

Human-animal interactions

By Sabrina Brando

Evidence of relationships between humans and animals dates back thousands of years, from stories of wolves and the domestication of wild species such as the jungle fowl, to whom we know today, the chicken. Of course, animals in other places such as farms, research centres, sanctuaries, zoos, aquariums and more, there are so many animals and also have many different roles and effects of these roles. Being a guide dog for the blind, a horse in a riding stable, or a gorilla in a zoo, there are a lot so details to think about when it comes to the interactions, direct or indirect, we have with the animals in our care.

We can speak of human-animal interaction (HAI) when an animal or human performs a behaviour directed towards the other, and when repeated can result in human-animal relationships (HAR). A relationship is considered in place when interactions lead to predictions of how the other is likely to behave and behaviour is modified accordingly. The quality of the interactions will determine whether a positive, neutral, or negative relationship forms, and relationships, if positive, may develop into bonds. You only have to use Google scholar to find several publications on these topics in zoos and aquariums.

A human-animal bond (HAB) is defined as 'a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviours essential to the health and wellbeing of both' (AVMA). For a relationship to be classified as a bond between a human and an animal should be between an individual human and individual animal, be reciprocal and persistent, and promote an increase in well-being for both parties (Russow, 2002).

We can consider the direct interactions we have with other animals through feeding, shifting and other care activities, other staff, as well as general visitors, schools, and events on location. I always like to think too about how our relationships from a decision-making perspective affect the animals. Decisions we make about the routines, timing, absence of staff for many hours of the day, all will have an effect on the quantity and quality of care and in turn the wellbeing of the animals.

Of course, we want animals to feel safe, cared for and happy, as well as challenges and being agents of their own lives to a meaningful extent. What does this look like for a red panda and for a cockatoo?

What do we do on a daily basis that benefits both the animal and you when giving care and attending to needs and wants.

Spend some time thinking about for example:

- how do the animals react to me, and to other people?
- in which ways are my interactions with the animals predictable?
- in which ways are my interaction with the animals engaging and playful?
- how does the environment (and e.g. social life etc.) provide, support and facilitate animals to make choices, to have control over aspects of their life?
- how about the hours when we are not at the facility?

- when we train and interact, am I in a conversation with the animal, offering opportunities to collaborate in care?
- Do the animals participating in programs have a choice to participate, to leave or say no?
- Which other things come to mind for you when thinking of the human-animal interaction?

The important part is thinking about theory, the science and incorporating natural history, evolutionary relevant aspects, to learn from the wild and all other knowledge we can be accumulating from various sources. Knowledge is wonderful and we, of course, want to **ACTion** it. **How can you be an actor for change for the animals in your care today? Write down 1 idea and go do it!**

P.S. I miss working directly with animals and live vicariously through you, if you want to send me a photo or video that would make my day 😊