Using a collaborative approach to collection planning

By Amanda Pressly, Ambassador Animal Specialist 2, New Mexico Wildlife Center

When the Ambassador Animal Program Director (AAPD) at the New Mexico Wildlife Center (NMWC) was tasked with creating an Ambassador Management Plan, the goal was to build something that aligned with our upcoming master plan, reflected current staff strengths, and kept pace with evolving zoological standards and welfare practices. This eventually became our acquisition/disposition protocol--a living, purpose-driven document focused on building a collection of working ambassadors that represent native New Mexican species with strong ties to conservation and human-wildlife conflict education.

There were a lot of factors to consider: a newly restructured education department, a raptor-heavy ambassador collection, aging infrastructure, varying staff experience levels, and changing expectations around quality of life and welfare.

Rather than tackling this project alone, the AAPD built a collaborative framework with the wildlife rehabilitation hospital staff, education team, and executive leadership. Every ambassador disposition includes a quality-of-life evaluation and an A-to-Z plan with agreed-upon welfare markers to guide decisions. Potential acquisitions begin with an individual scoring system completed by each team member to help shape open discussion around programming fit, welfare, staff capacity, and personal perspectives. All decisions require team buy-in and must reach a consensus.

In 2025, NMWC had a record-breaking number of acquisitions. While some conversations were difficult, this process helped us identify blind spots, challenge assumptions, and consider animals we may not have otherwise pursued. The collaborative approach has helped drive meaningful growth, including housing New Mexico's first publicly displayed black-footed ferrets, welcoming our first sandhill crane ambassador, and expanding involvement in SSP and SAFE programs.

This presentation will share practical tools for collaborative collection planning and how shared decision-making can strengthen both team investment and institutional growth.