

ANIMAL TRAINING



Zookeepers play a vital role as animal trainers. Each time they interact with an animal, they work to influence its future behavior. A learning activity is any efforts that result from practice or experience. When a practice or experience is directed by a human, the process is called training. **Zookeepers are animal teachers!**

The Zoo's resident animals learn through operant conditioning and positive reinforcement. Operant conditioning relies on a recurring behavior that increases or decreases by the consequences that follow. Positive reinforcement follows an action or response with something that the subject wants (favorite food, verbal praise, tactile

contact, play, favorite toy). This process of conditioning and reinforcement increases the chances of repetitive behavior. Training affects animal management, enrichment and education.

ANIMAL MANAGEMENT:

Shifting animals off and on exhibit or to another holding area is accomplished through training. For example, the white rhinoceros is shifted out on exhibit daily, then is trained to return to the holding area by an audio cue - a cowbell. When the cowbell is rung, the rhino walks back to the stall and consequently, will be rewarded with food (positive reinforcement). This behavior, shifting on cue, is a result of operant conditioning and positive reinforcement.

Training also is used for medical procedures. Animals are trained, through positive reinforcement, to voluntarily participate in medical procedures such as weighing, physical exams, hoof trims, vaccinations, and blood draws. Training can decrease stress the animal experiences with some medical procedures.

Take for instance, the Siberian tiger are trained to walk into a crate for vaccinations and blood draws. Target training is also used with the tigers. Through positive reinforcement, the tigers respond to a visual cue (target) placed in various places along the enclosure. This enables the zookeeper to get a closer visual inspection of the tiger.

ENRICHMENT:

Behavioral enrichment provides an environment that promotes natural behaviors. Enrichment challenges animals both mentally and physically by encouraging the use of their senses and special adaptations. Training animals furthers the enrichment by getting the animal active and by motivating them to explore and utilize their environment.

EDUCATION:

Animal training demonstrations help educate zoo visitors about the animal's trained behaviors, as well as its natural behaviors and habitat. Zookeepers develop programs with a goal in mind. They begin by researching the animals' natural history and individual history. Then, they outline a training plan plotting each step to train toward the goal. Keepers practice effective communication, consistency and patience throughout each training phase.