

HUSBANDRY TRAINING AS A TECHNIQUE FOR BEHAVIORAL ENRICHMENT IN MARINE MAMMALS

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The use of operant conditioning as a behavioral enrichment device has been a vital component of Sea World's marine mammal program for many years. This training is not only used to develop the behaviors seen in the shows, but it is also an essential part of the preventive medicine program. Husbandry training has allowed the performance of routine physical examinations and biological sample collection on a variety of marine mammals with minimal or no physical restraint, which results in reduced stress to both the animals and personnel. Frequent examinations and sampling allows the detection of medical problems at an early stage, often before physical manifestations are evident. Common procedures include physical examination, blood sampling, urine and fecal collection, milk sampling, radiology and sonography, biopsies; cultures of the respiratory, gastrointestinal and urinary tracts, body weights and measurements, oral and ophthalmic exams, as well as administration of medication and topical treatments. Without this program the staff would eventually be forced into providing more treatment of disease than prevention. Through behavioral enrichment programs such as husbandry training, not only is the environment more stimulating for the animal, but the veterinarian also has the opportunity to perform more routine diagnostics with less stress and trauma to the animal.