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## **LIONS, LABRADORS AND LINKING: EXPLORING COLLABORATION AND INCLUSION AT ZOOS SA**

By

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### **ABSTRACT**

Our zoos and aquariums are places where we can experience ourselves as a part of nature, rather than apart from nature; an opportunity to recall our heritage and ignite a sense of stewardship. As part of Zoos South Australia's (ZSA) inclusion and accessibility program, realising these engagement goals means supporting diverse visitor needs – some of which may also see us welcome their assistance animal companions.

To develop effective approaches, our challenge has been to address multiple strands of enquiry: how will we develop a setting that simultaneously promotes visitor engagement and safety, manages biosecurity considerations and supports animal welfare? In essence: just what might happen when a Labrador meets a lion?

To begin our quest, ZSA joined with the Royal Society for the Blind (RSB) Guide Dogs program to bring RSB trainers, dogs and our diverse animals together to innovate a program of four visits across Adelaide Zoo and Monarto Safari Park. Dogs met vaccination standards before we explored carefully considered itineraries at our contrasting sites to assess what happens when the domestic meets the exotic. Five different dogs of both genders were trialled across the four visits to ensure a broad sample of responses, with four trainers added to the mix to further glean their diverse insight. We filmed behaviour at each encounter, capturing crucial detail and building a catalogue of the entire trial series. This has enabled an improved understanding of what general behaviour outcomes may occur between canine visitors and animal residents across a range of contexts, with shared resources to inform discussions and steer policy direction in support of a more inclusive wild experience for all.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Nicholas has relished his work in the zoo world for the past 21 years in Australia and overseas, with a keen focus on behaviour, birds and free flight presentations. These have blended with his background as an actor/singer to see him working internationally in the field of Nature Theatre, supported by academic pursuits in performance arts, applied ornithology and wildlife management.

As the Animal Behaviour and Creative Programs Manager at Zoos South Australia, Nicholas supports effective animal training and storytelling programs at Adelaide Zoo and Monarto Safari Park. These focus on positive, innovative and engaging approaches in technical and cultural endeavours at both sites to connect people with nature and save species from extinction.