

Desensitising to Promote Trust and Logic Behaviour – Make Some Noise



TARONGA
WESTERN PLAINS
ZOOTM

For the Wild
TARONGA
CONSERVATION SOCIETY AUSTRALIA

Where is Dubbo?



- Dubbo is 6 hours from Sydney or 400km (249 Miles)
- Temperatures range from: -4 to 43 degrees Celsius on average. (25 to 109 degrees Fahrenheit)
- Small rural farming city of 44,000 people

The Black Rhino Complex



- 5.4 Black Rhinos housed
- Complex size: 25 Acres or 10 hectares
- 2 Display exhibits
- 19 nights yards
- 15 holding yards
- 3 keepers per day to allow for Husbandry, Training and Conditioning and management of browse plantations.

What we are doing?



- Previously we performed on average 5 general anaesthetics (GA) in a year for dentals, health checks, rectal ultrasounds and semen collection to name a few.
- We have now reduced our GA numbers through time invested into our conditioning programme allowing for blood and faecal collection, ultrasound, and skin treatments using our chutes.
- Most importantly this has allowed us to monitor our breeding females oestrus cycles via rectal ultrasound and pregnancy checks, these previously requiring a GA.

Building trust through conditioning

Our goal is for the rhino to stand still and relax



Pressure and release conditioning technique

- Until the Black Rhino understands that we are not going to harm or eat him/her, they will not trust us, as mother nature has programmed them to. Once this basic fear is alleviated in the animal, it will start to think more logically and respond rather than react.
- Understand the survival instincts of predator/prey animals.
- Condition this behaviour with approximations and steps to build up to the desired end result i.e. relaxed in open chute. Use a stimulus to desensitise and then stop with stimulus when desired result is achieved.
- Food is used to reinforce the conditioning.
- **It isn't what you are doing that sends the message but it is when you stop doing what you are doing that sends the message.**



Free standing open ended chute

- The chute system design gives the animal the choice to stay or leave at its own will.
- This choice promotes trust with the trainer and with the predictability of the situation.



- Through the desensitising technique we have had success in:
 - Treating animals for skin lesions, wounds and illness.
 - Doing rectal ultrasounds to monitor oestrus and determine pregnancy.
 - Regular blood draws to monitor overall health and haemochromatosis

The Benefits

- Build brave behaviour and logical thinking.
- Animal will start to perceive that it is training you. (reverse psychology)
- The Rhino always has a choice.
- Relationship with the Rhino will improve.
- Limits the need to do general anaesthetics which reduces the stress and break of trust i.e. humans acting like predators.

THANK YOU

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- Scott Smith
- Taronga Western Plains Zoo
- International Rhino Keepers Assoc.

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