

## SHOW AND TAIL

### Naturally Talented: Empowering the ABQ BioPark Ambassador Animal Collection

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The ABQ BioPark is a 2 mile long facility in the heart of the Rio Grande River valley in Albuquerque, NM. Made up of a zoo, aquarium, native bosque recreation area, and botanic garden, the living collection spans plants, bugs, fish, birds, reptiles, and mammals. Natural Encounters Inc. has partnered with the BioPark for over three years, and I have been permanently based here as the Behavior and Enrichment Manager for a year and a half through an ongoing partnership.

Upon my arrival, the education and ambassador collections were some of the first I was introduced to. The history of the program is extremely important to the present and future so that's where I started. Outreach to the surrounding area can include going on overnight trips around the

state of New Mexico, as the BioPark is the largest facility of its kind in the state, and the only to offer a variety of conservation programming. The history of the ambassador program started with a program called Zoo to You. Run entirely by our dedicated volunteer staff, they would take collection animals to schools across the state, sometimes for days at a time, to have maximum impact and reach. While this was a truly amazing way for our volunteers and community to engage with our animals, the time came for us to assess the welfare of the animals going on these trips. With welfare as the compass, the Zoo to You program was ended, and Discover the BioPark was born. While the program itself was ended, our volunteer involvement was not, and several new opportunities were found for them to maintain connection to the BioPark.

With the change in programming, we were able to change the frame-

work for our animal training and expectations for how we wanted the animals to be viewed. The Education Staff decided to bring together several concepts when creating programming; showcasing natural behavior that demonstrates concepts instead of interpretation or telling the audience, prioritizing animal welfare every step of the way, and



creating unique opportunities for the audience to connect to animals in means beyond traditional tactile or static observation. As a caveat, tactile was not eliminated, simply evaluated for its efficacy and elevated to make sure the animal has the choice to participate. With these goals as the guide, programming was created for all ages, incorporating our current collection animals in roles that suited them.

Evaluating the collection for this change was an important step, as we used a framework of "right tool for the job" to consider every individual animal and what would empower them the most. In some cases, this meant recognizing some animals were best suited for other departments. Our two Great Horned Owls, who were both rehabilitated adults when we received them, were moved to a beautiful, lush exhibit after years of glove work. Using positive reinforcement, the team had spent countless hours trying to build relationships with them and help them be comfortable on the glove. This was never able to be achieved, even though progress was made, and so a team discussion of their welfare led to the decision to move them to the exhibit. While tough for the team to lose favorite, maximum impact animals, the outcome of seeing them perched up in a pine tree comfortably preening and snuggled together is enough to make all of us know it was the right choice.

For animals like Calloway the Three Banded Armadillo, all we had to do was give him the chance to show us his ability to spark ideas for programs. His care team noticed how engaged he was with certain enrichment items, how active he was at specific times of the day, and thought about what made him so exciting for them to watch. Starting with training him at times where he was awake (because he showed us very low motivation to wake up for training!), we used both his diet and his affinity for tactile to drive behaviors like crating and handling. Tactile reinforcement here has a very visible effect, important to recognize to know if it is actually a reinforcer or just something the animal has learned to accept with no value associated with it. For Calloway, he pushes his head into a hand when offered, closes his eyes, and uses his front feet to push his head as hard and deep into your palm as possible. It is adorable! With a stronger relationship built, the team was able to move training session times and now sees him participate whenever they walk up! They also developed programs that allow Calloway to engage audience members of all ages. Us-

ing enrichment items, like a ball pit or a giant running wheel, program attendees get to see Calloway do what nature enabled him to do: run and explore his environment.

When looking at how to engage guests in creative and new ways, we brainstormed what engages us about our animals and built around that. Especially for animals that might be good candidates for tactile programs, we wanted to showcase their abilities and include tactile in a manner that respects them and acknowledges their abilities. The reimagined program uses a target behavior to have the rat stand and allow touching on it's back. In the long run, one idea is to eventually have the rat lean into a mock training wall to parallel how we work with large animals, while also allowing touch. Connecting audiences to the way we care for our whole collection and helping them understand why welfare care is so important is just one of the many outcomes of creating animal-centric programs.

While on the surface I have discussed a change of programming, the underlying change was one of culture. Anyone who has attempted a mass culture change, knows the difficulty. It is a slow step of approximations and constant re-evaluation, same as positive reinforcement teaches us to do. There were many stakeholders at the BioPark who all participated, and all came together to prioritize animal welfare. When using animal welfare as the uniting principal, it is easy to bring passionate groups of keepers and staff together. Even in the moments where we disagreed, taking a moment to refocus on our common goal always garnered buy-in. Beyond that, we operated in a safe space as a team that allowed for mistakes and celebrated the knowledge gained from them. There were tough moments along the way, but all of these things combined are what have led to progress and measurably higher welfare for our collection animals.

If you are looking to make change in your own areas, remember to go easy on yourself and celebrate small success. Unite your team around common passions and reinforce everyone as individuals. With welfare and a positive outlook as your guides, anything can be achieved. You will find new ways to help your animals be their best selves and connect audiences more strongly to your facility than ever before.