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The Importance of Animal Training, Its Evolution, and Its Modern Practical Applications

Ken Ramirez, from Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, has over 30 years of experience in animal care and training with a wide variety of animal species. In addition to training and consulting on marine and zoo animals, he consults with trainers of search-and-rescue and detection dogs, as well as pet dogs.

Ken is author of the book ***Animal Training - Successful Animal Management Through Positive Reinforcement***. His presentation revolved around why training should be considered a necessity of animal husbandry, and not a matter of convenience; outlining the importance of training as part of animal welfare. His overview of positive reinforcement training was brief, due to time constraints. More detail can be found in his book. He rounded out his talk with some practical examples of training.

The components of every animal training program should take into account:

- 1.) **Health care** - training an animal to accept veterinary care makes medical procedures easier on both the trainer and the animal.
- 2.) **Nutrition** - training requires a healthy, well-fed animal.
- 3.) **Environment** - giving the animal comfortable, pleasant, healthy living quarters, as well as giving the animal something to interact with contributes to successful learning and training. Giving the animal something it finds interesting or challenging to interact with provides variety and relieves boredom. It also makes it easier to determine what the animal enjoys interacting with.
- 4.) **Behavior management** - manage behavior with a combination of positive reinforcement training and environmental enrichment techniques. Environmental enrichment includes finding ways in which the animal can have some influence over events in its life.

Training is teaching. Trainers must know why they are training and must have their priorities straight. The primary reasons for training should revolve around those things that make life better for the animal. They include:

- 1.) Physical exercise to avoid overweight and to maintain condition.
- 2.) Mental stimulation to provide challenges and to alleviate boredom.
- 3.) Cooperative behavior to teach the animal to cooperate in its own care.

Some secondary reasons for training include:

- 1.) Educating the public through animal presentations
- 2.) Research stemming from observation and training of animals
- 3.) Sport
- 4.) Conservation
- 5.) Entertainment
- 6.) Working animals

As an example of the importance of training to animal welfare, he told a story about a 1970's London study commissioned by one of the British humane societies. The society was determined to close down the traveling circuses in England by claiming that the training of the elephants demeaned them. As part of the study, a comparison was done between the health of elephants in zoos and the health of elephants in the circuses. The hope was to show that the zoo elephants were healthier than the circus elephants. When the study was completed, it showed that the circus elephants were far healthier. The circus elephants were in better physical condition than most of the zoo elephants; were bright eyed and alert, and exhibited little or no stereotypical behavior. The study cited the training of the animals to be an important part of the difference in health between the two groups. The humane society chose not to publish the study.

Zoos now recognize training as an important part of their animal care programs.

All successful training has a basis in science. The science of learning is constant, but the applications of that science are continually evolving. It is important to remember that any animal can be trained, and that every interaction with an animal has reinforcing value. Application of the rules will vary from species to species, and there will be numerous exceptions. The creative use of science verges into the realm of art.

Positive reinforcement is a powerful tool. Skilled practitioners use hundreds of tools. Training tools include:

- 1.) Choosing the right reinforcers.
- 2.) Selecting an event marker. Whistles and clickers, though not necessary, add precision and aid distance training.
- 3.) Choice of operant or classical conditioning.
- 4.) Picking the right place to begin.
- 5.) The use of targeting.

Training as part of kenneling:

A good relationship is important to understanding an animal. Understanding an animal encompasses trust. The animal must know that you will not hurt it. You, as the trainer, must also learn to trust that the animal won't (or can't) hurt you. With certain animals this may entail taking appropriate safety precautions that limit the amount of contact and minimize the possibility of injury. Trust is developed through day-to-day interactions, but trust takes time.

The training of medical behaviors requires a build-up of trust. Desensitization is an ongoing process used to maintain trust. The wants and needs of the individual animal must be considered -- not every animal wants to be touched. The trainer needs to determine when and where is best, taking into account a training cost-benefit analysis. The trainer must consider the amount of time involved to accomplish his goal, and the stress to the animal.

Ken Ramirez wrapped things up with a few examples of training used in animal conservation:

Several years ago some endangered California condors were raised in captivity and then released into the wild. The first ones to be released ran into problems because they had been imprinted on humans. Subsequent birds have been raised with appropriate training for release into the wild in such a way as not to be imprinted on humans.

Several Bottlenose dolphins born in the wild were taken into an aquarium to study their social structure. When the study was complete, they were returned to the wild. Training the dolphins to accept certain procedures made the animals' adaptation easier.

After the Gulf oil spill, the US Fish & Wildlife Service wanted to relocate thousands of sea turtle eggs they knew had already been laid in the sand on a beach. It was feared that if the eggs were allowed to hatch in the sand, the baby turtles would swim straight into the oil spill and die. Since all sea turtle species are endangered, it was important that as many eggs as possible be saved. It was estimated that there were about 50,000 eggs buried in the sand. Human volunteers digging in the sand found about 12,000 eggs. Someone thought of the idea of training search and rescue dogs to find turtle eggs. Since the dogs were basically already trained, teaching them to find turtle eggs took relatively little time. The trained dogs found an additional 29,000 turtle eggs.

Additional information on Ken Ramirez can be found on his website at:

<http://kenramireztraining.com/>