

## **DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN OPERANT CONDITIONING PROGRAM FOR COMMON ZEBRA (*EQUUS QUAGGA*) HUSBANDRY AT THE BUIN ZOOLOGICAL PARK, CHILE.**

Esteban Manuel Idalsoaga Ferrer, María Fernanda González-Rivero y Pedro Erices Fuentes

In zoological collections, preventative medicine is one of the most valuable tools in veterinary care; however, this procedure involves routine manipulation of animals, which produce a certain level of stress. Training programs offer an alternative to clinical and sanitary handling, which minimizes or eliminates, to a degree, the effects of stress on the animals during these sessions, especially animals that are nervous, non-docile and in some cases, even aggressive, such as is the case with zebras. Because of this, a training program was designed and implemented so as to be able to perform clinical procedures and fulfill husbandry needs of the common zebra (*Equus quagga*) at the Buin Zoological Park. This allowed for periodic checks without the need to use physical or chemical restraint, given the clinical consequences that are involved when working with wildlife and especially when working with non-domestic equine.

The training program was developed on the basic principles of animal welfare, which encouraged motivation and trust of the animals that were being worked with. The animal's cooperation was a priority during each training session. Because of that, the sessions took place within the exhibits, where the animals had to approach the trainer to participate in the training. For the trainer's safety, each session was performed under protected contact, with the trainer being separated from the animal by the exhibit edge.

During the training sessions and to motivate the animals, the animals were stimulated with continuous auditory reinforcement and food based positive reinforcement. When the animal's response was not the one requested or it showed signs of aggression, a neutral operant of "time out" was used. The program was implemented with three sub-adult males, which were trained individually and at different times. In each case, each training session lasted 15 to 20 minutes and were performed 5 consecutive days a week, with two days off.

The results were as expected, the program was successfully implemented with all three individuals. In each case, full compliance by each animal achieved resulting in preventative checks and samples, including desensitizing to blood draws without the need for physical restraint. In this last case, blood draws were successful in two of the three individuals and the third was in the desensitizing stage.

In conclusion, emphasizing a valuable resource resulting in the creation of trust between the trainer and the animal, allows us to narrow the bonds between humans and animals during training programs. Especially when it comes to implementing routine medical exams, which clearly benefits performance and results, making exams more effective and significantly reduces stress on the animals.