



Keeper and Animal Relationships

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Zookeepers and the animals they care for develop unique relationships that would probably surprise the average zoo visitor (i.e., it's not like you see on TV).

When I tell people that I work with animals at the Zoo, their initial vision may be that of a keeper who spends his day playing with the animals. This is an expected response from a public who often sees Jack Hanna on TV handling zoo animals or countless other animal programs portraying similar situations. The truth is that the relationship between a keeper and an animal is rarely like what you see on TV. The relationship can be an intimate one, but it has well-defined boundaries.

Most zoo animals have been born in zoos, but you would be mistaken to assume zoo animals act domesticated like your dog or cat at home. And although zoo animals were not raised in the wild, they actually do inherit the instincts of their wild cousins. Whether an animal is large or small, instinctual behavior can be dangerous to animal keepers (or anyone for that matter). Many zoo animals are faster and stronger than humans, and the ones that aren't may have other lethal characteristics such as sharp teeth or pointed beaks. Thus, one of the first lessons that experienced keepers teach their new recruits is not to take unnecessary chances with their animals. Of course, this doesn't mean that keepers live in fear of their animals. Instead, they learn to respect their animals' instincts, attributes, abilities and territories.

Zoo animals rely on their keepers for daily care, and, over time, a level of trust and comfort builds between the two. From my own observations, an animal's comfort level most often depends on an established routine. The routine is made up of regular daily events: the cleaning of enclosures, feeding times, interactions with the keeper, etc. The timing and quality of these daily occurrences is extremely instrumental in building trust between an animal and the keeper. Like humans, animals that have become accustomed to a routine might feel stress when the routine is disrupted. Once under stress, animals have a tendency to revert to instinctual behavior. And depending on the level of stress, an animal could respond with the use of those previously-mentioned sharp teeth. To avoid this or other dangerous instincts, keepers understand the importance of routine in their animals' lives and strive to maintain it every day.

As a zookeeper, I believe there is nothing more rewarding than to reach a bond of trust with one of the animals you care for. One of my most memorable experiences provides a great illustration of this keeper-animal bond. I had developed a strong level of trust in my relationship with a female orangutan named Lena. Lena lived with 3 other orangutans, but I always felt she was my "go-to" girl (orang). On one occasion, the orangutans -- legendary in their ability to take things apart -- had reached out of their exhibit and pulled a bunch of metal levers out of a heating duct nearby. They were having a great time bending the metal parts into all sorts of shapes, and, of course, using them to take other things apart. I knew I had to stop them as quickly as possible, but I was not about to go into their exhibit to retrieve their new "toys." Going into their exhibit was not an option for two reasons: one, I would be invading their space and breaking the routine, and two, an adult orangutan has impressive strength (often said to be that of 10 men).

I chose to rely on the strength of my relationship with my girl Lena. I grabbed a bunch of grapes and negotiated a trade with her. She was able to retrieve every lever in the exhibit except for one in the grip of a young male. Although I tried, I was unsuccessful in negotiating a trade with the male for the last lever. Lena sat nearby, observing our interactions. She appeared to grow impatient with the negotiation and finally reached over, took the lever away from the male and handed it to me.

I suspect that most zookeepers can tell you similar stories of the unique relationships they have forged with their charges. It's one of the great privileges we have working with zoo animals.