

Enrichment At Home



Zookeepers know that animals require more than food, water, and shelter to be happy and healthy. They need to be mentally and physically stimulated. This is why enrichment is a vital part of their daily routine. Enrichment is anything that enhances the welfare of a being by allowing it to interact with its environment.

In order to keep animals active, keepers provide them with stimulating exhibits and maintain them in species-appropriate social groups. They further enrich their lives by giving them novel objects to play with, scents to investigate, and hiding food treats throughout their exhibits. Many species are also involved in operant conditioning training programs (positive reinforcement training) which helps facilitate the ability to care for them. All this enrichment helps to keep animals from becoming bored.

You may have never realized it, but pets can likewise get bored of the same old thing and will benefit from enrichment. Do you have a cat that scratches the furniture? Do you have a dog that chews on your shoes? Providing various types of stimulating toys and activities can allow your pet to display natural behaviors. You may even find that your pet decreases destructive behavior when their activity levels increase.

In order for a zookeeper to provide effective enrichment for the animals in their care, they follow a model called **SPIDER** (Set goals, Plan, Implement, Document, Evaluate, Re-adjust). They research what an animal's wild environment consists of and try to tailor the enrichment to mimic how they would spend their time if they weren't in a zoo. This can be helpful to you as a pet owner. Besides, who hasn't looked into the eyes of their pet and noticed their wild ancestors staring back?

Set Goals: What behavior is the enrichment designed to encourage? Use the questions on the next page to compile a brief summary of the species natural environment and behaviors.

Plan: Now that you have an understanding of why your pet behaves the way they do, you have a better idea of what type of enrichment they would more likely enjoy.

Implement, Document, and Evaluate: Supervise your pet when introducing a new toy. Zookeepers keep detailed logs of how animals interact with an enrichment device. This is important because there are usually several animals and more than one day involved. This way all the keepers can get many opinions of how effective the device was. Should they make more like it, did the animal seem afraid of it, or try to fight with it, or did the animal seem not to care about it all?

Re-adjust: Was it a good size? Did it make too much of a mess? Were you afraid your pet could get it stuck on their head? These are all important questions to consider. Below is a list of safety guidelines that zookeepers follow to avoid an animal getting hurt by enrichment devices.

NATURAL HISTORY QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the species' wild habitat? (e.g.; desert, rainforest, tropical, tundra) What type of soil, water, and vegetation are found? Do they stay on land, in the trees, or in water?
- 2) Where do they sleep or rest? What sort of materials does the species use to make a nest?
- 3) What do they eat? (meat, grass, bugs, a little bit of everything) Does the diet vary with season? Do they store food? How and where does the species find food?
- 4) What are typical self-maintenance and "comfort" behaviors? (e.g.; grooming, sunning, bathing)
- 5) Is the species active at night, or during the day? Why? (food availability, predator avoidance)
- 6) What are their primary sensory modalities? (sight, smell, hearing) How does the animal move?
- 7) How do they learn to survive?
- 8) What is the specie's social structure? (big or small families, bachelors, solitary) What is a typical group size? Does the social structure change seasonally? Who raises the kids?
- 9) Describe the primary social behaviors. (courtship, aggression, submission, alarm calls)
- 10) How does the species advertise and defend its home territory? What is the average size of their home territory?

- 11) How does the species spend its time? If possible, make a chart of what is known about average time spent in rest, foraging, social interactions, and play.
- 12) What are the specie's main threats? Predators? Competitors? What behaviors do they display in response to these? How does the species hide? How do they show fear?
- 13) How old are your pets? Do they have a history of medical or behavioral concerns?
- 14) How is your pet fed? How is their diet modified from what it would be in the wild?
- 15) How do the animals interact with the components of the household? (scratching the furniture, etc) What enrichment has been successful and unsuccessful in the past?

General Enrichment Safety Guidelines

When designing an enrichment device, refer to the following questions and considerations:

- 1) Can an animal be cut or scratched by the device?
- 2) Can an animal be trapped in the device?
- 3) Can the item cause stomach problems if eaten? Is the item easily broken?
- 4) Can the item be used to help an animal escape their enclosure?
- 5) All cardboard boxes must be free of staples, wax, and tape.
- 6) All paper bags must be free of strings, plastic, and wax liners.
- 7) Use screws and a hot glue gun or craft glue instead of nails.
- 8) Use blank newsprint when possible. Use non-toxic paint to decorate.
- 9) Use wheat flour, never white flour, for paper mache items.
- 10) Use natural materials as opposed to plastic and nylon whenever possible.

Here are some enrichment ideas that zookeepers use at home with their own pets: (NOTE: These ideas may not be suitable for all animals! Consult your veterinarian about specific considerations for your pet. Many pet stores can offer invaluable advice. Remember, if we cannot eat it, neither can they!

CATS:

- ❖ Tie a cat toy to a fishing line (remove hook and weights)
- ❖ Use peacock feathers (florists sell them)
- ❖ Use a laser pointer or flashlight to shine a spot on the floor or walls for them to chase
- ❖ Blow bubbles for them to catch. Pet stores sell catnip-scented bubbles
- ❖ They will jump in boxes and paper bags. You can put shredded paper in them, and sprinkle spices or spray perfume in them. Cut holes in bigger boxes for them to peek out of
- ❖ Provide different materials for them to dig in (snow, dirt, gravel, leaves) Feel free to hide treats. Use a container (or bathtub) to contain the mess
- ❖ Cut holes in the plastic containers that litter comes in
- ❖ Put beans, rice, or a small bell in a film canister or plastic Easter eggs for an instant rattle
- ❖ Put treats in a paper egg carton
- ❖ The rings from plastic milk jugs are great to bat around, especially on a wooden floor
- ❖ Sew a plastic grocery bag into an old T-shirt, towel, or pillowcase. Cats love the crinkle
- ❖ Provide fresh herbs, grass, melon and edible flowers
- ❖ Make your own scratching post with an old carpet or welcome mat. Screw it into a piece of wood or glue it onto the plastic containers that litter comes in
- ❖ Make a shelf by a window and hang a bird feeder outside.
- ❖ Laundry hampers work well as a bed
- ❖ Put a used, dry teabag or coffee grinds (with filter) into an old sock for cats to rub on. Stuffing it with another sock or paper towels will make it firmer
- ❖ Use a nature sounds recording
- ❖ Recycle old plastic baby toys

DOGS

- ❖ Vary the route, length, and location of your daily walk. Allow your dog to go where their nose leads once in awhile. Make a play-date with your friend's dog
- ❖ Hide biscuits or dry dog food around the house or in the yard
- ❖ Play fetch with clean, empty 2-liter bottles (they crunch without splintering)
- ❖ Buy dog bones and Kong toys at a pet store and fill them with peanut butter, yogurt, etc.
- ❖ All treats are great frozen. You can soak their dry food and freeze it
- ❖ Poke a hole in a rubber ball and string onto a bungee cord for a boomerang twist on catch
- ❖ Tie knots in old socks and towels to make excellent tug-o-war ropes

- ❖ Old socks can be made into chew toys
- ❖ Hide treats in a paper bag, paper egg carton, or box
- ❖ Put treats in a wiffle ball so that they fall out as the toy is played with. (you can poke holes in a plastic milk jug as well) Use ping-pong balls for smaller dogs
- ❖ Dogs respond well to training; consult your veterinarian about training resources

BIRDS

- ❖ Offer novel foods like cooked or raw pasta, plain, air-popped popcorn, eggs, and nuts
- ❖ Cut their fruits and veggies into different shapes, or give whole
- ❖ Offer pine cones (can be stuffed with treats)
- ❖ Move the location of the cage (try a different window)
- ❖ Hide food, edible flowers and leaves, etc in paper towel tubes or cereal boxes
- ❖ Hang a natural fiber broom head, or a clean mop head in their cage for them to pluck
- ❖ Color scrap pieces of wood or tongue depressors by soaking them in sugar-free juice mixes. String them onto rope and hang in cage
- ❖ Make piñatas with wheat flour (be sure to remove the balloon before filling it with treats)
- ❖ Screw an eye hook into the spine at the centerfold of an old phone book and hang.

REPTILES

- ❖ Change branches when you clean tank
- ❖ Hide food in boxes, leaf piles, gravel piles, under paper, etc
- ❖ Make an insect feeder with paper mache
- ❖ Place whole melon in tank
- ❖ Hang greens from the top of the tank

- ❖ Fill an unglazed terra cotta pot and place on top of tank. The water will weep out of the pot creating a sprinkler

RODENTS AND RABBITS

- ❖ Give them anything to chew: paper, cardboard, grass, edible flowers, fruits and veggies, hay
- ❖ Give them plenty of hiding spots: boxes, glass jars, tubes and crates, leaf piles, piñatas
- ❖ Place whole melon in tank
- ❖ Give them plenty of places to climb: rocks and branches
- ❖ Change the type of bedding occasionally: wood chips, mulch, dirt, and sand
- ❖ Offer spices, spray perfume
- ❖ Recycle old plastic baby toys
- ❖ Put a plant pot saucer in the freezer and put in cage.

FISH

- ❖ Move plants and "furniture" around
- ❖ Store a few extra pieces of furniture and rotate them when you clean the tank
- ❖ Vary the time that you feed them once in a while
- ❖ There are You Tube videos of fish being trained with a laser pointer for more ideas!

The important thing to keep in mind is that pets don't need dozens of toys. Constant stimulation can be exhausting! Rather, rotate them; hide them for weeks even. When you bring them back out, the novelty will spark your pet's interest anew. Have fun experimenting with your own ideas.

Enriching your pet's environment should be enriching for both of you!