

SUPPORTING NUTRITIONAL HEALTH OF AMBASSADOR ANIMALS AT ZOOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Ambassador animal programs often have a unique set of requests for zoo nutrition programs. These requests are centered around handling frequency, desired behavioral outcomes, and changes in body weight for management. Frequently, requests are numerous and lead to individualized diets with specialized feed items or preparation instructions that would not extend to conspecifics housed in other areas.

Diet requests for ambassador animals are commonly driven by behavioral management and training. Requests for feed items that are “novel” or that will help trainers keep their animals interested are common, and these items are not always nutritionally appropriate or feasible for a nutrition program to accommodate. For some species nutritional ecology does not align with desired presentation schedules or desired behavioral goals. Body weight management of ambassador animals can also be challenging when programs are focused on keeping an animal motivated for training and guest experiences. These challenges sometimes spark conversation and debate on whether the animal really has choice and control in training participation.

Our challenge as nutritionists is to support conservation efforts and guest engagement while also providing appropriate nutrition for the animals in our care. What methods have been successful in managing these requests, and are there improvements that can be adopted by nutrition professionals to support nutritional health and conservation of the individuals in our care?

Points to discuss:

- What are the current pain points other nutritionists have experienced when working with ambassador animal diets?
- What tips/tools have you found to be most successful to manage nutritional and training needs?
- How much leeway do you give ambassador animal teams to make changes for their animals/presentation requests?
- What role does NAG have in developing AZA's ambassador animal guidelines?