

## **Animal Behavior Management Alliance (ABMA) Training and Enrichment Talks**

### **Topic: Training Animals in a Group Setting**

**Begley, N. (Fall, 2003). Training and Enrichment Talk. *Animal Behavior Management Alliance: Wellspring*. 4(3) p 16-17.**

**Question:** With animal training becoming an important focus throughout many facilities, it is common for one keeper or trainer to be training a number of individual animals within the same exhibit. Oftentimes, it is not practical or possible to separate the animals from each other for training sessions. Do you have any insight or solutions to some of the common problems that may arise?

**Answer 1.** This is a very good question although can be difficult to answer without knowing the species and number of animals in the enclosure. In a situation where separation is not possible, I would suggest establishing stations. A station is an assigned position for each animal. Often times the animal can determine where it is most comfortable and does not feel threatened. At the beginning of each session, each animal needs to come to the same spot or “station”. Once at their station, they will be reinforced. When establishing a station and using food as the primary reinforcement, try to provide one that is quick to eat. This will not allow other animals to take the food or the animal receiving the reinforcement to become distracted by playing with it. Before you begin, give each animal their reinforcement and incorporate the animal’s name. This will help condition name recognition and as a result each animal will know who is receiving reinforcement. It is very important to keep your sessions very short and positive at the beginning. The primary problem that can develop is aggression. First, determine who the dominate animal is. I would suggest always feeding this animal first and last. This will reinforce the dominate animal for letting the more submissive animals eat and will help gain trust with your submissive animals. Remember to always reinforce the animals that are waiting patiently. It is much harder for an animal to sit and wait then it is to actually do something. Once the animals are ready, you can have longer sessions but it is always important to vary your length. Once you feel you have established co-operative feeding and stations, you can start shaping new behaviors.

If you are using a bridging stimulus when working with a group of animals they can often become confused. There are several different types of bridging stimulus. One such bridge is a visual bridge. This could be a finger point at the animal or a touch to its body. Another type of bridge is the audio bridge. An audio bridge could be a different sounding whistle or tone to a trainer’s voice. Using the animal’s name followed by the verbal “good” or “all-right,” can all be good conditioned reinforcers. You can also work the animals in unison and bridge them all at the same time. The problem you could run into with this method is if one animal does not perform the behavior correctly. You can reinforce the animals that performed the behavior correctly with a primary or secondary reinforcer and give the animal(s) that are not co-operating an LRS (Least Reinforcing Stimulus, which is a three second neutral response). Do not bridge in any situation where

dominance or aggression may appear. Depending on the species, number of animals, previous training, and trainer's experience level, this could be a quick and smooth process. Good luck!

**Beth Ament, Animal Behavior Consultant**

**Answer 2.** Teaching animals to allow others to work is a critical part of training animals in a group setting. This can be done in a variety ways, such as through formal targeting and stationing of each animal or by rewarding them when they're behaving appropriately and not interfering (such as with DRO or DRI - differential reinforcement of other or incompatible behaviors). The concept of cooperative feeding, although it may take some time to train in some cases, can be a great benefit. With cooperative feeding the dominant animal(s) learn that they get fed primarily when the subdominant animal(s) have been allowed to eat. When fully trained and understood, not only may dominant animals let others eat and/or work, but they will sometimes use their social position to "encourage" the others to participate and cooperate. Here are a few examples of how these concepts have been implemented at the Philadelphia Zoo:

- Reward other animals for not being involved, by targeting them away from the animal being worked. It's helpful to give the animal not being actively trained a bigger reward that takes time to eat, such as unopened nuts or whole food.
- Don't reward an animal for a behavior unless they've been asked to do it. Teach an "away" or "go" command and reward them for moving/staying away from the training area and stationing. The animal learns that the "training area" isn't the only place to earn reinforcement, and that they're reinforced for allowing other animals to work.
- Start with one of the dominant or "pushiest" animals, teach them to station and hold there for durations of time, until a less dominant animal has been worked and reinforced, and then bridge and reinforce the dominant animal that was stationing. Some animals do better with something to occupy them while stationing (targeting, learning to "hold" an object, something to manipulate or focus on). Train animals to sit at the station area, so that they're in a passive/static position rather than an active/dynamic posture like standing.

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