

Marine Mammal Training: A New Language

Watch a training session in one of our seal exhibits (check the daily schedule for times.) While you listen to the trainer, watch for some of these concepts. Are any of these concepts familiar? Have you used them to train a dog or cat?

Command

The signal that tells the animal to do a certain behavior. Often these are verbal or auditory (such as blowing a whistle) and sometimes they are gestures (mammal trainers will wave to get the seals to wave, for example). The command needs to be associated with the bridge, reward and behavior to successfully lead to the animal doing the behavior after the command.

Reinforcement

A reward for a particular behavior. By reinforcing the behaviors that you want to see or that will lead to behaviors you want to see and ignoring the behaviors you do not want from the animal, you can eventually get the animal to associate the command, behavior and reward.

Operant Conditioning

The process of modifying an animal's behavior, usually through rewards or reinforcement. By rewarding a behavior that is close or similar to the one you eventually want the animal to do, you can begin to associate a command (say a verbal command) with the behavior.

Bridge

The signal that tells the animal being trained that it has successfully done the behavior being asked for by the trainer. It is important to use a bridge to make it clear to the animal which behavior it is being rewarded for. If an animal is being trained to do one behavior but then swims to the trainer to receive a reward the animal may start to associate swimming with the reward, for example.

Target

The name of the tool used in target training. (Usually a pole with a wider bulb at one end.) The animal is trained to target—touch its nose to the pole. This simple behavior is easy to train in many animals and can be used to train more complex behaviors.

Husbandry Behavior

A husbandry behavior (related to animal husbandry) is a behavior that allows staff to monitor the health of an animal or perform health-related tasks, such as teeth cleaning or drawing blood. This is contrasted with non-husbandry behaviors, which are primarily to enrich the animal and keep its brain active and healthy.

Enrichment

A process of creating a dynamic, engaging environment for an animal living in a zoo or aquarium. Through adding toys, obstacles, structures, objects filled with food and other objects to an animal's habitat, staff at zoos and aquariums seek to keep an animal active and engaged with its surroundings. These enrichment programs also seek to change the habitat over time, further increasing the animal's need to explore and interact with its surroundings.