariums to become sources of inspiration and action for staff, visitors, and the wider communities. It encourages active collaboration among WAZA members and the conservation community globally.

Protecting our Planet: The World Zoo and Aquarium Sustainability Strategy 2020–2030 (2020) [\[link\]](#). Guides WAZA members in reaching sustainability outcomes in their operations and strategies. It shows the synergy between sustainability and conservation and suggests ways to integrate sustainability into their strategies and operations based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Social Change for Conservation: The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Education Strategy (2020) [\[link\]](#) Guides WAZA members and the wider zoo and aquarium community to build expertise, leadership, and capacity to achieve educational and social outcomes crucial to their conservation mission. It specifically calls for the creation of a culture of conservation supported by measurable learning outcomes for diverse audiences. It also defines the wide range of approaches to conservation education — such as creating connections to nature, fostering empathy for wildlife, capacity building, and motivating pro-environmental behaviours.

These foundational documents indicate that progressive zoos and aquariums must hold themselves to the highest ethical standards in all endeavours, including animal welfare, conservation, environmental sustainability, education, research, business practices, and human relations.

Periodic Review: It is expected that this Code of Ethics is reviewed every five years to reflect the dynamic nature of cultural, ethical, scientific, and regulatory trends for progressive zoos and aquariums.

WAZA members embrace and embody the following set of Ethical Values

- Present the animals in our care with dignity and respect, including the animals with which we engage in population management, conservation, research, and education programmes.
- Implement best practices to ensure optimal physical, psychological, environmental, behavioral, and social conditions that allow all individuals in our care to thrive.
- Continuously improve policies and practices that support staff, improve facilities, enhance the welfare of animals in our care, and build a safe and respectful environment for the animals, the visitors, and the staff.
- Utilise science, experience, respect, empathy, and compassion in all our decisions that affect animals, people, habitats, or the environment.
- Acknowledge and respect the cultural complexity and differing values that may exist among WAZA members, and engage one another with openness, respect, wisdom, and patience.

WAZA Members Prioritise Ethical Decision Making in All Aspects of their Operations

WAZA members must follow general ethical principles in all areas of operation. Ethical decision making must be a priority for all WAZA members. When it comes to general ethical principles associated with operational practices, WAZA members must:

- Act with compassion, inclusivity, and empathy because they are charged with caring for living animals and interacting with people of all varied backgrounds and abilities,
- Act with an environmental conscience,
- Collaborate wherever possible to achieve shared conservation goals,
- Operate in the interest of the natural world and the community, developing their own policies that are consistent with this goal.
- Present animals in a respectful manner, that meets their environmental, behavioural, nutritional and health care needs, in accordance with our current understanding of animal welfare science (Mellor & Beausoleil, 2015) and progressive zoo and aquarium standards and evolving best practices.
- WAZA members engage in population management activities that are based on and contribute to legal, sustainable, and ethical sourcing and placement of animals.

WAZA Members Prioritise Animal Welfare and Associated Ethical Considerations

As part of the [WAZA 2023 Animal Welfare Goal](#), all WAZA National and Regional Associations must have an animal welfare evaluation process in place and such a process must include specific elements approved by WAZA. All WAZA institutional members must comply with the animal welfare evaluation process established by their National and Regional association.

WAZA members should ensure that animals in their care are allowed opportunities to have positive experiences in their day to day lives, as recognised through the Five Domains of Animal Welfare (Mellor and Beausoleil 2015), such as:

- a) Receive proper nutrition, and an engaging pleasurable diet,
 - b) Live in environments that promote comfort,
 - c) Experience good physical health, and are safe from injury and disease,
 - d) Can express choice and control over their interactions with the environment and other animals, and engage in species appropriate behaviours, in ways that the animal finds rewarding, and
 - e) Have lives where positive mental experiences are occurring, while negative mental experiences are minimal.
- Address inadequacies in animals' abilities to reach positive outcomes in each of the Five Domains and to assure staff are aware of current animal welfare science practices and theories in animal welfare science.
 - Consider the potential animal welfare outcomes of each aspect of animal management, such as choosing appropriate species for display or other use, exhibit planning, animal care, animal health procedures, and use of live feeder animals.
 - Human-animal interactions of all forms must be guided by the [WAZA Guidelines for Animal-Visitor Interactions](#) (WAZA, 2020) and must provide opportunities to promote positive animal welfare outcomes and deliver sound conservation messaging.
 - Animal welfare must be a component of population planning and end of life decisions.
 - If animals are part of research of any kind, animal welfare impacts must be assessed. Where possible, an ethics committee should review and approve research involving animals.

WAZA Members Act Ethically Towards All People

Many activities in which WAZA members are involved are aimed at changing or understanding human behaviour. These practices include general zoo and aquarium visitors, educational programmes, *in situ* conservation work with local communities, outreach to specific audiences, human behaviour research, social media positions, learning outcomes, and more.

When WAZA members work or interact with people, they must always be aware of the groups they are working with and make every consideration to treat all persons with dignity, respect, and privacy, including all cultural and ethical considerations. WAZA's conservation education and sustainability strategies, describe numerous mission-related activities in which zoos and aquariums work with diverse groups of people.

WAZA members must at all times act ethically and respectfully toward all colleagues in the zoo and aquarium community.

WAZA Members use Ethical Decision Making in Conservation and Research Practices

Many WAZA members conduct conservation and research activities that take place at the zoo or aquarium, in the field or in the laboratory.

Because WAZA members hold wildlife conservation as a core component of their missions, much of this applied conservation and research activity involves working with live animals, habitats, and ecosystems.

Therefore, WAZA members must:

- To the extent possible, align with WAZA's Conservation Strategy: Committing to Conservation for orientation and incorporating ethical considerations for *ex situ* activities, animal welfare, and educational programmes.
- Consider animal welfare in all aspects of work, including the ethical disposition of animals when research is completed.
- To the extent possible, publish and disseminate their findings in relevant journals and other scientific communication channels.
- Demonstrate that their conservation and research activities have been performed by qualified personnel and within legal and ethical guidelines.
- Ensure the responsible use of biological and genetic materials is compliant with international protocols (e.g., CITES and the Nagoya Protocol).

Legal Compliance

WAZA members must:

- Act in accordance with all local, state, national and international laws, conventions, treaties, and regulations,
- Conduct their work with the appropriate permits and licenses.

WAZA Ethics Concern and Inquiry Process

Approved by the WAZA Council in April 2026

This document establishes the procedure followed by WAZA when reviewing concerns regarding potential violations of the WAZA Code of Ethics by a WAZA Member.

In the event of any inconsistency between this process and the WAZA Bylaws, the WAZA Bylaws shall prevail.

When WAZA receives an ethics concern, it follows the process outlined below and illustrated in the attached flowchart.

Concerns will be treated as confidential but may not be anonymous. Only concerns submitted by an identified complainant will be considered.

Throughout the Ethics Concern and Inquiry process described below, all involved parties shall maintain strict confidentiality regarding the case, except where disclosure is required as part of this process, to relevant authorities, or as provided for in Sections 10 and 11 of this document.

Roles and Responsibilities

To ensure transparency and consistency in the Ethics Concern and Inquiry Process, the responsibilities of the different WAZA bodies involved are outlined below.

Any individual involved in the Ethics Concern and Inquiry Process who has, or believes they may have, an actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest must promptly notify the WAZA Executive Office. The WAZA Executive Office, in consultation with the Chair of the Ethics Subcommittee, will assess the existence and relevance of the conflict and determine whether the individual must recuse themselves from any involvement in the review, deliberation, or decision-making related to that case.

Individuals for whom a conflict of interest has been identified will not participate in the review, deliberation, or decision-making related to that case. Where appropriate, they may be consulted solely to provide factual background or information, without influencing the outcome.

WAZA Executive Office

The WAZA Executive Office is responsible for:

- receiving and formally acknowledging ethics concerns;
- determining whether the concern relates to a WAZA Member;
- coordinating communication with relevant parties (i.e. regional and national associations, institutional member, WAZA bodies);
- maintaining documentation and records related to the process;
- providing administrative support to the Ethics Subcommittee and WAZA governance bodies throughout the inquiry process; and
- formally communicating the outcomes of ethics inquiries to WAZA Members and relevant parties on behalf of the Ethics Subcommittee, Executive Committee, and Council.

Ethics Subcommittee

The Ethics Subcommittee is responsible for:

- Operating under the delegation of the Ethics and Animal Welfare Committee
- initiating and leading the inquiry process;
- requesting and reviewing information from relevant parties;
- assessing whether a violation of the WAZA Code of Ethics may have occurred;
- determining the provisional outcome of the inquiry;
- preparing recommendations for the WAZA Executive Committee; and
- overseeing any Active Management process, including monitoring progress and determining follow-up actions.

Regional or National Associations

Regional or National Associations may:

- provide contextual information related to the concern; and
- support the collection of relevant information when requested by the Ethics Subcommittee.

WAZA Executive Committee

The WAZA Executive Committee is responsible for:

- acting under delegated authority of Council;
- reviewing recommendations from the Ethics Subcommittee; and
- determining whether disciplinary actions should be recommended to the WAZA Council.

WAZA Council

The WAZA Council is responsible for:

- making final decisions regarding disciplinary actions as outlined in the WAZA Bylaws; and
- serving as the appellate body in the event of an appeal.

Ethics Concern and Inquiry Process

1. Receipt of Concern

WAZA receives a written concern (e.g., from visitors, media, another WAZA Member or any source identified in Article 9 of the WAZA Bylaws).

The WAZA Executive Office formally acknowledges the concern and ascertains if the concern is about a WAZA Member within ten (10) days of receipt.

If the concern does not relate to a WAZA Member, the Executive Office will notify the relevant Regional and/or National Association as appropriate and WAZA's handling of the case will be closed. This outcome will be communicated to the complainant.

2. Clarification of alleged violation

The concern should explicitly outline the specific violation of the WAZA Code of Ethics that is alleged. If no clear articulation of a violation is provided, the complainant will be given an opportunity to clarify the concern.

If the complainant does not provide clarification within seven (7) days, the WAZA Executive Office may close the case.

3. Notification of the Ethics Subcommittee

If the concern relates to a WAZA Member, the WAZA Executive Office will notify the Chair of the Ethics Subcommittee, who will convene the Subcommittee as appropriate.

4. Inquiry Process

The Ethics Subcommittee, through the WAZA Executive Office, initiates an inquiry process and solicits additional information from relevant parties. The relevant Regional or National Association and the WAZA Member concerned will be notified of the concern and invited to provide any relevant information within fifteen (15) days.

If the information received is insufficient for the Ethics Subcommittee to reach a determination, the Subcommittee (through the WAZA Executive Office) may request additional clarification or information from the parties involved. In such cases, the Regional or National Association and/or the WAZA Member concerned will be given a further period of ten (10) days to provide any additional relevant information.

If no additional information is provided within this timeframe, the Ethics Subcommittee will proceed with the inquiry based on the information available.

In order to ensure fairness and consistency across all Members, all information considered in the inquiry process must be obtained through the formal procedures coordinated by the Ethics Subcommittee via the WAZA Executive Office. Information obtained through informal or external channels will not be considered unless it is formally requested, documented, and validated as part of the inquiry process by the Ethics Subcommittee.

5. Determination of Provisional Outcome

Within thirty (30) days of receipt of the relevant information, the Ethics Subcommittee will review the information provided by the Regional or National Association and/or the WAZA Member.

The Ethics Subcommittee may request additional clarification or information from relevant parties if it determines that further information is necessary to reach a determination.

During a meeting or conference call, and by simple majority, the Subcommittee will determine the provisional outcome of the inquiry and prepare a recommendation for the WAZA Executive Committee, if applicable. The Ethics Subcommittee may reach one of two outcomes:

a. Substantiated

If the Ethics Subcommittee concludes that a violation of the WAZA Code of Ethics has occurred, the concern is **substantiated**. The Chair of the Membership Committee will be informed of the Institutional Member affected by the substantiated concern and the outcome recommended (i.e. recommendation for disciplinary action or active management).

Substantiated concerns can lead to two different outcomes:

Disciplinary Action

Through the WAZA Executive Office, the Ethics Subcommittee Chair will present a recommendation to the WAZA Executive Committee regarding appropriate

disciplinary action. These may include reprimand, suspension, or expulsion, as outlined in Article 9 of the WAZA Bylaws (Cali, 2025).

In cases where reprimand or suspension is recommended, the Ethics Subcommittee may also recommend an Active Management process to support the Member in addressing identified issues and returning to compliance.

The WAZA Executive Committee will review the recommendation. Refer to section 6: *Executive Committee Review* to continue with the process.

Active Management

If the Ethics Subcommittee determines that the concern raises legitimate issues but that immediate disciplinary actions are not appropriate or that further improvements are required, the case may enter **Active Management**. The Ethics Subcommittee will oversee and monitor this process.

Under Active Management:

- The Ethics Subcommittee will develop a **set of recommendations** aimed at addressing the issues identified.
- A **timeline for implementation and review** will be established, which will be proportionate to the issues identified and will normally not exceed twelve (12) months unless otherwise justified.
- The WAZA Member will be required to provide **evidence of progress or corrective actions** within an agreed timeframe (e.g. six months following the issued recommendations).
- At the conclusion of the timeline, the Ethics Subcommittee will reassess the case and determine whether:
 - the case should be **dismissed**, or
 - the concern should proceed to the disciplinary process with sanctions recommended.
- The WAZA Executive Office will formally communicate the Active Management decision, including the recommendations and timeline for implementation, to the WAZA Member and any relevant parties.

Active Management is a non-disciplinary measure intended to support compliance and does not constitute a sanction under Article 9 of the WAZA Bylaws.

The WAZA Executive Committee will be informed when a case enters Active Management.

b. Dismissed

If the Ethics Subcommittee determines that there is insufficient evidence of a violation, or that the concern does not constitute a breach of the WAZA Code of Ethics, the concern will be **dismissed** and the case will be closed.

The WAZA Executive Office, on behalf of the Ethics Subcommittee, will notify the WAZA Member, the complainant, and any other relevant parties of the dismissal of the case.

The WAZA Executive Committee will be informed of all dismissed cases.

6. Executive Committee Review

The Executive Committee will deliberate and reach a decision within fifteen (15) days of receiving the recommendation from the Ethics Subcommittee Chair.

The WAZA Executive Committee will review the recommendation and relevant information and determine whether disciplinary actions should be recommended to the WAZA Council.

If the Executive Committee determines that disciplinary action is not warranted but that the concern requires further monitoring or improvement, it may refer the case back to the Ethics Subcommittee for consideration under the Active Management process.

Decisions will be made by simple majority vote.

7. Council Decision

Where disciplinary action is recommended, and as per the WAZA Bylaws, the WAZA Council will make a final decision within fifteen (15) days of receiving the recommendation from the Executive Committee.

Council decisions must be approved by a two-thirds (2/3) majority of Council members. If a two-thirds (2/3) majority is not achieved, the Council will provide reasoned feedback to the Ethics Subcommittee. The Ethics Subcommittee will review and, where appropriate, revise its recommendation in light of this feedback and resubmit it to the Executive Committee for further consideration before returning to the Council. This process may be repeated iteratively until a decision is reached in accordance with the required two-thirds (2/3) majority.

A letter including the substance of the findings and the disciplinary actions taken will be sent by the WAZA Executive Office to the WAZA Member and all parties involved in the process. This communication serves as the final decision, subject to appeal.

8. Appeals

An appeal may be made in writing to the WAZA Executive Office within thirty (30) days following receipt of notification of the WAZA Council's decision. The appeal may include a request to appear before the Council, as provided for in the WAZA Bylaws (Cali, 2025).

Appeals will be subject to an administrative review by the WAZA Executive Office to ensure completeness and alignment with the criteria set out below. The final determination on admissibility rests with the WAZA Executive Committee, acts under delegated authority of the WAZA Council in carrying out this review.

An appeal may proceed where it can be demonstrated that:

- a. there are new facts, not known at the time of the Ethics Subcommittee investigation, which the Executive Office believes may have changed the outcome; or
- b. the Ethics Subcommittee, Executive Committee or Council did not follow relevant WAZA procedures; or
- c. the sanctions recommended by the Ethics Subcommittee or WAZA Executive Committee and/or imposed by Council were disproportionate under the circumstances.

The WAZA Council will serve as the appellate body. If a vote is required, it will be carried by a two-thirds (2/3) majority.

The Member shall be classified as “suspended” during the appeal process, in accordance with Article 9 of the WAZA Bylaws.

The Council must act upon the appeal prior to the next General Assembly. The appellate decision of the WAZA Council shall be final and cannot be appealed.

9. Closure of the Case

In the absence of an appeal, all final disciplinary actions will be communicated to all parties involved, marking the closure of the case.

If the process of appeal changes the initial outcome, all Parties involved in the process will be notified.

10. Confidentiality of Proceedings

The Ethics Concern and Inquiry Process shall be conducted in a confidential manner in order to protect the integrity of the process and the parties involved.

When the outcome of the process involves case dismissal, all detailed proceedings and documentation of the inquiry process will be kept confidential.

In cases where disciplinary action is imposed, confidentiality will be maintained with respect to the detailed proceedings; however, information regarding the outcome and the basis for the decision may be shared in accordance with Article 7(h) of the WAZA Bylaws.

The WAZA Executive Committee may, at its discretion, make available partial or full reports of the inquiry process to regional or national zoo and aquarium associations or to relevant government wildlife, conservation, and law enforcement authorities.

11. External Communication

In the event that the WAZA Ethics Concern and Inquiry Process leads to the provisional and/or final termination of the WAZA Member, WAZA reserves the right to communicate the decision to appropriate audiences.

Such communication will be conducted in a manner consistent with Article 7(h) of the WAZA Bylaws, ensuring that transparency obligations to Members regarding sanctions are respected, while safeguarding the confidentiality of the inquiry process and sensitive information.

External communication will be overseen by the WAZA Executive Office and the WAZA Executive Committee and will be limited to a concise summary of the findings, the process followed, and the outcome.

NOTE: See attached diagram for the WAZA Ethics Concern and Inquiry Process

