DESENSITIZATION AND OPERANT CONDITIONING OF REPTILES TO FACILITATE VETERINARY CARE: CURRENT EXAMPLES AND FUTURE APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Training for veterinary procedures has long been performed in mammalian zoo species; however, the application of behavioral training techniques remains underutilized in reptile collections. A survey was sent via behavioral and zoological list-serves to determine what behavioral training techniques are being employed with reptiles in zoological collections worldwide. Nineteen institutions provided examples of training techniques for lizards, snakes, turtles, and crocodiles. All 19 institutions (100%) used desensitization and/or operant conditioning techniques. Desensitization was used at 13/19 (68%) institutions in over 9 species to facilitate handling for examination, radiographs, ultrasounds, blood collection, and topical and ocular medications. Operant conditioning, referring to modifying behavior involving positive or negative reinforcement was most frequently used to have animals target, station, or shift for procedures. Operant conditioning was used at 18/19 (95%) institutions in over 20 species to facilitate obtaining weights, examinations, radiographs, ultrasounds, blood collection, and administering oral and parenteral medications. The examples of reptile training already being employed at zoos worldwide illustrate how zoological institutions can use techniques such as desensitization and operant conditioning to improve the veterinary care of reptiles.

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