

Is training zoo animals enriching?

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Abstract

Husbandry training of zoo animals (training) has been associated with many benefits, and indisputably is a valuable tool; training facilitates movement of animals within their environment, and participation in husbandry and medical procedures. Training has also been considered to be enriching. With few exceptions systematic empirical data have not been collected which have evaluated the impact of training zoo animals outside of the training session. Most publications in this area are methodological, outlining what behaviours can be trained and how, or consider the value of training whether it is believed to be beneficial or detrimental. Determining whether training is enriching, is in part hindered by semantics; what is meant by the suggestion that training is enriching? To move this situation forward five hypotheses have been suggested in this paper whereby animals would be considered to be enriched, if training: 1) affords learning opportunities, as learning is considered to be enriching; 2) can achieve the same results as conventional environmental enrichment (CEE); 3) increases human–animal interactions; 4) provides a dynamic change in the animals' day; and 5) facilitates the provision of CEE. These suggested hypotheses are by no means exhaustive, but represent commonly held assumptions used to explain how training might be considered enriching. These hypotheses provide a starting point to systematically consider available data which support or refute whether training is enriching; an evidence based approach.

Data collated revealed that training could be considered enriching according to: hypothesis 1, whilst the animal is still learning; hypothesis 2, if the ultimate consequence of training was considered itself enriching. More data are required to test hypothesis 3. And data did not support that training was enriching in and of itself according to hypotheses 4 and 5. In conclusion, training was not considered to be an appropriate alternative to the provision of CEE. Both, training and CEE are recommended to ensure an integrated holistic captive animal management strategy which will meet an animal's needs.

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