



Behavior Training

Panel Organizers

Amy Cutting, Keeper

North America, Oregon Zoo, Portland, OR

Speakers

Julie Christie, Polar Bear Keeper, Oregon Zoo, Portland, OR

Beth Ament, Animal Behavior Consultant, Bolingbroke, IL

Carrie Weitz, Acting Lead Keeper — Bearline & African Journey, Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, IL

Traci Belting, Marine Mammal Manager, Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium, Tacoma, WA

Bill Winhall, Assistant Curator of Mammals/Wild Arctic Team Leader, SeaWorld San Diego, San Diego, CA

Amy Cutting, Keeper -- North America, Oregon Zoo, Portland, OR

Topic Synopsis

When people talk about "training" captive animals, they generally mean teaching animals to respond in specific, reliable ways to specific cues. Common trained behaviors include touching a target with a body part, following a person, sitting, presenting feet for inspection, and opening the mouth. Operant conditioning is the standard technique used to train captive animals.

Operant conditioning is conceptually simple and has proven extremely useful in getting animals to cooperate. Essentially, it aims to modify animal behavior by rewarding desired behaviors and ignoring undesirable ones. While conditioning can be done through formal training sessions, it also is something that occurs every time human care givers interact with animals in their charge. Care givers reinforce or "punish" the actions of animals constantly, wittingly or not. Rewards and "punishments" take many forms and depend entirely on an individual animal's perception of what is good and what is bad.

Typically a punishment would be the removal of something positive like social interaction, or the opportunity for a treat. This is called negative punishment. It is like a "time-out" and is very effective, particularly when combined with lots of information about what behavior will be rewarded.

Keepers and other care givers can expect to influence animal behavior more effectively by becoming more aware of how they reinforce and "punish" the actions of animals. Through increased awareness and the application of operant conditioning principles, care givers can minimize or eliminate less desirable or harmful behaviors (banging, pacing, etc.) and increase desirable ones (resting, playing, etc.). Behaviors such as shifting, door banging, stereotypy and aggression all can be managed effectively through operant conditioning.



Beyond its usefulness as a behavior management tool, operant conditioning does much to improve the quality of life of captive animals. Because it elicits voluntary cooperation from captive animals, it provides them with control over a given situation, learning opportunities, and mental stimulation, all of which are particularly vital to the well-being of captive polar bears. Operant conditioning enables animals to participate more actively in the routines of zoo life. The more that polar bears can actively participate in such routines, the more relaxed and in control they should feel. Cooperation with shifting efforts can result in more frequent rotation of exhibit mates or enrichment opportunities. Voluntary participation in observational and medical behaviors may eliminate the need for some veterinary procedures and immobilisations. Perhaps most importantly, because animal participation in operant conditioning is voluntary, training can build positive relationships between keepers and their charges.

While the concept of operant conditioning is simple, implementation can be challenging for both animal and trainer. Acquiring basic skills is the first step. Many keepers do not have experience with operant conditioning and can benefit from basic definitions and skills development. Those in attendance at this session of the conference learned about reinforcement/reward principles, training tools, common mistakes and useful strategies.

Even the most experienced trainer runs into obstacles periodically. Brainstorming and learning from the experience of others are invaluable when it comes to animal training. One goal of this session was to talk about commonly encountered problems and present successful strategies for overcoming them. Topics of interest included incompatible behaviors, stereotypical behaviors, minimizing coaching, fading out baiting, modifying holding facilities and working with different bear personalities.

To help keepers prioritize which behaviors to train, panelists also made suggestions as to which behaviors provide the most benefit to polar bears. In order to make the best use of time and other resources, keepers need to prioritize the behaviors that they want to train. Teaching too many behaviors can be confusing and teaching too few may be boring. The aim should be to challenge the animals with what we ask them to do, but without frustrating them unnecessarily.