

The importance of the role played by secondary reinforcement

As an animal trainer one of the most powerful things, but often little appreciated, is the use of secondary reinforcement. Perhaps due to the lack of knowledge, or ability to discover the importance of this reinforcement which when properly used can provide even more relevance to the primary reinforcement.

Traditionally, in an animal training program, primary reinforcement is the first and most valuable option. However, introducing and knowing how to train the secondary reinforcement can provide us with a range of possibilities in terms of variability, by not being predictable and increasing motivation in our animals, promoting curiosity. But, above all, it allows us to work on the duration in a number of behaviours, without the fear of losing the satiated animal's attention.

Typically, the beginning of animal training depends on primary reinforcement as food, as it proves to be very effective and increases a positive association with the whole environment, however...What would happen when we train voluntary medical behaviours, which logically works while the animal is healthy, but suddenly an emergency arises and we must perform the procedure that has been trained in a real situation, because the animal is sick? And the first thing that happens with an animal when it is sick is that it stops eating, it loses its appetite.

How are we going to execute the behaviour if at all times we rely solely on food to train that behaviour?

So, in my place of work, we always try to explore reinforcement alternatives apart from food.

How do we do it? Through observations, and knowing the previous history of each individual, as well as recognizing the body language of each individual and not only of the species.

Such is the case of "Chonchita" a 7-year-old Collared peccary (*Pecari tajacu*), who arrived at the zoo years ago and came from being a pet. Being social certainly helped a lot, since the barrier of fear towards humans did not exist. However, although she approached people, at the beginning we had many biting incidents towards keepers.

It is worth mentioning that the development of this case implies an excellent communication and teamwork on part of the involved keepers and veterinarians.

The goal with "Chonchita" was to be able to perform healings and other medical procedures without the need to restricting or catching her in a handling facility or a

compression cage, in a simple and completely voluntarily manner, while always having the option of choosing not to do so and having the freedom to leave.

Everything began with management inside the box, since she had a neck wound. While the cures were made, she was stroked and scratched by the neck area, and, with her body language, she showed how much she enjoyed the contact.

Because of that, it was decided to start doing management without a box. Logically making approximations in the training sessions between one management and another, in such a way that a voice command "Pegada" was introduced, and she would stick and approach the grid voluntarily, and she would be petted and have her neck scratched during several sessions or visits per day.

To reach the result, that is to be able to perform the cures, YES with protected contact, but successfully without a compression box.

The secondary reinforcement at the beginning is completely continuous, since the animal tolerates and allows cures and even injections.

The objective, as with all trained behaviours, is to be able to caress once the behaviour has finished and the result has been achieved. In addition, we would begin to space the petting, in small approximations, constantly reading the body language, reinforcing intermittently and perhaps alternating between primary and secondary. In the case of "Chonchita" she likes to be petted, but in order to have solid and lasting results, it is important to alternate with a favourite primary reinforcement.

However, it is important to mention that when caressing (secondary reinforcement), there is no risk of satiating the animal, and there is no question of exhausting reinforcement. Although within the same modality of petting, it is possible, in the best of cases, to vary to the type of caresses: vigour, speed, etc.; that little by little Chonchita's preferences would be explored.

Details to avoid

One of the most critical details when training an animal is the correct and accurate reading and interpretation of attitude and body language. What can be pleasant and positive for one animal may not be for another animal of the same species. Each individual tells us that it can be rewarding for each one. There are animals that simply cannot tolerate and it is counterproductive to try to touch them.

Knowing that a motivated body language does not always express something entirely positive and, we must know and be in constant alert of every detail, because from one moment to another an aggression can trigger, although it seems that the animal was highly motivated. This is because excitement and aggression occur in the same portion of the brain. With many animals, it happens that when they are very motivated and excited, it can trigger an avalanche of euphoric emotions that the animal simply does not know how to control, and positive results are not always obtained. That is, we must be extremely selective when it comes to knowing what kind of secondary or caresses or words and tones we use with each individual.

In the same way, we must be selective in the area where we can apply the petting, so as not to confuse the animal with some courtship behaviour on our part.

As you can understand, it is not simply a question of touching, petting or talking to all animals. It is a process of observation and putting together primary reinforcement with the secondary.

It is advisable to alternate and maintain with primary reinforcement, no matter how much the animal likes a secondary, it is important not to abuse its use, so that it does not lose the reinforcing power.

Conclusion

By expanding our range of action regarding the list of other types of reinforcements and not just food, we are increasing the possibilities of a greater number of successful training sessions, enhancing the attention range of our animals, being unpredictable and introducing novel methods, maintaining the interest of our animals towards us, achieving longer duration of behaviours that require duration, more training sessions and more variability for our animals. But, above all, we are enriching their lives at the same time.