Most of the sodium that Americans consume each day comes from processed foods. The concession stand at the Topeka Zoo offered mostly processed, higher-sodium snacks and meals to visitors.

With support from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the Shawnee County Health Agency, Heartland Healthy Neighborhoods, and Kansas Health Foundation, the zoo launched a complete review of its concession stand’s menu, with a focus on reducing sodium.

Following review and approval of the new menu by a dietitian, visitors are now enjoying more healthful menu options at the zoo’s snack bar. For example, the sodium content of the three most popular sandwiches was reduced by an average of 45% per sandwich.

Zoo visitors began sampling the new Grazer’s Café menu with significantly less sodium in March 2013. In place of options like hot dogs and chicken nuggets, visitors can choose the “Hippo Meal” veggie wrap or “Kid’s Hippo Meal” veggie plate. The “Giraffe Meal” is a fruit and nut salad with side options such as vegetable sticks with hummus. So far, responses from zoo visitors have been positive. A summer 2013 intercept survey of 108 visitors found that 78% viewed the menu changes as favorable.

This project illustrates a successful collaboration. Zoo staff wanted to see changes because they believed in the zoo’s mission and recognized the contradiction between that mission and the need for more nutritious food. As a result, zoo staff members are proud of the new menu and their part in its development. As a next step, the Topeka Zoo is working with the Topeka City Council and Friends of the Zoo to maintain and expand the movement toward healthier food options.