

The keeper as an observer: from dominator to nurturing technician. The transformation from keeper staff to technician.

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By incorporating Animal Welfare as an essential aspect in any human-animal relationship, especially in husbandry practices, keepers who care for wild animals under human care must renovate themselves as professionals with specific skills and knowledge. Two of these skills are the ability to describe behaviours and record behavioural signs. Here we propose the steps for this change, the limitations they may face in Argentina, and convenient institutional items.

The re-definition of living beings, that until now have been distinguished as non-human entities with (or of) instincts, sentience and cognition, puts their responsible caregivers in a novel situation: it is no longer enough to hold them down.

The system of simply restraining / holding the body is revealed as a deferred euthanasia: the (living) being is not, only lasts.

We must incorporate the behavioural dimension, what the being does, and more exactly, that part of what it does that it defines it as such.

Interestingly enough, the so-called keepers from the institutions that care for wild animals in captivity have been the first to realize the need for changes in the practice.

What changes are we talking about?

Basically, to know the behavior in order to encourage it, accompany it to its instrumentalization. By encouraging it, we understand generating conditions of captivity (using euphemisms does not change the situation) that make it possible.

By accompanying, we understand that interventions are made taking into account that they are not in an enclosure with a being, but with a behavioural structure, which is performed by the being in an enclosure. Moreover, that behavior is specific for that species and characteristic of that individual, and not of another.

By instrumentalizing it, we understand three different endeavours. On the one hand, training the animal to facilitate medical and management manoeuvres; on the other hand, to use behavior as an early indicator of medical-behavioural problems, that is, of animal welfare, and finally as an instrument to improve the quality of life.

In all cases, the interface between the captive being and the appropriate practice is the caregiver. And in all cases, the procedures, and therefore the specific competences and knowledge, are three. Description of the behavior, measurement of the described behavior, evaluation of the measurements.

Throughout the years, from the chairs in which I work (Ethology, FCNyM, UNLP, and Animal Welfare, FCVet-UBA) we have been working with at least three institutions with captivity of wild animals, to generate the knowledge base from which to carry out these activities.

Three have been the obstacles, for which we propose corrective measures.

The course given to the staff (description of behavior and documenting behavioural measures) stumble upon the problem of the so-called "volunteers": whenever we gave a description of the behavior, when we returned to the institution to continue the training, for example the following

year, there were new volunteers, and we couldn't measure training, because we had to replace the description of the behavior.

As institutions behave as if animal welfare, and therefore behavior, are things that are added as a minor change in style, and not a paradigm shift in the human-animal relationship, documenting behavioural measures is a task that is added to the (many) tasks of caregivers. This plots not only against the quality of measurement, but also against the mere realization of it.

Similarly, the evaluation of these measurements, and their insertion into the institutional dynamics, is usually assigned as a task to personnel who do not have these specific evaluation skills.

We propose three strategies:

Regarding the description of the behavior, delegate it to those who have the knowledge and skills in their programs, through specific agreements, either as research tasks, or as teaching tasks that result in the structuring of those descriptions.

Regarding describing indicators and measurements or generating keepers who are only dedicate to that (use of spreadsheets, scoring by observer, behavior profiles, animal welfare indicators) or as a tasks for all keepers, assign specific times to make take measurements. In addition, perform the training to apply these techniques in specific training spaces, as part of the task.

Regarding the analysis of the indicators, one way would be to carry it out in conjunction with research institutions.

From my point of view, this is a (not sure if the only) way to not keep doing more of the same.