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Great Apes: A Study of Human and Non-Human Primate Interactions in a Zoological Environment

Zoo Atlanta is the home of North America's largest collections of Orangutans and Western Lowland Gorillas, as well as a large collection of Old World taxa. I had the opportunity to work alongside all of these species from May to December of 2013, recording my journey from internship to seasonal animal keeping position within the zoo's primates department. Recording observations of behavior was the main method of data collection, and over 30 hours a week were spent with the apes, engaging in their feeding, enrichment, and training routines. All of but the youngest of the zoo's primates are trained for medical and husbandry related purposes including body positioning for cardiac and prenatal ultrasounds, the administration of flu vaccines, dental and oral health maintenance, and the presentation of most body parts. The training is voluntary and reinforced in a positive manner in order to make the visual and diagnostic assessments of health and behavior much easier for both the keeper staff and the veterinarians. The primary research question concerns identifying the types of training and enrichment that are most effective at increasing survivorship and promoting instinctual behaviors, and also whether or not these methods can be used to promote conservation and cognitive development in captive primates. The results demonstrate that when it comes to "work", Bornean orangutans tend to figure out how to obtain the rewards much faster than their Sumatran counterparts and the gorillas. The ecological inference is that because primates are able to be trained to perform medical and husbandry types of behaviors, training and enrichment can be also be utilized to promote the learning of other behaviors necessary for survival in the wild, while at the same time promoting cognitive development in captivity.

Key Words: Participant Observation, Primatology, Husbandry, Ecology, Primates, Orangutans, Enrichment, Cognition, Training, Gorillas