

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors

Promoting the Best in Pet Behaviour



How to Train Your Dragon: Behaviour and Training for Exotic Pets

By Debbie Busby BSc(Hons), MBPsS

Last year both the BSVA and BVA highlighted welfare concerns associated with the keeping of exotic species as pets. The Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors, last year formed an exotic's group whose aim was to highlight these welfare concerns and to produce educational hand-outs for both the public and interested professionals. Further details of handouts available may be found at this link <http://www.apbc.org.uk/info/exotics>

APBC members and other pet professionals met on 17 August 2013 for the first event specifically organized to address the behaviour and training of exotic pets: reptiles, birds and small furrries, with the aim of improving the welfare of this diverse range of species

The speakers were:

- Elaine Henley, PGDip CABC, founded the Exotics group within the APBC. She is a full member of the APBC, with extensive experience of behavioural problems with dogs & parrots. She is visiting lecturer at Napier University & the College of Animal Welfare. Elaine shares her home and family with Milo, an African Grey, (Congo) parrot and five dogs.
- ***Dr Anne McBride BSc (Hons), PhD, FRSA, developed the first British academically recognised qualification in Companion Animal Behaviour Counselling and is Programme Director of the MSc at the University of Southampton. She was head clinician at the Animal Behaviour Clinic at the University, which ran from 1999-2009 and has lectured internationally on various aspects of animal behaviour and the human-animal bond. Anne is a member of the Companion Animal Welfare Council and Deputy Chairperson of Pathway, a working party looking at pets and housing issues in the UK.***
- Danielle Middleton-Beck, BSc (Hons), PGDip CABC, zoologist, animal behaviour counsellor and provisional APBC member, with extensive experience in reptiles.
- Chirag Patel, BSc (Hons), PGCert CABC,. He owns Domesticated Manners Pet Training and Behaviour and has worked with renowned behaviourists including Susan Friedman, Ken Ramierz and Bob Bailey. Chirag has trained a variety of animal species including parrots, rats, degus, marmoset monkeys, raccoons, and most recently chickens and marine mammals. He lives with a Macaw, African Grey Congo and a dog.

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- Erica Peachey, BSc (Hons) is a full member of the APBC and visiting lecturer in Animal Behaviour at Liverpool John Moores University and has presented her scientific papers internationally. She has published books on animal behaviour and gives seminars to vets and other professionals. Erica, lives with a variety of exotic animals and a dog.

Key messages from the presentations covered four areas:

- welfare risk factors for exotics;
- awareness of individual species' ethograms;
- environmental enrichment; and
- how suitable training can reduce stress and improve welfare.

Welfare

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 lists an animal's needs as:

- a suitable environment;
- a suitable diet;
- ability to exhibit normal behaviour patterns;
- to be housed with, or apart from, other animals;
- to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

Keeping exotics as pets can present significant welfare risks. For reptiles, there are similarities between commercial reptile farming and puppy farming; typically large numbers and sterile environments. There is a trend to breed for un-natural colour varieties. Reptiles are exothermic therefore environment is key to their welfare, otherwise metabolic disorders occur, and burns can result from unregulated heat lamps. Many owners are unaware of stress indicators, such as colour changing, darker spots and enlarged dewlap in chameleons. Often the original habitat, e.g. desert or temperate, is ignored. Smaller hobbyist breeders can house different reptile species, e.g. herbivore iguanas or omnivore bearded dragons, more appropriately according to their ethogram and habitat. Where all species-specific needs are met, reptile welfare may be better than that of some cats or dogs. In contrast, some species' environments could never be replicated in domestic captivity, for example iguanas reach 6 feet in length and become frustrated in captivity, and the bigger lizards travel many miles in one day, presenting issues when they are kept as pets. Prey and predator species housed close to each other will cause stress.

Pet parrot welfare is significantly compromised: African Greys lived up to 70 years in the wild, in contrast to around 20 years in captivity. 85% of over 1 million parrots in the UK were rehomed within their first 4 years, correlating with maturity at 4 to 5 years. Dominance myths abound: owners believed low perches maintained their authority; however parrots seek height when afraid, and perch positions should allow this. Cages should only be used when the animal could not be supervised.

Understanding the ethogram

Reptiles will fight over food, so it's good practice to teach them to feed at stations at either end of the tank, or to scatter feed as appropriate to encourage foraging. Providing multiple resources prevents resource holding contests, and environmental changes should be small to avoid stress yet frequent in order to provide variety. However if the animal came from a large commercial reptile farm even small changes can be too difficult for the animal to cope with.

Parrot species differ greatly in terms of behaviour. The African Grey Congo needs significant habituation and socialisation; everything new is a threat. They are highly intelligent but have a short attention span and no frustration control. They need company and become anxious when alone. Poor welfare leads to self-mutilation and feather plucking. Feeding is a complex social event in extended families of wild parrots, similar to a human

banquet where family members mingle with other families. Parrots require a great deal of mental stimulation, and in the absence of a conspecific flock, they flock with humans.

Misunderstandings about a species' ethogram can affect welfare: turning a rabbit on its back is said to "trance" the rabbit into stillness; however behaviourally the animal is in a state of tonic immobility.

Environmental enrichment

Pets should be given opportunities to use natural behaviours. Parrots should be a member of a flock (their human family), with foraging opportunities and complex perches and toys to allow them to use their intelligence productively. They should be able to choose social contact or independence. Parrots are omnivores, and Milo's favourite family meal is chicken curry!

Offering choices can enrich the environment and enhance welfare, for example provide both a water bowl *and* a bottle. Misguided enrichment can make welfare worse; running around inside a hamster ball may provide exercise; however banging into walls and being inspected by any predator species present, with no choice to avoid, will flood the animal. As with reptiles, care should be taken not to mix prey and predator, such as rabbits sharing a garden with dogs, unless they know the individual animal well.

Guinea pigs and rabbits are often kept together in hutches, although their natural habitats are different. If co-housing is unavoidable, ensure both species have escape places where the other can't go. Guinea pigs can resource-guard the gap between living/sleeping areas. Ensure one resting place per animal and one where all can rest together.

In homes with small children it is better to get an animal that the child cannot pick up, such as a giant rabbit, to reduce the stress of handling.

Training to improve welfare

Appropriate training can help to mitigate the stress of captivity. Reptiles should be target trained to step up onto a hand, rather than subject them to the stress of being picked up by a hand casting a shadow overhead which they may generalise to a bird of prey. The practice of picking them up from above could be generalised to a raptor's claw. Reptiles can also be trained to accept medication, and conditioned to accept touch.

Behaviour is best bestowed by the animal rather than compelled by a trainer. A "Trickmousing" video illustrated how we can use biological preparedness to our advantage. We should give the animal choices within training interactions, and we have to ensure a really strong association between conditioned and primary reinforcer. Training to station is useful when two animals are in the training area (training with a conspecific reduces stress in a group-living species); one can be reinforced for stationing while we shape behaviours in the other.

Owners should train animals to travel by classically conditioning them to the experience and adding cues for behaviours such as going into the cage/carrier and coming out. Choose a species-appropriate carrying option, for example dark and enclosed for rodents/rabbits/hole dwellers, with the choice of somewhere to hide; in contrast a parrot's option should be light, with good visibility. For vet visits, take a cage mate to facilitate scent swapping when they return home. Vets should not keep predator and prey species in the same areas.

Before it's necessary in the consulting room, we can train animals to accept various vet checks. We saw an amazing video of a lumpfish trained to come onto a hand for a skin scrape. Injections can be conditioned with a cocktail stick; 200-400 interactions set up a credit in your bank account ready for use in "real life". Training a strong "touch target" means

the behaviour can be maintained for a long time before a treat needs to be given, this helps at vet visits.

We should put these vet checks on cue:

- accept being wrapped in a towel
- stay still for a stethoscope examination
- open mouth
- lie flat/lie on back
- stretch leg
- have foot held
- open wing
- accept a syringe
- take medication
- accept an injection

Meeting their needs?

There are some species whose needs we cannot hope to meet adequately when kept as pets: wide-ranging foraging behaviour, covering many miles a day, living in complex, cohesive, groups for safety, cannot practically be replicated in a domestic environment. With safety at the base of their ethogram, prey species do not choose to cohabit with us (their potential predators) and please us in the same way that dogs do, as an example of a predator species. Feral dogs exhibit clear appeasing "can I join the camp?" behaviours, hovering on the outskirts, taking food, warmth and human contact when they can, whereas most exotics share an evolutionary learning context which starts with, "given the choice, I would not choose to interact with you.", presenting a challenge in terms of the reinforcement environment, the process and the reinforcers themselves.

We should consider carefully how we approach the captivity and training of both prey and predator species and the choices we offer. As Anne McBride puts it, "prospective owners need to make an ethical judgement between the benefits of meeting their personal interest and desire for ownership of an exotic pet against the implications for welfare of both the individual animal and the species. To do this, professionals need to be able to give appropriate and full advice both pre and post acquisition."

Quotes from delegates:

"From start to finish, five inspiring and informative speakers, each on a different and interesting aspect of exotics training and behaviour....looking forward to the next one"

"It was a brilliant day. My nurses loved it too. Lots of great tips to take back to practice."

"I learned a year's worth of CPD in 24 hours..."

"You know when you go to a conference and one speaker might be a little less interesting.. well every speaker was amazing. It was informative, thought provoking and most of all fun!"

"It was a fantastic day from start to finish, five inspiring and informative speakers, each on a different and interesting aspect of exotics training and behaviour."