A New Way of Handling Elephants

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Elephants are not usually required to work, in zoos. Nevertheless, zoo elephants need to be trained. Since their feet are not worn down by miles of walking, as they would be in the wild, they must be trimmed regularly, by hand; and elephants often need other physical care.

Traditional elephant training, like traditional horse training, involves using force—the elephant hook or goad—and restraint. Elephants used to be chained by the leg, sometimes for many hours, as a form of discipline. Traditional elephant trainers rely on social dominance, as well: while an elephant and a person may develop ties of affection, the trainer must always be Boss. Elephants, however, can rebel. Keepers in zoos have been injured or killed by fed-up elephants.

Today many modern zoos are using a technique based on operant conditioning, called Protected Contact. The elephants learn to offer behavior in response to vocal commands, in order to earn a marker signal—usually a whistle—and a treat: fruit, bread, or another preferred food. The trainer remains safely outside of the cage, while the elephant holds its feet, one at a time, through the bars to be trimmed, or perhaps presents its ear for blood sampling. Elephants can be moved, separated, loaded into transport vehicles, and so on, all for a beep and a treat. Keeper injury is no longer a problem, and keepers do not need to make the elephant fearful or submissive to get good behavior. Even bull elephants in the dangerous breeding condition of musth can be safely handled and doctored this way.

Training with positive reinforcers and cues, instead of commands and threats of punishment, makes all the elephants safer to handle, including those that are used for work, ridden, or expected to perform with people in what is now called “free contact.”

Gary Priest, a former killer whale trainer and now Curator of Behavior at the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park, supervised the transition to shaping and positive reinforcement with the zoo's elephants. Do the elephants like the new system? “They love it! They'll do anything we ask. They'd fly for us, if they could,” says Priest.