It's a bit of an odd pairing. Zoos and hunting education programs are not often seen together, but the Oregon Zoo in Portland, Ore., is working with hunters across the state to protect wildlife by promoting the use of non-lead ammunition. This unusual partnership is based on the fact that raptors and other scavengers often take advantage of easy meals left behind by hunters. When a deer, elk or other animal is shot with lead ammunition, small fragments from the bullet are left behind and can be consumed by golden eagles, bald eagles, California condors and other scavengers. Fortunately, hunters have a long history of conservation, and when informed are often willing to change their behavior to conserve wildlife. However, care needs to be taken to not alienate the very people we try to engage in conservation efforts.

The innovative program received an Association of Zoos and Aquariums Conservation Grants Fund award in 2015, its first year of operation. The funding from CGF leveraged funding from other government and private sources to enhance our ability to engage directly with the hunting community in Oregon. This included meeting with hunting organizations, creating outreach materials, attending sports shows with educational booths, and hosting testing events to let hunters try non-lead ammunition in their own firearms and encourage them to make the switch. Thanks to the assistance of CGF, more than 10,000 people were directly engaged with conservation messaging. Even more were reached through articles and news reports.

An important piece of this effort is evaluating the success of educational outreach programs and events. The support of CGF was critical in piloting survey efforts to evaluate the current and intended behavior of participants in Non-lead Hunting Education events. Although still preliminary, the data indicates education can have substantial impact on the intended behavior of hunters. Evaluation efforts show that after participating in a Non-lead Hunting Education event, 40 percent of hunters are willing to use non-lead ammunition for all of their hunting in the future. Zoos have a unique role in connecting people to wildlife, and this program demonstrates opportunities to work with novel partners to encourage conservation actions.

Leland Brown is the non-lead hunting education coordinator at the Oregon Zoo.