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Our understanding of animals has come a long way over the past few decades. Every time we take closer consideration of how the mind of an animal works, our predispositions are thrown out the window. Much of our knowledge about the animal mind is new and often takes a deeper understanding or longer observations to see. This is something that zoo workers can take for granted sometimes. Through our learning and experiences, it becomes commonplace to watch an owl or rhino step onto a scale to weigh themselves. It is truly amazing what happens every day at the zoo.

Commonly I hear ideas or phrases from some people that vastly underestimate the potential for animals to think, comprehend, and feel. Ever hear that a goldfish only has a two second memory? Well, a quick look on YouTube for goldfish training will show you how false that claim is. Training requires the animal to learn and change behavior based on its experiences. If a goldfish could only remember the last two seconds of its life, then no one would ever be able to train goldfish. Have a fish tank? See what happens when you bring the food container near the tank. They probably begin to rush to the surface closest to the container. That's because they learned the signals that they are about to be fed. They don't have instincts to follow round plastic containers, that is learned behavior. While there are limits to an animal's understanding, the bar is much higher than it previously was thought to be. This greater understanding of the psychology of behavior and how to adjust it has led to many changes in animal care.

Zoological institutions are working more and more to have the animals take part in their care. When possible, we avoid grabbing or corralling animals for basic health checks. Instead, we work with the animals every day to make it rewarding for them to voluntarily participate in their care. With time the animal caregivers build what is known, in the field of animal behavior, as a "trust bank". By creating positive experiences and minimizing negative experiences, the "trust bank" grows. As the "trust bank" grows, the caregivers can begin asking for behaviors from the animal such as weighing themselves or moving from one place to another. If the trust bank is large enough the caregivers can even ask for things that could have a negative experience attached, such as the poke of a needle for medication. The animal might not conceive how the drug works, but they trust their caregiver won't hurt them.

Not only does this make the jobs of the zoo employees easier, it also improves the lives of the animals they care for. Many studies monitor stress hormones in animals. It is the easiest and truest way to tell if an animal is better off from a change. If the animal's blood (or feces) contains a high amount of stress hormones over a prolonged period, then we know a method doesn't work. Years of animal observations and related studies have changed everything we do from how we design an exhibit to how often an ambassador animal, such as the ones USD 457 students see in their classrooms, participates in programs. Happier, less stressed animals improve the success of breeding programs, extends life expectancy, and reduces behaviors associated with aggression. Just like people, animals can acquire ill effects from stress such as mood swings and general health problems.

Next time you are at the zoo, stay at an exhibit awhile. Watch and observe one animal for a bit longer rather than jumping from exhibit to exhibit. You might catch a behavior you didn't realize they did. You might even catch zoo staff as they go about their day. If you do, feel free to ask them

questions about the animals under their care. We take pride in our work and the animals. Also, just sitting and watching an animal go about its day has been shown to reduce stress hormones in people. So relax a bit and let our "trust bank" with you reassure you that the animals you are watching are in good care.