Animal Behavior Management Alliance (ABMA) Training and Enrichment Talks

Topic: Recognizing, Preventing, and Controlling Aggression

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The 2004 conference in Baltimore was absolutely incredible. In addition to all of the terrific presentations, demonstrations, and tours, some of our board members also presented some great workshops! In order for all of ABMA's membership to benefit from the workshops you will find summaries of one of the presentations below. Thad Lacinak of Busch Entertainment Group and Gary Priest of the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park presented an incredibly entertaining and informative presentation on aggression.

Aggression

Aggression is a normal response to cope with the environment. As trainers, we can increase or decrease this response through operant conditioning. Aggression is a learned behavior and like all learned behavior it can be modified. The key to managing aggression is to deal with it proactively and to not let it occur in the first place!

We must look for precursors to aggressive behavior. There can be many causes to aggression. The animal may be aggressing due to social reasons. Are there new animals in the group? Or a new hierarchy? It may be due to resource acquisition, such as stealing food or intimidation. Aggression can also be learned from other animals since it can be learned simply from watching others.

Hormonal changes may also be a cause of aggression. In addition to the normal seasonal fluctuations of the animal's hormone levels, aggression may arise due to heightened arousal levels or in an attempt to disrupt courtship. Many times there may be little to no change in an animal's behavior before aggression may appear.

Physical duress may also cause an animal to aggress. Even just being in a location that has a strong negative history can cause aggressive behavior. For example, if the animal gets anesthetized every time they go into the squeeze cage this area becomes extremely negative. Prepare for this situation proactively by having positive sessions in the squeeze cage and by training voluntary husbandry behaviors that may often eliminate the need to get anesthetized.

There are many behavioral situations that may trigger aggression, since aggression is a common response to aversive stimuli. Aversive stimuli may include the use of punishment or the presence of a delta. The animal may also aggress if it feels that there is no escape from the aversive, triggering the flight or fight response. Special care must be used to avoid schedule-induced aggression during training sessions. Animals may become frustrated when trainers have unclear or changing contingencies, too many non-reinforced trials, too much time between reinforcers, or by asking for the same behavior repeatedly.

If aggression is already occurring there are a few different techniques that may be able to reduce the appearance of the behavior. The most commonly used tool is differential reinforcement. Differential Reinforcement of Low Response Rates or DRL, provides

reinforcement consequences for the reduction of frequency of an undesired behavior. Reinforcement can then be given for any increase in the time for which the undesired behavior does not occur. Differential Reinforcement of Other Behavior or DRO, is providing reinforcement consequences for all responses other then the undesired behavior. One of the most often used techniques is Differential Reinforcement of an Incompatible Behavior or DRI, which is providing reinforcement consequences for a behavior that directly competes with the undesired behavior. An example is that the squirrel monkey cannot be jumping on the keeper's head if he is targeting to a specific spot in the exhibit.

The Least Reinforcing Scenario or LRS is a tool that cannot only be used to reduce aggression but also to prevent it. The LRS is a 2-3 second calm and passive response of the trainer after the animal performs an undesirable behavior. The LRS is applied when the trainer would normally deliver the reinforcement and is merely a neutral response, not a fixed or pre-determined posture. The animal's response to the LRS is an actual behavior and can be reinforced. The animal's criteria for the behavior is generally to return to the trainer in a calm manner and remain calm until the trainer continues with the session. Since the LRS is reinforced periodically the animal still has opportunity for reinforcement even if the previous behavior was performed incorrectly.

In conclusion, there are the six rules of aggression that should be kept in mind when working with our animals:

1. Animals that have the opportunity to aggress will do so more often.
2. The use of punishment or aversive can cause aggression.
3. Aggression can be shaped, both accidentally and purposely.
4. Animals will initially respond more favorably to a consistent environment, make radical changes slowly.
5. An animal that is food deprived may become aggressive.
6. Most all animals have some degree of aggression within the normal behavioral repertoire.

The key to avoiding aggression is through proactive animal management. Do not allow rehearsal of aggression, remember aggression is a learned behavior and practice makes perfect. We must build positive relationships with our animals by eliminating punishment, being consistent with our contingencies, and using variable reinforcement. We can avoid session predictability by varying the location, time, animals involved, and lengths of our sessions. It is also very important to keep behavioral records and plan each session before it starts.