

ORANGUTAN/CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIPS

Melanie Bond and Barb Weber

Updated by Carol Sodaro

Components of a good orangutan/caregiver relationship

- ✓ **Respecting individual animal personalities**
- ✓ **Knowledge and understanding of species behavior**
- ✓ **Understanding an individual's life history (APES)**
- ✓ **Interface with past caregivers and other professionals involved in orangutan care**
- ✓ **Relationships remain objective and professional**
- ✓ **Establishing a relationship of mutual trust, viewing the animals as partners in their care**

A relationship is a "connection" in some way to another individual. There are no two relationships that are alike because there are no two people alike. Orangutan/caregiver relationships are no exception. Have you ever met two orangutans that are alike? They have highly individual life histories, personalities, likes, dislikes, moods, etc. Each animal must be respected as an individual.

The foundation for a good caregiver relationship with an orangutan is multifaceted. Knowledge and understanding of the species behavior is essential. It is important to understand how a wild orangutan interacts with its environment and other conspecifics. Becoming familiar with this information will not only help you interpret behaviors of the orangutans in your care but will help in defining solutions to problems affecting their lives. An overview of orangutan behavior can be found in the Behavioral Biology Chapter (this volume).

For example, orangutans are arboreal and live in habitats that are highly flexible and movable. By understanding this, we know to provide our animals with areas in their exhibits that will enable them to climb or make a nest high off the ground. By making regular changes to the pathways they use to *locomote* in their exhibits and holding enclosures, we are offering variety and providing mental stimulation; an important aspect of orangutan husbandry.

Wild orangutans have an incredible memory, which allows them to locate food sources in a highly variable environment. Although a captive setting provides a regular food source (their daily diet),

orangutans benefit from the mental challenge of acquiring food in a variety of ways. This can be accomplished via regular variation in food type, presentation and times of day the food is offered. These are only two examples of how the knowledge of wild orangutans can help in providing a more appropriate environment for captive orangutans.

Knowing the life history of the orangutans in your care is very important. Are they wild or captive born, hand-reared or mother-reared? Species traits and individual characteristics combine to form a unique personality for each orangutan. Learning the past histories of your animals - where they have lived, who they were with, and how they got along with conspecifics and caregivers can give you information to help interpret the behavior of an individual. APES profiles help to provide a wide variety of behavioral, housing, and historical information for the majority of the living animals within the SSP® population. Refer to the A.P.E.S. Chapter (this volume) for more information on individual profiles.

For example, knowing that an adult female did not take care of her infant at one institution, combined with the knowledge that this female was hand-reared, had no prior infant experience, and is housed with a more dominant female, may suggest that she would make progress in an environment that would give her an opportunity to observe a competent mother, participate by "aunting" and have some training in appropriate maternal behaviors.

Open communication with previous caregivers is essential. Not only will you learn from contact with others in your profession, but they will appreciate regular updates on the status of an animal that was previously in their care. Former caregivers may provide useful information that will benefit both caregiver and animal. Knowing that a previous institution has trained a mother to allow her baby to be touched and examined without restraint or anesthesia can make life much happier for orangutan, caregiver, and veterinarian. Previous caregivers may be able to explain why a particular individual may appear difficult to staff at your institution. Most likely, there is information you are lacking that will give you an understanding of your animal's behavior. For example, "Pepper tends to be a shy individual – she does better in situations where her caregivers are consistent. Her favorite treat is mealworms and she reacts negatively to loud noises."

The Red Ape Keepers List Serve is a good method of communicating with fellow professionals while benefiting from their experience and advice. Contact Carol Sodaro at casodaro@brookfieldzoo.org to

subscribe.

Caregivers must understand that relationships with the animals remain objective and professional. It is necessary to become a skilled observer of animal behavior in order to effectively evaluate the reasons that a behavior is performed. One must not be anthropomorphic in analyzing the behavior you are observing (i.e. to attribute human emotions, characteristic or motive to animals). Only the animal knows what it is thinking at any given moment.

The needs of the animals, individually and as a managed species, must be put ahead of personal attachment. These animals are "ours" only in the sense that they are our responsibility and our privilege to care for, but NOT in any possessively emotional sense. The development of an orangutan/caregiver relationship should progress according to the individual animal's needs not on a pre-determined schedule. This is an on-going relationship that will strengthen over time.

The development of the relationship will depend on the caregiver's attitude. Caring for such intelligent creatures is a great responsibility. We are the spokespersons for the animals in our care. It is best and most effective to begin to establish a relationship of mutual trust, viewing the animals as partners in their care, rather than as subordinates to us. A good caregiver understands orangutans are beings that have thoughts and feelings about what is happening around them.

Many of us have experienced the almost uncanny ability of some orangutans to immediately perceive a caregiver's request, either willingly accommodating him or stubbornly refusing to budge one inch toward the desired goal. In the case of stubborn refusal, the animal usually has a good reason for such behavior. Orangutans are reactive to situations they encounter and at times make requests and demands of their caregivers. It is the caregiver's job to examine potential reasons for that behavior. By trying to see the problem from the orangutan's point of view, solutions are more easily found. Do not order or demand the animal to comply unless it is for the animal's safety. Orangutans are one species of primate that cannot be forced or tricked by keepers without risking the breakdown of their trust. This is where an animal's trust is critical. If the caregiver has truly gained the animal's confidence, the caregiver will be much more likely to gain cooperation. If you have not bothered getting to know and understand this individual, why should the orangutan cooperate?

Establishing consistent daily routines with a regular staff of caregivers is very important because it provides a sense of security in knowing what to expect from day to day. This routine increases the likelihood of orangutan cooperation. On the other hand, **orangutans are very intelligent animals and need frequent mental and physical stimulation.** This is accomplished by providing variety in the animal's life.

Diet, behavioral enrichment, changeable enclosure furnishings and positive reinforcement training for cooperative care are some of the many ways to ensure mental well being for orangutans. Refer to the chapters on Behavioral Enrichment, Nutrition, Training and Facility Design (this volume) for more ideas.

Orangutan caregivers are one of the few animal caregivers that need to enter into a complex relationship of cooperative care with their animals. This is due, in part, to the animal's high intelligence level and the bond they form with their caregivers. A great orangutan keeper is one that wins the respect of the animal on the animal's terms. To gain the trust and cooperation of an orangutan is truly an honor.