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# Mental Stimulation

## – IT'S NOT JUST FOR DOGS!!

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### Introduction

Exotic pets include small mammals, parrots, reptiles, fish and pretty much any pet that isn't a dog, cat or horse. Traditionally, these animals are housed in minimalistic environments, which are unrepresentative of their natural habitat, often with persistent and unavoidable stressors. These enclosures are relatively unchanged from when similar species were kept for food or in laboratories, where convenience and simply keeping the animal alive was the caregivers' main priority.



Dexter, Green Iguana by Danielle Middleton-Beck

Animal Welfare Act, 2006 (UK) protects all vertebrate species and aims to ensure the following five criteria are met:

- A suitable environment,
- A suitable diet,
- **To be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns,**
- To be housed with, or apart from, other animals, and
- To be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Despite this many keepers of companion animals are unaware of their responsibilities (CAWC, 2013). Information regarding their welfare focuses on supplying appropriate

resources such as food, housing and veterinary care (CAWC 2009) and little on their suffering, with regards to fear and distress. However, appropriate enrichment should be just as important as correct diet and habitat.

Environmental enrichment involves changing the environment to allow the animal to exhibit normal behaviour patterns such as digging, swimming, foraging and flying. To prevent an animal from performing natural behaviours, will lead to behavioural problems, and is against the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (UK), which means the caregivers can be prosecuted.

When deciding on appropriate environmental enrichment you need to consider the animals;  
**Physiology** – what is normal for that species and what is it physically capable of doing? &  
**Ethology** - An animals ethology can be used to encourage the performance of naturally occurring behaviours.

An understanding of the animal's life in the wild, will enable you to provide the appropriate enrichment



Milo, Congo African Grey by Elaine Henley

items. Remember some textures, substrates or scents may be aversive to the species you are working with.

Ethological considerations may include;

- What is its natural habitat?
- What is its natural diet?
- Is it a predator, prey or both?
- What is their predation / foraging style?

NOTE: Some behaviour's may be normal for one species and abnormal for another despite belonging in the same group, knowing the difference is vital for their welfare.



Monty, Savannah Monitor by Danielle Middleton-Beck



Roy, Congo African Grey by Elaine Henley

Common behavioural problems are often linked to stress, which is, 'A response to a real or perceived threat, which may challenge an individual's ability to meet its real or perceived physiological and psychological needs and includes;

- Feather damaging behaviours in parrots,
- Interaction with transparent boundaries (scratching and rubbing against the transparent boundary) in small mammals and reptiles,
- Reduced movement and feeding,
- Aggression and handling problems.

As the welfare of an exotic pet is mostly reliant on its enclosure, enriching its environment encourages natural behaviours and greatly improves their welfare. Environmental enrichment is the easiest and most natural way to keep any animal mentally stimulated, thus reducing stress. Toys and novel objects elicit exploration and creative play. Climbing structures allow more efficient use of space; providing shade and temperature gradients for a choice of microclimates.

Setting enrichment targets can help you choose which kind of enrichment will suit that species, whilst allowing you to adjust the enrichment if the need arises.

Targets may include:

- Increasing exploratory behaviour,
- Increasing their sensory behaviour,
- Increasing / reducing social behaviour.

Providing an enclosure that represents their natural habitat through the use of appropriate substrates, furnishings, temperature



Milo, Congo African Grey by Elaine Henley

gradients, hides and obstacles to interact with, including digging pits and tunnels are a great way to start.

Many species of exotic pets are either foragers or predators and finding food is a natural behaviour for them all. Taking into account their foraging and / or hunting style you can provide different opportunities for them to use their cognitive abilities in order to gain access to their food. More curious species, generally your foragers, are active and spend most of their day searching for food, they are generally slow moving (unless spooked) and active for long periods e.g. Parrots, Rabbits, Guinea Pigs, Iguanas, Tortoises, Gerbils, Monitors and Rat snakes who will really interact with different objects and 'toys' with relatively little interference from you.



Roy, Congo African Grey by Elaine Henley

Sit and wait predators will enjoy them too, though it can take a bit of time for them to interact with the toy, at first they just 'sit and wait' for the food to come out. Laying scent trails to follow before feeding times, or hiding food in objects can help stimulate them.

Many social species suffer in captivity due to the inability to perform natural social behaviours or escape their co-habitants. Social enrichment therefore is often species specific.



Roborovski hamsters, by Danielle Middleton-Beck

Some points to consider with all social species are;

- Is there enough room? Are there enough resources?
- Can they to escape?
- Are there enough refuge sites?
- What's normal behaviour around breeding season? E.g. aggression in males, egg binding in females of some lizards and parrots. Is neutering an option to prevent this?



Dorian & Freebie bearded Dragons, by Danielle Middleton-Beck

Many social species often fight in captivity due to lack of resources, particularly around breeding season. The males of some species e.g. Green Iguanas are known for being highly aggressive and territorial when in breeding season, which occurs every year, and is something that

owners need to be prepared to deal with on a regular basis. Breeding partners, in the form of toy iguanas, are an alternative companion during this period to reduce frustration and aggression during breeding season.

Regardless of the species it's important to understand their social requirements and have contingencies in place to deal with individuals that may be socially incompatible or to address the need for larger or family groupings.



Liz & Ard Sudan Plated Lizards, by Danielle Middleton-Beck

Behaviour problems often arise when a captive animal has prolonged exposure to an ecologically relevant problem, that it is incapable of solving within its enclosure. Such problems include finding a mate, hunting for food, and escaping from human contact. The frustration caused by the animal's inability to carry out certain behaviours results in problem behaviours.

Often wings and claws are cut to make these animals easier for us to handle, without any consideration for the animals, and the reduction in confidence from not being able to climb, fly or perform other natural behaviours.



Juvenile Savannah Monitor, by Danielle Middleton-Beck

You have two choices when working with exotic species,

1. Form an association between yourself, fear and distress, as each time they see you, you force an interaction in an attempt to tame or train them.

NOTE: Most training often uses negative reinforcement, by removing safe places, so the animal has no option but to remain close to you. E.G. having a parrot in a room with no safe perch other your arm, or placing lizards in a bath, with no escape other than your arm, this also cools them down so they can't physically fight back.



Dexter, Green Iguana by Danielle Middleton-Beck

OR

2. Form an association of anticipation and curiosity, as they associate you with enrichment, puzzle feeders and positive reinforcement training. By doing this they will no longer run and hide as you place an item in their enclosure.

Once this trust starts to appear you can work with the animals to teach them to 'enjoy / tolerate' handling at a later date. Providing enrichment, can aid in bond building and reduce aggression associated with stress.

## REMEMBER:

**To touch an animal is a privilege not a right; respect their right to say, "No"**

**Never underestimate the power of enrichment and mental stimulation, when reducing stress in these captive wild animals, we term 'exotic pets'.**