

# Wild Animal Initiative Strategic Plan

**2022**  
**v6.0**

This is a living document. The last substantive update was 6 May 2022. This version expands on the previous version ([v5.0, last substantively updated 26 Aug 2021](#)) by (1) adopting a 3-year planning timeline, (2) setting goals for 2022-2024, and (3) updating our theory of change to clarify the relationship between academic field-building (which is the focus of Wild Animal Initiative's work) and other mechanisms of change (which are outside the scope of Wild Animal Initiative's work).

# Introduction

## Purpose of the strategic plan

The purpose of the strategic plan is to document our strategy in a way that:

1. Helps us determine which tactics and objects we should aim for to have the greatest impact.
2. Informs our efforts to evaluate our progress.
3. Facilitates discussions around setting priorities or evaluating the opportunity cost of pursuing new opportunities.
4. Makes our strategy transparent enough for outside audiences to understand it, evaluate it, or suggest improvements to it.

## Drafting process

1. At Wild Animal Initiative's February 2022 strategy retreat, the staff discussed each section of the plan and agreed on high-level directions for each program.
2. Over March and April 2022, the staff and board iteratively wrote and revised drafts of the plan.
3. The staff voted to approve the plan on May 6.
4. The board voted to approve the plan on May 12.
5. Next steps:
  - a. Mid-year update, Q3 2022: We'll review the plan to further develop our goals and hiring plans for 2022. These revised goals will form the basis of the plans we submit to Animal Charity Evaluators (during the summer 2022 evaluation process) and our end-of-year fundraising appeal.
  - b. Annual review, Q1 2023: During the annual 2023 strategic planning process and each year thereafter. We'll review the plan and update it as necessary.

# Theory of change

We envision a world in which people take responsibility for improving wild animals' lives and have the knowledge they need to do so effectively. The road to that reality begins with the formation of a new scientific field — an ecosystem of people and institutions critically investigating wild animals' needs and how we can meet them.

## Motivation

**Wild Animal Initiative exists to improve the welfare of wild animals.** Humans and captive animals make up about 1% of vertebrates on Earth. The other 99% live in the wild. Even in habitats least affected by humans, many animals struggle to survive. Starvation, disease, severe weather, and other threats are common. We have a responsibility to reduce suffering when we can, regardless of its cause.

## Mission

**Wild Animal Initiative supports the growth of a scientific field dedicated to understanding and improving the lives of wild animals.** Significantly improving the lives of wild animals at scale will require evidence-based interventions, policy changes to enable them, and widespread public support for those policies. First, we need to know what actions and policies would benefit wild animals. However, because most wildlife research has been limited to the harms humans cause, we are still uninformed about what animals' lives are like in the wild and what humans could do to help responsibly.

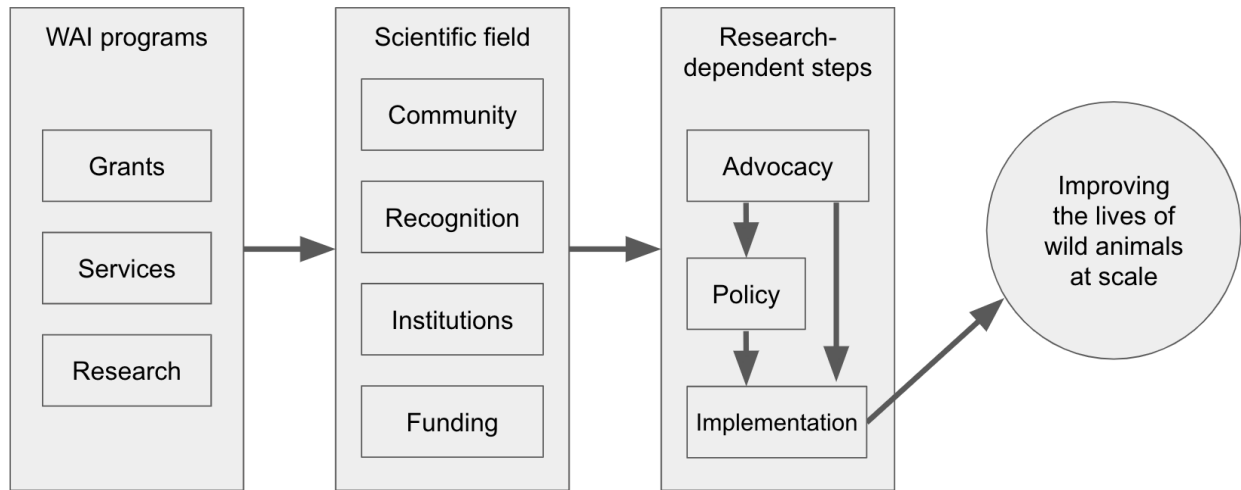
It will not be easy to answer these questions. The diversity of animal species and the complexity of ecosystem interactions requires a wider range of researchers than any one organization could support. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a scientific field dedicated to wild animal welfare. Supporting the growth of that community of scientists and practitioners is the fastest way to make progress on responsibly improving the lives of wild animals. It is also the most reliable way to ensure that progress continues into the future.

## Methods

**Wild Animal Initiative advances its mission through three core programs: Grants, Services, and Research.**

- To be effective and self-sustaining, the field needs:
  - **Community:** A continuously growing, diverse, and equitable community of prominent and promising researchers.
  - **Recognition:** Recognition as a source of rigorous research in a distinct subject area.
  - **Institutions:** The support of institutions dedicated to the field, such as research centers, conferences, or journals.

- **Funding:** Sufficient, diverse, and stable funding.
- We advance those objectives through our three core programs:
  - **Grants:** Making grants to researchers in the field.
  - **Services:** Providing services to support the careers of researchers in the field.
  - **Research:** Conducting research to inform further work in the field.



**Table 1. A simplified model of our theory of change** showing how WAI’s programs can improve the lives of wild animals: by supporting the growth of a research field that continuously informs advocacy, policy, and implementation.

# Strategy 1: Grants

## Program objectives

The grants program supports research that helps us understand and improve the lives of wild animals by focusing on the following areas:

1. **Knowledge:** Increasing our understanding of how to meaningfully improve the lives of wild animals on a large scale by funding rigorous, ethical, impactful, and applicable scientific research.
2. **Viability:** Demonstrating the viability of wild animal welfare science as a field by supporting projects that answer high-priority research questions and funding novel research methods that otherwise would not be explored.
3. **Growth:** Building a critical mass of promising and reputable researchers studying wild animal welfare to enable new stages of growth for the field (e.g., by hosting a major conference, founding a scientific journal, forming a professional society, or establishing a dedicated research center).
4. **Diversity:** Increasing the diversity of individuals and institutions researching wild animal welfare.
5. **Funders:** Influencing other grantmakers of general science, conservation, and animal welfare research to be more receptive to research projects focused on wild animal welfare.
6. **Standards:** Influencing the grantmaking industry standards to include appropriate welfare components in granting guidelines by modeling what responsible and compassionate calls for animal research proposals can look like.

## 10-year goals

- Fund research projects and fellowships that provide valuable insights to wild animal welfare science or interventions and are published in reputable, peer-reviewed scientific journals.
- Encourage funding by other grantmakers so that it makes up an increasing share of wild animal welfare research funding.
- Provide a meaningful share of our grant funding to grantees belonging to communities that are underrepresented in the sciences.
- Influence grantmakers of relevant science to include appropriate welfare components in granting guidelines that are reasonably expected to result in the execution of responsible and compassionate wild animal welfare science by their grantees.
- Inspire policy makers, advocates, and wild animal welfare practitioners to use research funded by our grants program to responsibly inform policies, actions, and priorities.

## 3-year goals

- We provide funding for research projects and fellowships that start to generate valuable insights to wild animal welfare science or interventions and are published in reputable, peer-reviewed scientific journals.
- Funding by grantmakers other than Wild Animal Initiative makes up a larger share of total wild animal welfare research funding than was the case in 2022.
- We direct a meaningful share of our grant funding to grantees belonging to communities that are underrepresented in the sciences.
- At least one grantmaker of relevant science includes appropriate welfare components in their granting guidelines that are reasonably expected to result in the execution of responsible and compassionate wild animal welfare science by their grantee(s).
- At least one research project funded by our grants program is actively considered by a major policymaker, advocate, or practitioner to responsibly inform a policy, action, or priority.

# Strategy 2: Services

## Program objectives

The services program helps build the field of wild animal welfare science by focusing on the following areas:

1. **Resources:** Connecting researchers to the resources (training, jobs, collaborators, and non-Wild-Animal-Initiative funds) they need to do wild animal welfare research.
2. **Advice:** Maintaining the rigor and relevance of wild animal welfare research (especially that funded by Wild Animal Initiative) through co-advising and review services.
3. **Collaboration:** Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration in wild animal welfare research.
4. **Community:** Creating a sense of community and shared identity as wild animal welfare researchers.
5. **Career development:** Growing the wild animal welfare research community through academic outreach and early-career development support.
6. **Institutions:** Providing the institutions and outlets that facilitate connecting, collaborating, and sharing wild animal welfare science research.

The long-term objective guiding the goals of the services program establishes a professional society for wild animal welfare research that would formalize a sense of community and shared identity among wild animal welfare researchers. We hope that this would support a positive feedback loop for growing the field even more by bringing in additional talented researchers and more funding, allowing wild animal welfare research to be done with greater scope and rigor.

Because the services program's objectives are about community-building, it is especially important for the program to advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). All goals require us to consider whom we're serving and why. Some goals are entirely about improving access and recognition for marginalized researchers (e.g., English-language editing services). Other goals require JEDI consideration at the implementation stage (e.g., where to advertise events).

## 10-year goals

1. Establish a professional society for wild animal welfare research that would formalize a sense of community and shared identity among wild animal welfare researchers.
2. Build and sustain relations with key academics and institutions by providing opportunities for communication, collaboration, or practical support.
3. Provide opportunities for sharing, dissemination, and communicating wild animal welfare research, such as hosting a regular conference.
4. Facilitate the establishment of a research institution specific to wild animal welfare (e.g., research center, network, or collaborative research group) that consists of and attracts wild animal welfare researchers.

5. Release an open-access course curriculum to facilitate provision of wild animal welfare courses at universities and other educational institutes.

## 3-year goals

1. We establish relationships with key academics and institutions through hosting small events (e.g., webinars, conference sessions), attending conferences, and direct outreach (e.g., email, grants/services).
2. The [Wild Animal Initiative Research Community](#) grows and sees high member engagement with its constituent services.
3. We scope routes for establishing academic institutions focused on wild animal welfare and explore options and support for a wild animal welfare-specific regular conference.
4. Advising or co-supervision opportunities are offered for all promising projects that request our involvement.
5. We help to connect prospective wild animal welfare students and postdocs with relevant advisors.
6. Wild Animal Initiative hosts an opportunities board for wild-animal-welfare-relevant grants, jobs, and events.
7. We host a curated online research library.
8. At least one university establishes a wild-animal-welfare-specific discussion group with our help (e.g., a journal club or seminar series).
9. We scope the feasibility and ideal characteristics of a wild animal welfare course curriculum.
10. We offer career advice for prospective and current graduate students and postdocs.
11. Wild Animal Initiative grantees whose first language is not English can access English-language academic editing services that we provide or fund.



# Strategy 3: Research

## Program objectives

The research program will provide a clearer picture of the wild animal welfare field and establish a standard for others to follow by focusing on the following areas:

1. **Prioritization and scope:** Identifying and communicating research priorities to the wild animal welfare research community and defining the scope of the field.
2. **Proof-of-concept:** Inspiring further research by providing model research that illustrates our novel approaches to core concepts and demonstrates the viability of priority research areas.
3. **Credibility:** Contributing high-quality scientific output to the field to establish credibility and in so doing gaining support within the wild animal welfare science community as a respected and valued contributor.
4. **Impact:** Generating robust scientific evidence that helps inform policy and encourages responsible interventions to improve wild animal welfare.

## 10-year goals

1. Contribute high-quality and rigorous science outputs to the wild animal welfare science community that facilitate building the field and setting priorities for wild animal welfare research
2. Lead researchers and academics to recognize that wild animal welfare science is a discipline aimed at understanding and improving the lives of wild animals, and to seek to contribute knowledge to the field through their own research, following Wild Animal Initiative's example.
3. Influence wild animal welfare science to be generally acknowledged as a distinct field, a viable applied science, and a valid discipline to study.
4. Establish ourselves as a recognized and valued member of the academic community, with people seeking our advice.
5. Inspire policy makers, advocates, and wild animal welfare practitioners to use Wild Animal Initiative research responsibly to inform policies, actions, and priorities.

## 3-year goals

1. We consistently produce research outputs that demonstrate wild animal welfare science, advance the understanding of wild animal welfare, and help set priority areas for wild animal welfare research.
2. Wild animal welfare science is understood and seen as valid among scientists; for example, scientists start to replicate Wild Animal Initiative studies, expand on the concepts and applications demonstrated, and publish in high impact journals.
3. Wild animal welfare science is recognized and referred to as a distinct field; its complexities are appreciated and valued by the scientific community.

4. We gain a better understanding of how existing and upcoming sentience research relates to wild animal welfare science and develop a strategy for applying it to our programs by scoping crucial questions.
5. Wild Animal Initiative regularly collaborates with other respected scientists within the research community and is viewed as a leader in the field of wild animal welfare science with a trustworthy scientific reputation because we conduct, fund, and implement good science practices.
6. Wild Animal Initiative investigates opportunities to cautiously and responsibly inform policy and practice; policy makers, advocates, and wild animal welfare practitioners are interested in how wild animal welfare science can inform policy and management.

# Execution

When Wild Animal Initiative is intentional in how we facilitate, communicate, and fund our work, it becomes more likely that our programs will lead to the creation of a sustainable and highly respected academic field of wild animal welfare — helping us to understand and improve the lives of more individuals.

## Operations

### Program objectives

The operations program will keep Wild Animal Initiative running successfully by focusing on the following areas:

1. **Hiring:** Hire and retain diverse, talented, and motivated people.
2. **Information:** Keep everyone at Wild Animal Initiative informed of the organization's activities.
3. **Operations:** Ensure Wild Animal Initiative operates effectively.
4. **Compliance:** Ensure Wild Animal Initiative complies with legal requirements.

### Annual goals

1. Our staff reflect the diversity of the general population of the U.S.
2. Every member of staff feels like they belong and are provided with the resources they need to succeed in their role.
3. Our employees have complementary strengths and personalities.
4. We have the time, funding, and ability to recruit, hire, and onboard highly qualified candidates who understand and believe in our mission.
5. We provide every employee with time, tools, coaching, and education to increase their ability to help wild animals through their work.
6. Our retreats and meetings are accessible and feature multiple ways to contribute.
7. We continually seek out ways to improve our understanding of how we can build a more just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive organization.
8. Employees have good work-life balance.
9. Every employee understands how success is defined for their role and knows where they excel and how they can grow.
10. Staff have clear avenues to influence decisions that affect Wild Animal Initiative's mission and the conditions of their employment.
11. Employees work towards achieving our mission in a manner that suits their unique abilities and interests.

12. The Board of Directors has at least six members and includes expertise in biology, ecology, effective nonprofit management, nonprofit finance, law, animal welfare, and policy.
13. We have the staff and services needed to efficiently comply with legal requirements and maintain our 501(c)(3) status.
14. The board and staff are aligned on Wild Animal Initiative's theory of change and on how the organization is structured.
15. We have a consistent process for sharing information, collaborating, and managing projects within and between departments.
16. Every department has access to the equipment and services it needs to be cost-effective.
17. We build up and maintain unrestricted reserves to cover at least 12 months' operating costs.
18. We develop multi-year budgets and projections and can adjust them for different strategic directions.

## Communications

### Program objectives

The communications program will keep external parties informed about Wild Animal Initiative's activities by focusing on the following areas:

1. **Communication:** Communicate with academics, policymakers, and members of their social circles about the need for wild animal welfare research, how Wild Animal Initiative supports the field, and the progress researchers are making.
2. **Engagement:** Produce content in a style and tone that is consistent, scientifically rigorous, and engaging to general audiences.
3. **Transparency:** Transparently report on Wild Animal Initiative's activities so that collaborators and supporters can assess our effectiveness.

### 3-year goals

1. We regularly publish updates and reports on past grantees and alumni.
2. At least two significant media outlets feature Wild Animal Initiative per year, with unpaid journalistic content related to projects or researchers we have funded.
3. We create a concise list of five or more case studies detailing how Wild Animal Initiative has impacted the state of wild animal welfare research.
4. We collaborate with the science team to publicize available services through advertising, media relations, and optimized website experiences.

5. At least two significant media outlets feature Wild Animal Initiative per year with unpaid journalistic content related to our internal research.
6. At least two significant media outlets feature Wild Animal Initiative per year with unpaid journalistic content portraying the organization as a thought leader.
7. We raise at least \$15,000 through communications campaigns during each end-of-year season, with increasing totals each year.
8. We produce an increasingly professional and visually appealing annual report each year.
9. We complete a redesign of Wild Animal Initiative's logo.
10. We offer training and resources to Wild Animal Initiative staff and grantees that emphasize the importance of communications and help them prepare for media interactions.
11. We define our target audiences and develop a precise institutional voice and tone.

## Development

### Program objectives

The development program will ensure Wild Animal Initiative has sufficient, stable, and diverse funding.

### Annual goals

1. We have the funds to cover our annual program goals and build reserves for planned growth.
2. The loss of a major donor is not a threat to our budget.
3. Wild Animal Initiative remains a top-rated nonprofit.
4. The communications, development, and science teams collaborate to jointly and effectively advocate for our work.
5. Development and science teams communicate and collaborate to raise funds for the grants and research programs.
6. We have mapped the philanthropic landscape in which we operate.
7. We have a donor relationship management system that is user-friendly and provides accurate data and analysis.