THE PROCESS OF WRITING AND PERFORMING
IN A LIVE WILDLIFE SHOW

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Master of Arts

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Career opportunities for those who work with, or on behalf of, wild animals have grown beyond field research and zoo keeping positions to include the education and entertainment fields. Live wildlife shows seen at zoos, theme parks and circuses comprise a large part of these opportunities. Additionally, the television and film industries produce more wildlife documentaries every year. Several factors, such as increasing public attention toward environmental issues, an insatiable desire for new forms of entertainment, and media coverage contribute to the growth of these fields. Therefore, career opportunities for people who want to combine animal knowledge with public outreach have grown.

Ironically, little information exists about the craft of writing and performing in a live wildlife show. Since much information does exist about stage performance, handling and training animals and the history of mankind’s relationship with the animal kingdom, it seems that documenting the process of developing a live wildlife show for stage would fill a research niche. Those who could potentially benefit from this documentation are performers who are interested in wildlife conservation and conservationists who enjoy working with animals and the public. This thesis documents my experiences with shows that focus on educating audiences about the animals in the show.
Wildlife Shows: From Entertainment to Education

Educational live wildlife shows are commonly presented at zoos, school assemblies, and some theme parks. The animals are trained to do natural behaviors on cue. Natural behaviors are those that the animals would naturally do in the wild. A person on stage tells the audience about each animal’s unique environmental adaptations and niche in its ecosystem. The shows give the audience a more personal and vivid encounter with the various species than they would have gained by watching the animals on television or from a distance.

While many of today’s wildlife shows focus on ecology, this perspective is a fairly new phenomenon that took form in the latter half of the twentieth century. Positive training methods and humane animal handling techniques are recent mid-twentieth century concepts that are gaining popularity in the management of captive wild animals. It would be impossible to document here the history of how animals have been used as entertainment. Instead, this chapter provides an overview of the mainstream venues in which wild animals have become a major source of entertainment in America. The chapter also surveys how this entertainment evolved to incorporate eco-centered philosophies and the humane treatment of captive animals.

Mahatma Ghandi once said that “we can judge the greatness of a nation by the way it treats animals.”¹ The foundation of animal entertainment in America can be charted in three categories: the wilderness (represented by the national park), the circus, and the zoo. Television, film and other media reflect these categories in the types of presentations

they broadcast. Each category has roots in human history that have evolved over the centuries. The modern day circus descended from ancient Roman theatrical displays involving acts of violence between and against wild animals. Zoos developed from private collections of wild animals acquired by royalty and wealthy citizens. Despite such fascination with wild animals, wilderness areas around the world were greatly reduced to make room for human development and agriculture. The remaining areas have been compartmentalized into national parks. Ecological conservation and concern for animal welfare altered both the direction of these three entities and the American perspective of wildlife.

The National Park

In his book, *National Parks: The American Experience*, Alfred Runte points out that “scenic phenomena, not wildlife, inspired Yellowstone National Park.” In 1872, the Yellowstone wilderness in northwestern Wyoming was granted the status of the world’s first national park, or protected wilderness, because it contained beautiful scenery and geologically important geysers. At that time, the United States Congress upheld the principle of preserving scenic landscapes for all *people* to enjoy. In 1864, Congress had already set aside the Yosemite Valley in California as a scenic preservation site for the public. However, the needs of the native fauna inhabiting these sites were not taken into consideration when the park’s boundaries were drawn.

Many animals perished because Yellowstone was too small. Privately held ranchland fence lines just outside of the southern border prevented wildlife such as elk, moose and bears from migrating southward out of the colder highlands during the winter.

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to warmer valleys. Conservationists gathered more information on the ecology of Yellowstone and attempted to convince Congress to increase the park’s borders, but they were met with constant opposition since the fertile land outside the park was too profitable for ranchers.

In 1929, John D. Rockefeller purchased 35,000 acres of crucial wildlife habitat south of the park with the intention of giving it to the nation as protected land. To his surprise, Congress did not accept his gift at that time. This extension had to wait until 1950 when Congress finally agreed to enlarge the Grand Teton National Park on Yellowstone’s southern border to include Rockefeller’s gift.

Although the battle between preserving nature for nature’s sake and destroying nature for human use continues to be fought, the popularity of the national parks demonstrates that there came a point when “Americans could admit that ‘awesome scenery’ might in fact be sterile without the ‘intimate details of living things, the plants, the animals that live on them, and the animals that live on those animals.’”3

The general public’s unrealistic perceptions about wildlife have also undergone a transformation. From the park’s inception through the 1950s, park visitors did not hesitate to hand feed large animals such as bear, elk, and bison without regard for safety or the ecological impact of teaching wild animals that humans were a source of food.

In fact, national park rangers encouraged such behavior from the public. A popular event in both Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks was the daily bear feeding show. Every evening the rangers emptied garbage cans inside of fenced pit that was encircled

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by an amphitheatre seating over five hundred people. The audience proceeded to watch numerous bears rummage through the trash.\textsuperscript{4}

The masses of tourists enjoyed the show, but several critics detested it. The critics compared the feedings to Roman gladiatorial spectacles; “instead of people, the animals were reduced to ‘sadly degenerate representatives of the noble ancestors from which they sprung.’”\textsuperscript{5}

The 1960s brought a new generation of wilderness and environmental conservationists. In 1962, a book called \textit{Silent Spring} by Rachel Carson spurred an environmental movement which focused concern on how chemical companies were adversely affecting wildlife and public health. Carson presents laboratory and field research to prove how both wildlife and humans were suffering serious health problems caused by pesticide use.

One commonly used pesticide known as DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) was regularly dropped over agricultural fields, towns, and cities with surplus World War II military planes. DDT was a persistent pesticide, which means that it remained in the food chain from the lowest member to the top carnivore. Prey species including birds, fish, and mammals that had ingested DDT via insects and vegetation either perished or produced offspring with birth defects. Predatory bird species, like the peregrine falcon and the bald eagle, ingested DDT from the affected prey. The chemical caused the raptors to produce eggs with weak shells. The eggs would break during incubation and the populations of these and other raptor species decreased to near extinction.

\textsuperscript{4} Runte, 168.

\textsuperscript{5} Albert Atwood, “Can the National Parks be Kept Unspoiled?” \textit{Saturday Evening Post}, May 16, 1936: 18-19, quoted in Runte, \textit{National Parks}, 169.
Carson provides the details of how toxic chemicals also affected human health. Carson’s information and increased documentation of wildlife deaths caused by toxic chemicals such as PCBs incited public outcry against the chemical companies. The 1970s saw massive legislative actions that transformed America’s attention to its wilderness treasures: Earth Day, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act.

The American public and the National Park Service became more aware of their natural resources and the issues that threatened these resources. Wildlife became an entity that needed to be protected instead of mocked in public feedings. The feedings stopped, and, instead, visitors were educated about the wildlife and warned to keep a safe distance from the animals. This education continues throughout the National Park system and includes information about the natural history of the local wildlife. Since many species that were once abundant had gone extinct or were near extinction by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the public began to understand the meaning of extinction and the importance of protective legislation.

During the summer of 2005, I visited Yellowstone National Park. Based on other visitors’ actions, I found that the wildlife is arguably the most important aspect of the park. Often twenty or more cars would be parked on the roadside for a quarter of a mile, and the riders would be running back to the site and craning their necks in efforts to glimpse an elk, deer, moose, or black bear. Despite the fact that many of the onlookers did not know whether the animal was a moose or a male elk, they thoroughly enjoyed the experience of watching a wild animal in its natural environment.
On one occasion, a busload of forty people exited the bus and climbed a nearby hill because they were told that a grizzly bear, that was foraging several miles away, could be seen through one person’s spotting scope. To those people, the most important feature amidst the beautiful scenery was the grizzly bear that they could barely see through a scope. Thankfully, a major shift in public consciousness has been how to regard the wild animals, not whether to regard them.

The Circus

The circus in America was founded on the country’s love of athleticism, comedy, and spectacle of the “superlatives.”6 In 1768, British horseman, Philip Astley, developed the first post-Roman circus in England. “He discovered that if he trained his horse to canter in a circle at a constant speed, while both he and his horse were leaning slightly inward, centrifugal force would help him keep his balance.”7 Astley invented the circus ring in England that would later be set at the current circus industry standard of forty-two feet in diameter. In the ring, he performed numerous stunts with his horse and interspersed acts of equestrian clownery. The clown act, “Billy Buttons, the Taylor Riding to Brentford,” portrayed a tailor attempting to mount a horse and gallop away to a customer. Although Astley’s stunts and clowning acts were not new ideas, the circus invention was born from combining the two within a ring.

Nearly twenty years later, an American named Thomas Pool erected a similar show in Philadelphia. He billed himself as, “the first American that ever exhibited the

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7 Ibid., 1
following equestrian feats of horsemanship, on the continent.” Although his show ran for the relatively short span of a year, Thomas Pool is still credited for being the first entertainer to bring the circus to America.

While subsequent circus acts grew in popularity and included other types of human stunts alongside the horsemanship stunts, exotic animals did not enter the scene until the nineteenth century. The feats of horsemanship as the central circus attraction began to give way to a new money-making venture: the traveling menagerie. The first elephant to enter North America was a three year old female from Asia. She was displayed throughout the eastern seaboard for the viewing price of “one quarter of a dollar” for adults and “one eighth of a dollar” for children. The advertisements described the elephant species as “the most respectable animal in the world,” and described this elephant as “the greatest natural curiosity ever presented to the curious.” “In size [she] surpasses all other terrestrial creatures, and by [her] intelligence makes as near an approach to man, as matter can approach spirit.” As menageries expanded, their animal collections included species such as various types of large cats, North American bears, hyenas, jackals, kangaroos, and many more. By the 1820s, over thirty different menageries were touring throughout the eastern United States.

Menageries and circuses finally merged in the latter half of the 1830s when a menagerie animal keeper, Isaac Van Amburgh, became “a lion tamer” in the circus. Promoters “[figured] out a way to combine the menagerie with a circus…and make both

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8 “Thomas Pool’s equestrian exhibition and burlesque,” Pennsylvania Packet, August 20, 1785, quoted in Culhane, American Circus, 2.

9 Ibid., 13.

10 Ibid., 14 passim.
seem ‘educational’” by having Van Amburgh present the animal acts as living depictions of the *Holy Bible*. Additionally, equestrian stunt people and clowns were hired to perform in circus rings. Eventually the two shows became one large circus.\textsuperscript{11}

Circuses grew in popularity for displaying “people and animals that can be rated the largest, the smallest, the fastest, the fattest, the most ferocious – or any other superlative….”\textsuperscript{12} Circuses throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to attract audiences with the most exotic and marketable wild animal specimens that they could afford to purchase. From 1881-1885, P.T. Barnum displayed “Jumbo,” said to be the world’s largest elephant, as his main attraction. Even after Jumbo’s tragic death from a collision with an on-coming freight train, Barnum continued to gain publicity from the famous animal’s persona. The subsequent Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus featured “Gargantua,” the largest gorilla in the world in 1938. Hype from the recent “King Kong” film to attracted to see the large African mammal in its “twenty-two-ton air-conditioned cage.” Continuing the superlative entertainment legacy of Barnum’s “Greatest Show on Earth,” the next owner of this circus, Irvin Feld, sought out “the greatest all-around star in circus history”: Gunther Gebel-Williams, the wild animal trainer. In order to persuade Gebel-Williams to perform in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, Irvin Feld purchased the whole Williams Circus, which was Gebel-Williams’ employer, for $2 million dollars in 1968.

Gunther joined Ringling Bros. at a time when circuses in America were closing because of low audience attendance caused by television. Feld responded by using

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 14 passim.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 13.
television to market his new animal training superstar and lure people to see him perform live. Gebel-Williams’ ability to work with nineteen elephants at one time, and train “three tigers, two horses and an African elephant together in the same cage” were unprecedented.¹³ Gunther Gebel-Williams is credited with single-handedly reviving “the original magic of the circus: the therapy of watching real men and women overcome humanity’s age-old fears of wild animals….”¹⁴ This new animal training act drew audiences back to the circus.

Many other popular forms of animal spectacle such as rodeos, breed shows, and horse or dog sporting competitions, fall under the umbrella of the circus. These exhibitions play to the human affinity for sport, competition, love of superlative qualities. Animals have been revered and celebrated not so much for their own sakes, but for how they affect human sentiment.

The Zoo

Over the course of the twentieth century, American zoos have made strong attempts to evolve ways of molding a reverence for wild animals into enthusiasm for wildlife in its own natural element – the wild. Despite the four seemingly altruistic purposes for keeping captive populations of wild animals (recreation, research, conservation, and education), zoos continue to receive mixed criticisms.¹⁵ The average American zoo visitor believes that these purposes are perfectly fine justifications for

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¹³ Ibid., 289.

¹⁴ Ibid., 300.

keeping wild animals on display in captivity. On the other hand, people who have closer affiliations with wildlife research and welfare often feel that zoos provide little more than human recreation at the expense of the dignity and welfare of wild animals.

Zoos descended from wild animal menageries collected by royalty since 2300 B.C. More than four thousand years ago, “wealthy Egyptian kings maintained collections that grew to thousands of wild animals, including monkeys, wild cats, antelopes, hyenas, gazelles, ibex, and oryx.”

Kings and queens ordered hunting parties to capture wild animals, and neighboring countries sent animals as gifts. The collections were signs of high status and dominance.

The Greeks, on the other hand, built zoos and gardens for study. In his book entitled A Different Nature, David Hancocks states that “most Greek city-states maintained extensive zoos, and visits were an integral part of the education for young scholars.” In 350 B.C., Aristotle wrote the first zoological text, The History of Animals, based his own observations. The Greek writer Plutarch, who lived under early Roman rule near the beginning of the millennium, made the first recorded statement against animal abuse: “we should not use living creatures like old shoes or pots and pans and throw them away when they are worn out or broken with service.”

Unfortunately, the Greek philosophy contrasted from that of subsequent civilizations. The ancient Romans kept collections of wild animals for use in their Colosseum spectacles. Leaders sponsored expensive hunts and fights between animals, and between people and animals in order to gain personal fame. Hancocks reports that in

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16 Ibid., 7.
17 Ibid., 8.
one day, “five thousand wild animals [would be] slaughtered in mock hunts or in fights to
the death.”\textsuperscript{18} This brutality, initiatied by the same men who built the incomparable
Colosseum, is a reminder that ingenuity is no indicator of humanity.

The popularity of zoos rose from the circus and other animal show spectacles. Zoos
acquired their animal collections from the same breeders, dealers, and collectors that
supplied the circuses. The difference between the two types of displays was that zoos
placed the animals on exhibit in cement cell blocks adjacent to one another, organized
according to taxonomic order, while circuses marched them in parades and dressed them
in shiny costumes. Zoos aimed to display comparisons of different species. For example,
wild felines were all housed in one carnivore house where people could compare the
African lion, Asian leopard, Indian tiger and South American jaguar.

City dwellers would take a trip to the city park and tour through the zoo, which was
often located within the park, to look at the animals from America and abroad. City
planners and zoo planners worked together to create an experience for citizens that made
them feel as though their trip to the park was much like a walk through an idyllic
painting. Benches, footbridges over little streams, and specimens of exotic animals
completed the scene. There was no regard for the animals’ native flora, climates, or
natural behaviors. This pattern continued until the latter half of the twentieth century.

Over the twentieth century, American zoos took a turn for more natural settings and
the welfare of the captive animals eventually became a priority in zoo planning. As
mentioned earlier, an era of ecological interest began to appear throughout the country in
the 1960s. “It [became] clearer to more people that zoos, as mere entertainment facilities,

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 10.
People gradually realized that the animals needed to be in environments that were more mentally and physically stimulating than their cell block structures. Many zoo directors adopted the philosophy of placing the animals in exhibits that more closely resembled their natural settings, and also educated the public about the ecology of the animals. Additionally, zoos moved away from the taxonomic arrangement to the geographic arrangement of the exhibits.

William Hornaday, the first director of the New York Zoological Society, (also known as the Bronx Zoo), began this tradition in 1911 when he designed the zoo's North American bison exhibit to emulate the Great Plains. Hornaday led the zoo revolution with his belief that “wild animals of North America…should be shown…in the free range of large enclosures, in which forests, rocks, and natural features of the landscape will give the people an impression of the life, habits and native surroundings of the these different types.” Many of the zoos throughout the United States made the transition to natural settings later in the century.

With the rise of the environmental movement and subsequent federal legislation of the early 1970s, conservation and education became the main priority of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association. In the organization's mission, they state, “we envision a world where all people respect, value and conserve animals and nature.” Wildlife entertainment at zoos now placed the animals in recreations of their native habitats. It became clear that when the animals were engaged in any type of healthy activity, or

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19 Ibid., 111.
doing things that did not represent stereotypical behavior patterns of bored captive animals, zoo patrons were all the more entertained.

How can zoos survive, much less undergo expansive renovations, during the current rising popularity of simulated wildlife safaris in film and television? Similar to Ringling Bros.’ successful marketing tactic that lured circus goers with television previews of Gunther Gebel-Williams’ animal training stunts, zoos have actually benefited from the growth of filmed nature drama. Most zoo visitors have watched animal documentaries and desire closer contact with the animals. “Zoo patrons want to interact with animals.” In fact, “…47 percent expect to be able to feed, pet or touch animals.” Every single day that I work at the Living Desert Reserve, I observe visitors repeatedly trying to capture the attention of the animals by whistling, clucking, meowing, barking, howling and shouting pet names at the animals. For these visitors, a reciprocal glance of acknowledgement from one of the animals is comparable to a glance from a Hollywood celebrity. Often visitors inquire whether they can touch any of the animals. “Real, live animals are the edge the zoo has over TV.”

Science and research have become sources of prestige for zoos. Today’s zoos have been effective in rescuing several endangered species from extinction. This commitment is in contrast to the cruelty that animals taken from the wild suffered so that the early American zoos could display live exotic artifacts. A few of the species that have been receiving beneficial aid from zoos around the world are addax and Arabian oryx (two horned antelope species from North Africa); various forest duikers (small antelope species); California condor; palila (a Hawaiian songbird); thick-billed parrot; grey, red

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22 Croke, Modern Ark, 99.
and Mexican wolf species; African wild dog; striped hyena; cheetah; Australian wombats; and numerous species of primates. Zoos act as breeding facilities for the purpose of both reintroducing species to the wild and of maintaining captive populations of animals that are nearly extirpated from the wild. Zoological institutions often monetarily support and sponsor researchers in the field. They also serve as wildlife diplomats between international governments to help develop policies that preserve habitats and limit hunting.

The New York Zoological Society, was founded on the basis of conservation. In 1895 William Hornaday began the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) which is the zoo's field research and public education organization dedicated to conservation projects throughout the world. Today WCS supports nearly three hundred field projects in 53 countries. Hornaday and the WCS set a major precedent for wildlife protective legislation when they led a campaign in 1912 to convince the United States government to strengthen existing wildlife protection legislation. The snowy egret, a large, white, wading bird, was hunted to near extinction because the male’s spring breeding plumage was a popular decoration on ladies’ hats. In an effort to stop this practice, Hornaday purchased sixteen hundred hummingbird skins from an auction and mailed them to lawmakers and influential women of the day. His campaign convinced Congress to strengthen existing laws prohibiting the use of wild bird body parts in fashion. It also led to important wildlife conservation legislation such as the Migratory Bird Hunting Act in 1934 and the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

While zoos have more distance to travel before they can be considered perfect havens for wild animals, they have made a long progressive journey over the last century.
In the past, the public was entertained by seeing a captive wild animal in a cage. Zoos, like circuses, merely had to advertise that the first elephant, the largest ape, or the most exotic collection of wild cats was on public display to attract audiences. Today, zoos use ecologically focused missions and pseudo-safari experiences as marketing tools to lure visitors. Due to increased media coverage, people have more sophisticated expectations of how wild animals should be kept. If a zoological institution can demonstrate a commitment to wildlife conservation and welfare, visitors are doubly satisfied with the visual entertainment of seeing wild animals in wild-looking spaces and knowing that the money they spent on entrance fees helps the zoo accomplish its mission.

Wildlife shows are a conglomeration of all three veins of American wildlife entertainment. They combine the spectacle of sport and live action, informative dialogue, and the experience of having a close encounter with exotic animals. These shows are entertainment tools used to lure more visitors to the zoo, park, or whatever the host facility may be. Because of their appeal, these shows present an opportunity for conservationists to plant a few seeds of interest in the minds of the audience members. Interest germinates into knowledge, which blossoms into deeper appreciation. “In the end, we conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand what we are taught.”23

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CHAPTER II
DEVELOPING A SCRIPT FOR A WILDLIFE SHOW

If a live wildlife show is a tool used to draw more people to an institution, then the show script is the tool that the show performers use to formulate and facilitate entertaining and educational communication with the audience. Script development is the process of turning zoology and conservation into fun and engaging conversation with the general public without devaluing the information. A wildlife show informs the audience about the animals, their ecosystems, and conservation issues. At the same time, the show strives to keep the audience’s interest with entertaining dialogue, inspiring music, and, most importantly, trained animal behaviors. The author’s experience with the Wildlife Wonders show at the Living Desert Reserve, a non-profit zoo in southern California, forms the basis for much of the this discussion on how to develop a wildlife show script. Subsequent chapters tell how the performers’ and animals’ performances work with the script and form the physical life of the show.

The Objective

The objective of a zoo is articulated by its mission statement. The mission statement provides a reason and guideline for employees, docents, volunteers and board members to carry out their jobs for the zoo. The American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) oversees how AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums carry out their
mission statements in relation to AZA’s own mission statement: to be “dedicated to excellence in animal care and welfare, conservation, education, and research that collectively inspire respect for animals and nature.”24 The Living Desert Reserve’s mission statement is “to foster through interpretive exhibits, programs and publications an awareness of and an appreciation for the variety of plants and animals in worldwide desert ecosystems.”25 A wildlife show also has a mission statement, or objective, which is defined in accordance with that of the parent institution, just as zoos’ objectives are set according to the AZA’s mission statement. The objective of the Wildlife Wonders show at the Living Desert Reserve is to excite the public about desert wildlife. As the show’s objective is not formally publicized, it mainly serves to guide the development and presentation of the show.

Zoological institutions vary in their interpretations of how to expand public appreciation for wildlife. Corporate-owned theme parks, such as SeaWorld, tend to focus on the entertainment value of trained animals and offer little or no information about the animals. Often they incorporate the animal behaviors with fictional show plots and cartoon-style stage sets. If they offer factual information, it is minimal and secondary to the animals’ performances. The result is an amazed and well-entertained audience who gains little to no knowledge of the animals and their environments. On the other hand, non-profit institutions focus more on the educational value of trained animals performing behaviors, non-fictional show scripts, and naturalistic stage sets. The audience gains more


knowledge about the animals, but is often asked to sit through longer, formal explanations and sees far less animal action on stage. Entertainment and education are both necessary elements in a wildlife show and should balance one another. Entertainment keeps the audience engaged while the educational information is delivered. The objective needs to be broad enough to incorporate them, yet narrow enough to deliver a strong clear message.

Just as institutions vary in their perspectives on wildlife shows, the show team within each institution has a set of perspectives. In larger theme parks, show teams include animal trainers, actors, script writers, and producers. In the case of non-profit organizations, the show team usually consists only of animal trainers and they fulfill the duties of the other participants in addition to their training duties. In both cases, each show team member has her own idea of what a show should do, which can result in a diluted message. One trainer believes that warning the audience about habitat destruction will impel them to respect wildlife. A writer or producer feels that lots of audience participation and simpler language is the way to keep their attention. Another trainer is more entertainment oriented and thinks that discussing natural history will only bore the audience. These various perspectives carry validity and can help create methods of delivering information and keeping the audience engaged, but only one can be the main objective in order to send a clear message.

Defining the main objective becomes the show team’s first task. According to one animal trainer, “people retain 2% of any message.” In other words, the team should create a simple objective that sends a simple message that can be stated in one sentence.

26 Rebecca O’Connor, interview by author, transcript, Palm Desert, Ca., 31 March 2004.
As stated above, the Living Desert Reserve’s mission is “to foster...an appreciation for...desert ecosystems.” The objective of the Wildlife Wonders show is “to excite the public about desert wildlife,” so the message being sent to the audience is “desert wildlife is exciting.” Even though the team members personally feel that deserts are unique ecosystems which are quickly deteriorating due to human-induced pressures, the words “excite” and “exciting” are chosen because the team wants to arouse public support for desert wildlife by positively motivating audiences rather than depressing, scaring, or blaming them. The animals and their abilities are the focus of the show rather than their plight. A simple and positive objective makes the task of engaging the audience’s enthusiasm easily attainable.

For Wildlife Wonders, this message remains broad enough to combine entertaining and educational aspects while bringing every point back to how interesting each animal is. Anyone desiring to use audience participation to entertain or to deliver information should question whether this choice inspires excitement about the wildlife, or distracts the audience from the objective. Anyone wanting to discuss the decline of a species can send the message more effectively by also presenting some positive conservation information, and also by leaving the audience with a touch of humor. For example, audiences may be interested in learning about the decline of desert tortoise populations. In the show, have a tortoise enter and walk at tortoise-speed across the stage straight towards a plate of salad greens. Then the segment can end by commenting on his uncanny ability to seek out his favorite food on the seemingly barren desert floor as well as on a salad-bearing show stage.
Designing the Style

Once the objective is set, the team designs the show’s style, or the way of carrying out the objective. Since there is a large array of styles in which wildlife shows can be designed, the task of deciding which direction to take appears to be daunting. Shows are often designed to parody famous television series, movies or plays. Without parodying, they sometimes use a talk show format, variety show format, fashion show format, or take on a sporting event ambience. The style choices appear to be numerous, but certain elements narrow the choices to just a few. The elements to consider are: the number and types of species that will be in the show; the types of behaviors to be demonstrated; the type of stage and set; the size of the audience and its proximity to the stage; the manner of speaking to the audience; and the abilities of the show team. Rather than being limitations, these elements help the team choose a style that suits its venue and objective. The only limitations are the energy and creativity of the team.

The size of the show, which means the number of animals, is a creative factor during the development process. If there are only a few, such as ten to twelve, then a show format that heavily relies on the speaker’s persona and story elements works well because greater emphasis is put on the details of each animal and the manner in which the information is delivered, rather than on the amount of animals. A fashion show format or a parody of a famous television show such as Survivor are two examples in which the show uses story element and the speaker projects a fictional persona.

Shows that feature roughly fifteen or more animals usually do not have the time to give as many details about each species. A variety show, talk show or sporting event format works well. An additional speaker can be added to act as the “host” while several
trainers take turns introducing animals and demonstrating one or two quick behaviors. The audience may not gain or retain as much information about the species, but they experience a larger diversity of animal behaviors. This is not to say that small shows cannot use large show formats and vice versa, but awareness of how to take advantage of the show’s size aids the development process.

Choosing the species of animals to perform in a wildlife show requires a longer detailed discussion which is outside the realm of this paper. For present purposes, a brief comment will suffice. The species are chosen based on several basic logistical factors as well as behavioral factors.

Logistical factors are as follows:

1. The species’ relevance to the theme of the show. If the show is about desert wildlife, then only animals that are found in desert ecosystems should be acquired even if it means that a good acquisition deal on Brazilian rainforest parrots must be rejected. However, species that live in both desert and other habitats can be used.

2. The availability of appropriate enclosures and husbandry facilities.

3. The skill levels of the animal trainers are important. Certain types of animals, such as primates and large carnivores, require prior handling experience and a certain level of handling competency. Trainers should understand that experience with one family of animals such as birds of prey does not necessarily give the trainer enough knowledge to work with another family such as parrots even though they are both in the avian class. Accounting for the capabilities of the training team avoids potential injuries and keeping feared animals locked away in enclosures.
Behavioral factors are as follows:

1. Whether the species’ temperament (and individual animal’s temperament) is suitable for a show environment.

2. Whether and why the species in question is commonly used or not used in shows;

3. Where an animal that does not work well in the show environment can be suitably placed, either in this zoo or in another.

Certain species of animals are commonly used in shows while many are not used due to their negative reactions to a high level of human contact. At one time, the Wildlife Wonders show featured a pair of black-backed jackals. During a show one day, the pair ran off the stage, out of the theatre and across the zoo toward the mountainous and very expansive bighorn sheep exhibit. At that point, the team retired the jackals from the show, and they now reside in a holding yard which is off exhibit. Jackals are known for being quite skittish towards people and are almost never used in show situations. Trainers need to research the behavioral limits of each species prior to acquiring it for a show.

The types of animal behaviors to be demonstrated depend not only on the species in the show, but also on the stage dimensions, the size of the audience seating and its proximity to the stage. Both large and small venues offer challenges and opportunities for wildlife shows. In large venues (over 1,000 people) there are opportunities to use bigger animals, fly birds from higher stations and over a wider range and involve more trainers and performers. However, because the audience is larger and seated farther away from the stage, the challenges lie in developing trained behaviors that are big enough to be visible, and in performing a twenty-minute monologue with enough energy to engage over 1,000 people. In a smaller venue (under 800 people), the audience sits closer to the
stage and is able to see smaller animals. The show is more intimate and the performer is able to speak on a more personal level. The main challenges lie in developing animal behaviors in the smaller space that adequately demonstrate the animals’ abilities yet pose no danger to any of the audience members, and in refraining from performing too informally. The differences between the two types of venues are comparable to watching a theatre performance in a major performing arts center versus watching a performance in a small black box theatre. The show style should coordinate with the size of the venue.

The capabilities of the show team to be considered extend beyond their animal handling experiences. Discerning the number of people to carry out all the duties required to run a show is a priority. The large venues are generally found at corporate theme parks and they employ staff to perform in the show with the animal trainers, run the music, monitor the microphones, clean the stage, and extra backstage staff to assist the trainers with releasing and catching animals. The small venues are often seen at non-profit zoos where the animal training staff assumes all the other duties. At the Living Desert Reserve, only three animal trainers are available on any given day to run the show. During a show, one is the speaker and the other two handle animals on stage, release and catch animals from behind the stage, change the music tracks in the sound system that accompany each animal on stage, adjust the microphone volume as needed, and handle situations when the animals deviate from their prescribed routines in the show. Since not all trainers are able to perform well on stage, or handle all of the animals, or multi-task behind the scenes, the style and certain show elements should be adjusted to best fit the team so that team can successfully present the show.
If the backstage trainers at the Living Desert Reserve are not capable of handling all of the duties due to short staffing or inexperience with the show, three elements are adjusted to accommodate them. First, the music can be arranged so that general background music that fits every animal plays continuously, instead of playing a specific track for each animal. The show is more entertaining when specific tracks play for each animal as the different tracks help to bring out the individual character traits of the animals. Nonetheless, it is more important to have the backstage trainers working smoothly. Secondly, the line-up of animals is adjusted according to their release and catch sites so that the trainers can more easily reach each site on time for the cues. And finally, shows with fewer backstage staff feature fewer animals. The bird show at the former SeaWorld Cleveland, Ohio was able to have ten macaws flying on stage at one time because there were enough staff to release and catch them and the stage was large enough to accommodate the space requirements for the birds. The Living Desert Reserve show has neither the space nor the amount of staffing to accommodate more than one or two birds on stage at a time. The team’s ability to multi-task is an important consideration when choosing a style.

The animal training team’s ability to train appropriate behaviors for the venue and the show’s objective plays a very important role in choosing a style format. As mentioned earlier, challenges occur with both large and small theatres. At first it may seem that a large theatre is more desirable because the larger space allows for more animal behavior options. In order to have ten macaws flying in circles above the stage and audience, or to have two hawks flying in synchronized patterns across the stage, the training team must have the training creativity and knowledge to develop those behaviors in a higher number
of animals. A large theatre requires a commitment to a large presentation which means more animals, more variety of stage action (varying flight patterns, stunts, audience interaction), and a highly projected performance from the speaker. Although there are fewer animals, a small show also requires an advanced animal training ability to train behaviors that creatively use the smaller space and demonstrate the animals’ adaptations.

There is no exact formula for developing wildlife shows, and there are exceptions to almost every rule. At times, the animal behaviors or unaccommodating stage space have little to do with the success of a show. The San Diego, California Wild Animal Park had a popular bird show in a small venue. The species in the show were commonly seen in many other wildlife shows and many of the behaviors they demonstrated were minimal (an African crowned crane walked across the stage). The behaviors as well were predictable to anyone who had visited one or two other bird shows (a parrot retrieves a dollar bill from an audience member and later returns it). Even so, the show was very successful because the speaker delivered an energetic and charismatic performance and the script was both educational and quite entertaining. The show team took advantage of the small space and developed their own style of humorous dialogue with the audience reminiscent of a late night television talk show.

Another example is the former bird show at SeaWorld San Diego. The large three-sided proscenium stage was wide and the seating was not raised high enough to see the action on opposite sides of the stage. However, audiences consistently rated the bird show as one of their favorite shows because they learned more about the animals due to an educational script and a good rapport between the speaker and the audience.  

27 Michelle Beaver, interview by author, transcript, San Diego, Ca., 13 March 2004.
from the style, the venue and the animals, a show’s ultimate success relies greatly on the script and the speaker’s performance.

**Going from Outline to Script**

The following discusses how a script is created based on the process used by the Wildlife Wonders show team. A wildlife show script is made up of segments based on the animals in the show: the porcupine segment, the eagle segment, etc. Transitions link the segments. Each scripted segment is derived from an outline of information containing facts about each animal’s natural history: geographic range; type of habitat; preferred diet; hunting/foraging techniques; escape/defense techniques; natural enemies; nocturnal/diurnal habits; wild population status; if endangered, then why; etc. (See Appendices B and C). Most of the information will not be used in the script. However, this step is important because it compels the trainers to learn about the animals with which they work. As well, the information becomes very necessary when the public asks questions after the show or during an informal presentation outside of the show. When an animal takes an unusually long time completing the show routine, the knowledge allows the speaker to comfortably improvise the additional script while everyone waits for the animal to exit the stage. An example of an outline is as follows.

**African crested porcupine:**

**Range**
- north, south and east Africa
- also in Gabon (part of west Africa)

**Habitat and Home**
- forests, mountainous regions, grasslands
- not found in rain forest or arid desert
- lives in burrows (either abandoned or dug by porc.), caves, rock crevices, not trees

**Diet and Foraging**
- herbivore, but gnaws on bones to sharpen and file teeth and obtain calcium
- travels up to nine miles in one night searching for food
- extremely good sense of smell, hearing – locates food by both
- not so good sense of sight (small eyes)
- nocturnal

Mating Preference and Lifespan
- monogamous
- lifespan in wild: 12-15 years (approximately doubled in captivity)

Natural Predators and Defense
- predators: lions, leopards, hyenas, raptors, humans
- short tail made of rattling quills used as warning device (as a rattlesnake); distinct from other porcupines
- raises quills, runs backwards into predator

Population Status in Wild
- not endangered, but extirpated from portions of range due to conflict with agriculture; killed off because they ate & damaged crops

Physical Features
- largest and heaviest rodent in Africa (average 40 lbs.)
- quills easily disengage from body and stick into offending body (do not shoot quills)
- quills are smooth, unlike new world which are barbed
- member of rodent family: teeth continuously grow
- poor eyesight, excellent sense of smell and hearing

As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, script development is the process of transforming zoological information into engaging monologue with the audience without devaluing the information. The monologue is not meant to encourage a two-way discussion with the audience; it instead implies the tone of the show. The next step is to create a shorter outline of two to four “wow” facts from the larger outline which serves as the basis of the scripted segment.28 “Wow” facts are those facts that have the highest potential to impress the audience enough to say, “wow!”

In the list of “wow” facts, superlative facts come first because they immediately distinguish an animal from other animals. If the species is the largest, smallest, fastest, slowest, tallest, strongest, or has the best ability in any respect, then that “wow” fact takes precedence. Porcupines are classified in the taxonomic order of rodents called Rodentia.

28 Leslie Storer, interview by author, transcript, Hemet, Ca., 29 March 2004.
This fact in and of itself is often interesting to people because porcupines do not look like a mouse or a rat. In order to distinguish the African crested porcupine from other rodents, the fact that it is Africa’s largest rodent weighing an average of forty pounds is mentioned first. If there is time, the performer may also mention that it is the world’s largest porcupine species. Superlative facts can also be used to remind the audience that they are having a rare opportunity to see the largest, the fastest, or the only animal that can leap a certain number feet, etc.

A “wow” fact can be a non-superlative fact that distinguishes a species from other species in the same family. For instance, the African crested porcupine is the only porcupine that rattles the quills on its tail as a warning when it is threatened. The rattling quills sound very similar to the sound of a shaking rattlesnake tail.

“Wow” facts can also be those that dispel myths about a species. Contrary to popular belief, porcupines do not shoot their quills. Instead, the quills easily disengage from the porcupine when they prick another object, such as an oncoming predator, which gives the illusion that they are being shot.

Finally, “wow” facts include information about an animal’s abilities. An owl’s enhanced sight and hearing, and the cheetah’s running speed are two examples about which the public enjoys learning. There are times when an animal’s unique abilities are less obvious. The performer’s job is to reveal these lesser known details in such a way that grabs the audience’s interest. The white-nosed coati, a relative of the raccoon, has a long nose, which means that it has a good sense of smell. Rather than simply stating that the coati has a good sense of smell, the team can investigate a little further to find out just how well the coati can smell. It turns out that the coati’s sense of smell is so good that it
can locate termites that are six inches beneath earth’s surface. Small details about an animal can be as exciting as the larger superlative aspects.

The smaller script outline serves two purposes. First, the organization of ideas is useful when writing the script because it keeps the script focused on and moving ahead with specific ideas rather than superfluous filler. Second, the stage routines for the animals may not be developed prior to writing the script. The segments are scripted according to the order of behaviors that are performed in each routine. The outline format keeps the species facts independent of one another so that they may be juggled around in order to be delivered in synchronization with the routines.

**African crested porcupine – script outline**

- Africa’s largest and heaviest rodent
- weighs an average of forty pounds
- porcupines do NOT shoot their quills/quills are modified hairs
- an impressive set of quills with several uses:
  - flare up to make it look larger (hold top ones up to demonstrate while he eats treat on stage)
  - some act as feelers/antennae for his backside
  - short tail has short, hollow quills that are rattled to warn an intruder of his presence (like a rattle snake)
  - then flares out the quills and runs backwards into the face of the intruder
  - able to seriously injure and sometimes kill a large predator like a hyena or even a 200-400 pound lion.

Based on the script outline, narration is written for each animal. The Living Desert Reserve’s scripted narration for the African crested porcupine follows:

“‘Get ready for Africa’s largest and heaviest rodent. Come on out, “Linus”, let’s show them what we’re talking about. [“Linus” enters upstage right and follows performer to downstage right tree stump on which performer places a reward]. ‘This is the African crested porcupine – getting his name from the crest of quills extending from the top of his head.’ [Performer points to or holds up the crest].’ Like I said, this is Africa’s largest rodent weighing in at forty pounds. If you’re sitting in the first few rows, you need not worry; porcupines DO NOT shoot their quills. The quills are simply hairs just like the hairs on our heads – only
modified.’ [If time allows, add the following two sentences]. ‘He cannot shoot the quills from his head any more than we can shoot the hairs off of our heads. But if you can, let me know and I’ll put you in tomorrow’s show.’ [“Linus” follows behind performer to downstage left tree stump on which performer places a reward]. ‘He has several types of quills: long, thin quills he flares up to make himself look bigger’; [Speaker, if comfortable with the animal, lifts some of the quills to indicate them specifically] ‘shorter quills that act like feelers for his backside; and on the base of his tail, there are much shorter and hollow quills that he rattles as a warning. Like a rattlesnake, the porcupine warns an on-coming intruder of his presence by rattling his tail. If the intruder persists, the porcupine flares up all of his quills and runs backwards into the intruder impaling its face. Even if you’re a 400 pound lion, you would avoid dealing with this forty pound rodent. Now that’s quite the defense!’ [After porcupine exits, performer finishes segment with joke – optional] ‘Oh, would you like to hear one more fact?’ [Encourage an excited “yes!” response from audience] ‘There was a study completed recently on porcupines. It determined that porcupines never have a bad hair day.’ [Play off of the audience’s reaction].

The segment incorporates humor with educational information. Although humor can be built into a script to make it more entertaining, it is important to note that different speakers do not deliver jokes in the same manner; the written jokes do not consistently work if there are additional speakers. Much of the humor comes directly from each speaker’s interpretation of the script, personality on stage and rapport with the audience.

On another note, humor should not devalue the information, nor should it make fun of the animal. Promoting public appreciation cannot be accomplished if the animal is the target of a joke.

**Transitions**

Once the segments are composed for each animal, transitions that shift the show from one segment to the next are written. The arrangement of the segments and the corresponding transitions frequently alters because animals are often temporarily removed from shows for various reasons (day off, health issues, or in the process of learning a new

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behavior). While the show’s introduction and conclusion remain in place, the segments and transitions are slightly rearranged within the show format to match the daily order of the animals.

The show format broadly decides the order of the animals. The format can be based on the geography of the animals’ native ranges. Desert animals from North America, then Africa, then Australia and finally a species from the zoo’s locale are presented as such in the Wildlife Wonders show. The format can be based on taxonomy. Raptors appear first, the parrots appear next, then herbivorous mammals, then carnivorous mammals, and so on. A format can even be based on the animal routines by grouping similar routines together or juxtaposing them. A parrot that sings on cue can precede the falconry demonstration during which the falcon dives after a swinging lure. Within a designated format, the segments are often rearranged. If a North American species is removed from a show, then the segments in that category are rearranged. Transitions are the key to seamlessly linking together the ever-changing order of the animals.

Besides shifting from one segment to the next, transitions fulfill two additional purposes: they allow the trainers enough time to safely transfer animals backstage; and they provide an opportunity to interact directly with the audience, building a good rapport. Also, during the transitions, the speaker can adjusts her performance according to the audience’s reactions to the interaction. If the backstage trainers need extra time to transfer animals, they discreetly communicate this to the speaker via visual or audio signals. The speaker continues with the transition and improvises when necessary.

If the speaker senses that the audience is becoming restless due to inclement weather, a longer than usual show, or for any other reason, she makes minor adjustments
in her performance that help keep the audience interested in the show. Such adjustments include changing the tempo of the show by changing the speed of her dialogue, or cutting some of the dialogue to finish more quickly, or changing the pitch of her voice slightly. She can change the rhythm by asking questions that require a response, or gearing up the audience to see a new animal, or moving across the stage to talk to other sections of the audience more directly, or making a joke. Transitions are very helpful tools that allow the team to make necessary adjustments on and behind the stage.

Multiple transitions are created for each segment and they are interchanged as the animal order changes. A transition can be a simple as, “that was “Kricket,” our American kestrel. Now here’s “Olympia,” a Golden Eagle.” Then again, this type of simplicity is neither interesting, nor informative, nor does it fulfill the necessary functions as previously described. Instead, the next example is the type of transition the team uses in the show:

“‘That was “Kricket,” our gorgeous American kestrel. Well, folks, you’ve already met two different hawks, a couple of owls and one falcon. Raptors come in all different shapes and sizes from that little American kestrel to one of the largest aerial predators in the country. Let’s meet “Olympia.”” [“Olympia,” from behind stage right, lands on a perch on top of the stage right wall. She then flies across to the downstage left T-perch]. ‘This is a golden eagle…’”30

If after the kestrel, mammals are featured, then another transition is inserted after the kestrel exits:

“‘How do you like these raptors?!’ [Audience responds with a cheer]. ‘Do you want to see some more??’ [Audience answers, “yes!”]. ‘Great! Our next animal is a mammal!’ [Pause]. ‘But, he’s not just any mammal. He’s extremely versatile. Found not only in the hot Arizona desert, but also all the way into the wet rainforests of South America.’ [trainer enters with “Monty” the coati on a leash from stage right]. ‘Say hello to “Monty,” the coati….’”31

30 Ibid., 15.
When transitions are correctly used, the audience is not aware of the animal handling happening backstage, nor does it know about the speaker’s minor adjustments to her performance. Transitions drive the show forward by shifting seamlessly to each new segment.

**Introduction and Conclusion of the Script**

The same method of outlining specific points and tasks is used to compose the show’s introduction and the conclusion. They serve a larger purpose than to simply say “hello” and “good-bye” to the audience. In the introduction, the show’s objective is presented without actually being stated and the speaker immediately begins to build a rapport with the audience. The conclusion is the time to recap the objective and provide information that the audience can use after the show. If the show focuses on endangered species, an idea regarding how the general public can help endangered species could be mentioned. A success story about an endangered species that is pertinent to the show can follow. If the show is about the diversity of wildlife, then perhaps the conclusion can discuss a similarity between all living things. Putting the objective in relation to humans through a success story, metaphor, or useful information makes the show more significant to the audience.

Many wildlife shows begin with a pre-show. A few animals enter and exit the stage before the speaker and trainers enter. Wildlife Wonders’ pre-show includes a few different birds of prey separately flying or running across the stage. They enter and exit without the presence of trainers on stage. Wild Wings bird show at the former SeaWorld Cleveland, Ohio featured ten macaws flying in circular patterns above the audience.

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31 Ibid., 15.
When trainers entered the stage, the parrots descended to specific trainers. Marine mammal shows commonly feature animals performing behaviors prior to the trainers’ entrances. A pre-show is a fun way to grab the audience’s attention and stimulate their interest in the relationship between the trainers and the animals. One of the most popular questions audience members ask after a show is, “how do you get the animals to do what you ask?” A portion of the introduction is spent introducing the animals in the pre-show.

**Introduction Outline for Preshow and Show:**
- Preshow
- Performer’s entrance
- Greet audience
- Encourage greater audience response to the greeting
- Introduce animals in the pre-show
- Introduce the theme and objective
- Introduce the first animal

Below is the introduction script from the Wildlife Wonders show. Pausing and reacting to the audience needs to be tailored to each speaker’s personality.

**Pre-show:**

“[Great-horned owl enters from behind audience seated on stage left side and flies over audience. It lands on boulder located stage right; exits upstage right. Red-tailed hawk enters by flying from back stage to a perch on the roof of the cabin located upstage left. It then flies to eight foot tall platform and then exits through an opening in stage right wall behind the boulder. From backstage, a greater roadrunner jumps up to top of stage right wall that extends along audience seated on stage right. It runs along the top of stage right wall and flies down to stage floor. It runs across stage and enters the cabin located upstage left where it exits].

“[Speaker enters upstage left immediately following roadrunner]. ‘Good morning, everyone!’ [Pause for audience response. If response is low in volume, then proceed with next line]. ‘What?!! Let’s try that one more time.’ [Speaker may choose to exit and re-enter. Fit the moment to the speaker’s personality]. ‘Good morning, everyone!’ [Pause for audience response. If response is louder, then proceed with next line]. ‘Hey, that’s more like it. Thanks! How did you like those animals?’ [Pause for audience response]. ‘Great, glad you liked them. Come back at 2:00 to see a repeat performance. Thank you for coming!’ [Performer starts to exit upstage left].

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“’You’re not buying it. Do you want to see some more animals?’ [Pause for audience response]. ‘Ok, but first, let me introduce you to the ones you just saw. Coming in from the back of the audience we had a great-horned owl. Landing on this platform was a red-tailed hawk. And who was that last little guy zooming across the stage? That’s right, a roadrunner. How fast does the roadrunner run?’ [Listen for an audience member to say “very fast,” or a variation of that]. ‘Very fast! Correct. Actually, they are known to run up to 18 mph.’

“’Welcome to the Tennity Amphitheater. Deserts are full of amazing wildlife. Right here we have some really cool animals from some of the world’s hottest places. They’ll show you a few natural behaviors that they would do in the wild. And as you can probably guess, we encourage your responses! Let’s get started with this next animal.’”

The conclusion of a show offers very little time to say anything because the audience is already gathering their belongings and thinking about how to exit. Therefore the final message must be brief, yet leave a strong impression. Thank the audience for attending, and remind them that their attendance and support of the zoo contributes to conservation of these species. In addition, an invitation to approach the stage after the show to meet an animal or talk to the trainers further engages them and makes the experience more personal. Maintaining a positive atmosphere throughout the show and avoiding the environmental doom and gloom message keeps the audience more receptive to the message and also increases the entertainment value of the show.33

**Showstoppers**

From time to time animals deviate from their prescribed show behaviors. Numerous reasons cause animals to deviate. Distractions from the audience, from aircraft flying over the area, or other wildlife are only a few reasons. Mammals, at times, smell new scents on stage and stop to investigate them resulting in long pauses in their routines. Generally, the animal recovers and finishes the routine. There are occasions when they

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32 Ibid., 15.

33 O’Connor, interview.
end up either lying down on stage or wandering away from the trainer and even off the stage if they are not on a leash. Birds commonly deviate from their predetermined flight patterns. Instead of landing on designated perches, they frequently land on a nearby tree or fly to a random place outside the theatre where none of the trainers can see them. These examples represent a portion of the unpredictable animal-related events that can occur during a show.

The person who is speaking to the audience follows prescribed responses depending on how obvious the mistake is to the audience. They are prescribed in that they designate an order of objectives rather than scripted responses to mistakes. They require a swift ability to improvise because the script does not account for mistakes. The immediate response is to mask the fact that a mistake is occurring. If the deviation is minor and the behavior can be easily recovered, then the speaker continues talking as if there is no mistake at all. She adjusts the script by adding or rearranging a few lines in order to adjust the timing of the animal’s routine with her dialogue. There is a window of time before the audience can sense that a mistake is occurring. Many times, the audience never even notices if the speaker covers it well.

Once that window of time has passed and the show behavior has not been recovered, the mistake becomes noticeable. The speaker then looks for opportunities to make the mistake work for the show. Although it is not on cue, the animal is usually demonstrating other natural behaviors, such as stalking a small rodent or lizard in the bushes, and then the speaker can take the opportunity to talk about it. If the trainer has been waiting for a for the animal to resume, then the performer can talk about animal training and perhaps
joke about who is training who. This is also a good time to take questions from the audience about the animals, training, the zoo, and so forth.

Finally, when it is clear that the animal is not going to recover the routine, the speaker then chooses between two options: to immediately rearrange the animal order and continue the show with other animals; or to end the show. At this point, the goal is to continue the show in the safest manner possible. When a bird flies out of the theatre and there are enough trainers to retrieve it and still continue the show, then other animals that neither threaten nor can be threatened by the missing bird are used to continue the show.

On the other hand, when a bird comparable to a golden eagle flies away, then the show is usually canceled because additional trainers are required to retrieve it, and all of the other animals would be quite stressed if she returned to the stage while they were on it. The speaker should know enough about the tendencies of the individual animals to judge whether a show should continue or be canceled.

There are times when the speaker handles an animal and must deal with a show-stopping behavior while adjusting and improvising the script according to the above described responses. The situation can be as simple as giving the cue to the animal to repeat a behavior to as extreme as climbing a tree to retrieve a wandering free-flying parrot. It is impossible to script every possible response, so the speaker must improvise and consider how to move the show forward safely.

**Impromptu Adjustments to the Script**

Audience demographics vary on a daily basis so, too, the script should be open for adjustment to better suit certain types of people. Some audiences include many groups of school children or families with children on spring break from school. These audiences
are eager to play along and respond as encouraged. Other audiences consist mostly older adults in small groups of twos, threes and fours. While these audiences are often more attentive, they are normally less interested in vocally responding when requested. Upon her stage entrance, the speaker quickly evaluates the audience and makes immediate adjustments to the script to accommodate the type of audience.

These adjustments do not necessarily include the elimination of humor and all audience participation. Specific jokes, word choices, and length of time spent encouraging reactions from the audience are examples of areas that are altered for various audiences. The speaker might use a dry sense of humor with an older audience and a more obvious or exaggerated type of humor with groups of school children.

The amount of natural history information is altered too. For primarily young audiences, a few facts throughout the show are deleted and replaced with comments and reactions to what the animals are doing on stage. Since people, especially children, tend to remember more of what they see, the speaker has more success by keeping their attention on the action.\textsuperscript{34} Moreover, the speaker avoids competing for attention when many children are vocalizing their excitement about an animal. The speaker always looks for the right moment to deliver certain “wow” facts for the animals.

**Music**

SeaWorld San Diego animal trainer, Michelle Beaver, claims that in her experience, “music is the most important factor in setting the mood as well as timing.”\textsuperscript{35} Music works like a metronome maintaining a steady pace for the show. Music is also a

\textsuperscript{34} O’Connor, interview.

\textsuperscript{35} Beaver, interview.
powerful element that affects the audience’s emotions. As the script and speaker’s performance have limited abilities to inspire and grab the audience’s attention, music can be a subtle yet “powerful tool to provoke [the audience’s] emotions.”

Some shows play continuous background music which can accompany all of the animals. While this general background music is better than no music and can enhance the show’s mood and tempo, its effects are not as far reaching as music tracks that are specifically chosen for each animal. Through distinctive tunes, tempos, and rhythms, specific songs punctuate the specific personae that the animals express, which makes the show more entertaining.

To illustrate the difference, the Wildlife Wonders team presents the show using indistinct and distinct musical formats. Although the script and speaker are the same, the show with indistinct music evokes quieter and slightly delayed responses. However, the version with distinct music experiences louder and immediate reactions. During the pre-show, a moment before the roadrunner appears on the stage right wall, the theme song from the television series, Bonanza, begins. The roadrunner then flies down to the stage, runs across, and exits as the song and pre-show continue. The audience reacts with a loud laugh. They are not laughing at the bird, but at the association of two western American icons: the roadrunner and the famous western television show. When the same moment happens with general background music, the audience’s reaction is far less animated.

Summary

A wildlife show script begins with an objective. The show team researches information about the animals and develops an outline for each animal segment. Scripted

36 Ibid.
segments are composed based on certain “wow” facts. The segments are arranged according to a chosen show format and transitions link the segments together. Next, the introduction and conclusion are written to express the objective and to leave the audience knowing that they can make a positive impact on wildlife. Music is used to involve the audience emotionally as well as enrich the show’s timing. Always, all the elements reflect the objective of the show, which is to excite the public and inspire a greater appreciation for wildlife.

The most important element in every factor of the show is enthusiasm. For most people in the audience, a day at the zoo and twenty minutes watching the show comprise most of their annual time spent learning about wildlife. They tend to leave the show not knowing all the species names, much less remembering where the animals are found in the wild. Thus, twenty minutes is not enough time to lecture on environmental crises, and the ways that humans can correct problems. Instead, mention an issue with a solution that the audience can easily implement. The show’s success is measured by how much broader the audience’s perspective about wildlife is, and by how much more enthusiastic they are. If the show inspires individuals to do become more environmentally active, then it is 100% successful. “[People] are naturally drawn to learning if [the show] can keep the spirit of the occasion happy and enthusiastic.”

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CHAPTER III
THE PERFORMER’S PROCESS

Defining the Performer

The human performers in live wildlife shows are generally animal trainers by trade who interpret wildlife zoology and natural history to the general public. Most often one of the trainers speaks directly to the audience while other trainers handle animals on and off stage, and release and catch animals from backstage. “Performer” here refers to the trainer who speaks to the audience (also known as the “speaker”). “Animal handler” and “trainer” refer to the others who handle the animals on and off stage.

One’s performance technique is the culmination of tools that can be divided into two groups: physical tools and intuitive tools. After considering the many performance aspects at work during a wildlife show, and after observing other animal trainers who either have or do not have stage training, it is apparent that some tools are learned through practice, while others come to the performer more naturally or intuitively. This is not to say that intuitive tools cannot be acquired through observation and practice, or that technical tools cannot occur naturally for individuals.

As animal trainers rarely have stage training, they cultivate the greater part of their performance technique on the job. Stage training is not required or completely necessary to perform a wildlife show successfully. However, it can help the performer master
certain tools of her technique so she can focus on the show, the animals, and the audience instead of on herself during a performance.

In the wildlife show arena, there are usually no theatre directors or acting instructors to guide the animal trainers through their rehearsals and performances. At some animal parks, show producers are responsible for creating the show by bringing together such main players as the script writer, the animal training team, the stage designer and building crew, sound operators, stage crew, music coordinator, etc. The producer is generally not responsible for directing the performances of the trainers. Thus, the trainers are responsible for directing their own performances. Limited guidance may come from one another, but this mostly relates to blocking and animal handling on the stage. The following discussion is guided by the author’s experiences and as a wildlife show performer and animal trainer for the Living Desert Reserve and SeaWorld Adventure Parks. The discussion is aimed at performers who are interested in pursuing a career in wildlife theatre and animal trainers who do not have stage performance training.

**Physical Tools of Performance**

Physical tools are the performer’s physical instruments consisting of the voice, body, eye contact, and manner of handling animals and props. Technical show elements include lines, tasks, and blocking, or prescribed movement on the stage. Even though the technical show elements are the same for all who perform in the same wildlife show, no two performers utilize their physical tools in the same way.

One’s total performance technique “serves only one purpose and that purpose is for the [performer] to arrive at…the ruling idea” which is the show’s main objective.38 A

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The major difference between a play and a live wildlife show is that in the wildlife show, the performer directly addresses the audience and must find a way of appealing to them using only herself because there is neither a developed character for the performer to inhabit, nor a set of dramatic circumstances on which to build a performance. Even though the wildlife show centers around the live animals on stage, the performer remains as the most important element in the show because she connects the audience to the action on stage. Since she interprets the action, her job is to achieve the show’s objective. The audience comes to the show to see the animals, but whether or not they enjoy the production largely depends on the performer’s ability to build a good rapport and make the experience fun.

A performer who succeeds in achieving the objective is one who uses all of her tools to their fullest potential. The lack of a character does not imply that the performer need to be satisfied with only using her daily life voice and body in the show. Instead, she could use a variety of vocal pitches and inflections. She could make an effort to communicate to all sections of the audience with her eyes, posture, and movement. She could use her facial expressions to build on an emotion expressed by the audience. These are only a few ideas. When the performer explores the ranges of her physical tools, she discovers numerous performance choices.

Voice

People tend to remember more of what they see than of what they hear. So, the voice becomes the most important element in overcoming this challenge by encouraging audiences to actively listen to what is being said. The performer may be highly attractive or charismatic, but if her speech is incoherent, inarticulate or monotonous, the audience
quickly loses interest. On the other hand, if her voice is charismatic and appealing, she can encourage the audience to listen and react to what she says, and to retain a higher portion of the information. A great part of developing a charismatic voice lies in taking an honest interest in what one is saying and exploring various ways of communicating it.

Audience demographics should affect the performer’s vocal demeanor. If the audience consists of elementary school children, the performer might take on the role of a teacher and speak as an instructor. If a group of biologists is in the audience, then she might behave like a field guide. If the audience is a mixture of vacationing adults and families, the performer might be more of an entertainer. The performer should note the differences between the vocal patterns of various public speakers such as teachers, colleagues, and entertainers, and observe how she tends to address audiences. Physically mimicking these different styles of public speaking is a good exercise that aids the performer’s process of creating her own vocal style for addressing different audiences.

Another exercise is to practice qualities of speech. The performer can use the show script to experiment with different vocal pitches, volumes, and speeds in order to find a combination that effectively communicates the show’s objective.

A third vocal exercise is to build a personal repertoire of vocal actions. Acting instructor, Stella Adler, claimed that the “range of actions [an actor] should have at his command must be very wide. An actor must … acquire a vocabulary of actions.” To build her vocabulary of actions for a wildlife show, the performer uses the script to practice various vocal actions such as: “to talk,” “to chat,” “to converse,” “to explain,”

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39 Ibid.
“to teach,” “to reveal,” and “to advise.”

Other appropriate actions include: to exclaim, to point out, to demonstrate, and to joke. These actions require a wide range of vocal tones, physical demeanors, and facial expressions to communicate ideas to the audience.

In one instance, the performer may choose “to explain” the purposes of the different types of quills on the porcupine’s back. Next, she “demonstrates” how the porcupine uses its quills as a defense mechanism. Finally, she “advises” “that even a 400 pound lion” would avoid a confrontation with a “40 pound porcupine.”

Adler’s vocabulary of action expands the performer’s range of speech qualities and vocal characteristics.

Each animal expresses a unique persona on stage, and evokes a different emotional response from the audience. In the Wildlife Wonders show, for example, the African crested porcupine often provokes surprise and laughter from the audience when he enters the stage. The performer does well to go along with the audience's reaction and allow the moment of amusement so long as it does not disrespect the animal. The performer can then juxtaposes the porcupine comedic persona with the serious danger of being stabbed by his sharp quills.

In contrast, the golden eagle’s entrance always receives a loud gasp followed by a silence from the audience. The performer allows the moment to remain silent while the eagle flies across the stage. Once she lands on the perch, the performer continues with a few “wow” facts about eagles. The intensity in her tone of voice gradually builds with each sentence until she reaches the final fact that eagles can dive at speeds up to 150 miles per hour. Through her vocal tone and timing, she tells the audience that it is indeed

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40 Ibid.


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correct to hold the eagle in such high regard. Instead of delivering the lines in the same manner for each animal, the performer’s vocal repertoire can accentuate the specific qualities of each animal.

Eye Contact

The key to effective eye contact lies in speaking to an audience instead of speaking at an audience. Speaking to an audience subconsciously tells them that their presence is important and welcome. It creates a personal relationship between the performer and the audience. Speaking at an audience implies that what the performer is saying is more important than the audience’s experience.

The way in which the performer looks at an audience defines how the two perspectives are applied. Some performers choose to look at the highest row, or beyond the audience, because they believe it helps them project their voices. In a wildlife show, where the performer directly addresses the audience, this technique usually gives the impression that she is speaking at the audience. The way to speak to an audience is to look at the members of the audience. Though the performer cannot realistically look at several hundred pairs of eyes, she can divide the audience into sections and look specifically at each section. This gives the same effect as looking at every person.

Speaking to an audience improves other facets of the performance. Vocal projection is improved since the voice is naturally directed to each section. Also, the performer directly receives the audience’s reactions and can tailor the script and her performance moment by moment. Lastly, the performer’s “enthusiasm is [more] contagious,”42 when she passes it on through direct eye contact.

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Body

Principles described in the above section apply to the body as well. The body also has a vocabulary of action that works in coordination with the voice. Instead of standing on stage in an unanimated body, the performer has a physical intention with every scripted point she makes. Whether she’s explaining, joking, or simply moving out of the way of an animal, her body reflects her intent, and helps to make the information more clear and the show more interesting.

Physical objectives and actions prevent the performer from making random choices such as gesturing and moving around on stage with no purpose. The performer’s duty is to guide the audience’s attention. When there is an animal on stage, the animal is the visual focus and the performer is the audio focus. If the performer randomly walks around the stage, then the audience becomes distracted and does not know whether to look at the animal or the performer, lessening the audience’s ability to listen. Instead, some movements are blocked in relation to the animals’ actions and necessary spatial requirements. Other impromptu movements are made in relation to the audience when the performer addresses different sections. The audience absorbs more visual and audio information if the performer purposefully guides its attention.

Another rule that performers follow is to never turn their backs toward an audience. There are exceptions. If the performer needs to ascend or descend stairs, or, to step over a barrier, then she can turn her back quickly to get where she needs to go. The most ideal solution is to direct the audience to watch the action occurring elsewhere while she turns her back. The audience becomes quickly accustomed to watching her and taking in the information through her voice, facial expressions, and body language. Thus, on a
subliminal level, turning the back toward the audience is highly distracting. Furthermore, it serves no purpose and fulfills no objective.

**Intuitive Tools**

The intuitive performing tools are for the most part acquired instinctively. Although a performer is capable of discovering how to use her intuitive tools with practice, truthful and effective performing comes more effortlessly if the performer already understands how to use her intuitive tools. They give substance to the physical tools. Without the intuitive elements such as a sense of timing, honesty, and knowing how to employ one’s personal sense of style, the performer would appear robotic.

**Timing**

Timing is the core element of a wildlife show. It is the one element that determines how smoothly or unsmoothly the show runs. Each team member’s set of tasks depends on the accomplishment of another’s tasks. Music cues are timed according to stage entrances and exits. However, the entrances are timed according to completed exits and whether the exiting animal is safely secured. All of them depend on the performer’s timing. Yet, the performer times her lines according to the animals actions on stage and the needs of the trainers backstage who are shifting animals and changing music cues. Bird trainer, Rebecca O’Connor claims that her “shows became good when [she] learned timing” and it became part of her “muscle memory.”[^43] She could accomplish several tasks at the same time without delay because her muscles became attuned to the necessary coordination and the pace of the show.

[^43]: Rebecca O’Connor, interview by author, transcript, Palm Desert, CA, 31 March 2004.
Lines are spoken at the moments when they best support the action on stage. A common mistake performers make when they have a microphone is to quickly rattle off a lot of information or cleverly worded sentences believing that an audience wants to listen because they are on stage with a microphone. It is more important to support the action on stage by speaking in reference to animals.

When “Persia,” the caracal, enters and sits on her first platform, the fact that the caracal species is the strongest and fastest of all small cat species is an important “wow” fact that introduces the cat and sets the tone for the upcoming action. Secondly, her ability to jump and touch a pole held six feet above the ground is a visual display of the performer’s depiction of the caracal as an athletic bird hunter. Next, “Persia” leaps from a four foot high platform to an eight foot high platform located six feet away from the four foot high platform. The performer follows the action with the fact that caracals can also take antelope nearly twice their size. The descriptive lines can either precede or succeed the actions as long as they do not overlap the actions and distract the audience from watching the animal.

Animal training also requires precise timing, especially during a show. When an animal does a behavior as desired, the signal that it will receive a reward must be given in the next instant. The trainers and the performer observe each animal to gauge whether it is going to do all of the behaviors, deviate from the show behaviors, or if it is going to tolerate being asked to re-do the behavior if it does not correctly perform the behavior after the first cue. Observations and decisions are made in a matter of seconds so as to preserve the show’s momentum. Making training decisions while speaking to the audience requires an automatic sense of smooth timing.
Timing also affects humor. There is a certain speed at which jokes need to be delivered in order to provoke the greatest response. When a joke is directed at something that occurs on stage, the punch line must come after the audience has had a moment to see and mentally register the occurrence, yet before the joke sounds like a forgotten line that the performer suddenly remembered to say. Some jokes are scripted into shows rather than based on spontaneous occurrences. These can pose the greatest threats because different performers may not share the same sense of timing those jokes require. For example, after the porcupine exits the stage, there is a joke about how porcupines never have a bad hair day.

Honesty

Just as an actor who does not perform her role honestly and truthfully is easily detected as a fraud by the audience, so is a dishonest wildlife show performer easily detected by the audience. Because the audience’s positive reactions depend greatly on its good rapport with the performer, a fine line exists between the performer’s role as the presenter and the animals’ roles as the main focus of the show. If she is not careful, the performer can become more interested in placing herself at the center of the focus, which displaces the show’s mission. The performer who holds the mission of the show as the most important message and bases her performance on it understands how to build a positive rapport with the audience without compromising the attention deserved by the animals and other trainers. Whether this ability requires some degree of humility, basic excitement about the mission of the wildlife show, or a combination of both, each performer must gauge for herself.
Personal Style

“Every performer is unique: each possesses a personal style, charisma, or élan…. Spectators are charmed, entertained, engaged, or put off by a performer’s personal style, regardless of what role [she] is playing or what the production is.”

A performer can exercise her vocal instrument, make eye contact with every member of the audience, move like a ballerina, and possess a perfect sense of timing, but, if the audience is not attracted to her personal style, then it is not very attracted to the show. As stated previously, although the performer is not the central focus of the show, she is the main communicator, and therefore, the audience's main connection to the stage action. Hence, “the audience experiences…[her] personal style and charisma as part of the performance experience.”

A Method of Rehearsal

Rehearsal is as important to wildlife shows as it is to traditional theatre. As in traditional theatre, the performer exercises her performance tools during her private rehearsal time and uses the team’s rehearsal time to coordinate her performance with the other technical elements of the show. The following describes the rehearsal process that the author has used with wildlife shows.

Rehearsal occurs in four separate phases that are combined at a later point. In the first phase, the performer memorizes the script and becomes capable of altering the order of the segments and transitions without difficulty. As well, she works on developing her

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45 Ibid.
various performance tools. The first phase takes place during private rehearsal time at home and on the stage space.

During the second phase of rehearsal, the performer learns the blocking and the tasks for each segment and transition. Only those movements and actions that directly relate to, or interact with, the animals’ behaviors are rigidly blocked to maintain a level of consistency among the various performers. Consistency in animal handling and training is very important. When trainers’ signals differ from one trainer to another, the animals have difficulty understanding what is being asked of them, which can stress the animals as well as cause their behaviors to degrade.46 Other action is dictated by the performer and does not need to follow a blocked pattern. Actions other than speaking to the audience may be defined as tasks. These include: placing food rewards at appropriate places and times; handling props; cueing animals; cueing trainers; assisting with animals that deviate from their stage behaviors; or, improvising the script when an animal deviates. More advanced tasks that are learned during the third phase of rehearsal include handling an animal and making training decisions while speaking to the audience. In a given show, blocking and tasks are the same for all performers.

The performer coordinates the blocking and actions for each segment and transition with the lines and the animals’ actions. During the segment with the African serval named “Ruka,” the twenty-pound spotted cat reaches down into a clear acrylic tube with a foreleg to grab a piece of meat, which simulates how a serval in the wild uses its long slender forelegs to catch small prey animals from their ground burrows. To prepare for this behavior, the performer puts the meat in the tube and hangs it on the front side of a

four foot high platform. She says, “…and when ‘Ruka’ is ready…” to indicate to the trainer that the tube is ready and “Ruka” can now jump on the platform and reach inside of it for the meat. If the performer hangs the tube too early in the segment, the serval would be distracted by the tube because she knows it contains meat. If the tube is hung too late, the performer is stuck finding a way to hang it while “Ruka” attempts to grab the tube from her. The performer adjusts the timing of her lines and actions according to how quickly or slowly “Ruka” performs behaviors leading up to this point. Rehearsals without the animals present are necessary for the performer to be comfortable enough with the props, lines, and timing to be able to adjust them as needed.

Phase three of rehearsal involves learning how to handle and train the specific animals in the show. Much time is spent working with the animals outside of the show. Working with the animals consists of the following activities: spending time with animals; taking animals out of their enclosures for walks or flights around the zoo grounds; observing them interact with enrichment toys and treats; training behaviors; and doing daily husbandry duties such as weighing them on a scale, cleaning enclosures, preparing diets and feeding. These activities allow the animals to become more comfortable with the trainers and vice versa.

A trainer who is new to the team does not learn to handle all of the animals at once. She begins by handling the more mildly tempered individuals such as “Kricket,” the American kestrel, a small falcon weighing 100 grams. “Kricket” is quite comfortable with human contact and provides new trainers the opportunity to learn how to manage special equipment used in handling raptors. Gradually the new trainer moves on to handle more unpredictable and temperamental animals. Depending on the new trainer’s
proficiency, she moves on to handle other larger raptors such as the Harris’s hawks, barn owls, great horned owl, red-tailed hawk, the extremely skittish lanner falcon, and finally the golden eagle.

The golden eagle is not only the heaviest bird to hold on one’s arm, but it is also one of the least predictable animals. While she is not aggressive toward trainers, she is skittish and makes sudden attempts to bait, or fly off of the trainer’s arm. Since the trainer has a hold of the raptor’s jesses, which are thin straps of leather or cord that are attached to leather anklets on the bird’s ankles, the bird cannot fly away from the trainer. However, when the eight pound eagle baits with her five foot wing span, the trainer must be mentally and physically able to handle the bird and help her recover her perching position on the arm.

The same graduated process is used when learning how to handle the mammals, reptiles, and parrots. Largeness of size does not always equate to the highest level of difficulty. Two of the smaller Wildlife Wonders mammals (seven-pound coati and twenty-pound caracal) require more training experience and confidence because they move very quickly, have frequent mood changes, and become easily annoyed with trainers’ handling mistakes. In fact, new trainers often learn to handle the cheetah, “Sabi,” prior to the coati and the caracal because she has a milder temperament. Chapter IV discusses more specifically how to handle and train the animals on stage.

Finally, phase four of rehearsal is when the team combines all of the show’s elements together: the animals, actions, lines, props, and music. The performer and trainers make adjustments to one another based on the animals’ tempos on and off stage.
The performer implements her style of humor into the show. Any necessary changes to
the trained behaviors are determined and re-worked.

Ongoing changes throughout the life of the show are necessary to accommodate the
audience and to maintain a level of freshness. Audiences can bring about such alterations
as adding lines that ask them to stay seated and to refrain from touching an animal. Jokes
are altered or removed if they no longer receive desired responses. If an animal
repeatedly frightens people because it comes too close to the audience, then the behavior
is altered. From time to time, animals are added to the show to replace others that need to
retire. Plus, music is another element that should be regularly updated.

When rehearsal time is properly used to practice and refine the technical work, a
performer becomes freer to allow her intuitive dynamics to guide her performance. She is
less concerned about the lines and the props and more focused on the show’s immediate
needs such as how the animals are behaving and how the audience is receiving the show.
She can immediately and more effectively adjust to diverse audiences and deal with
challenging animal situations.

The very important characteristic of spontaneity can then become a regular dynamic
in her performance. While it is often overlooked, spontaneity is exactly the effect wildlife
shows strive to produce. Ideally each performance should evoke that “once in a lifetime
feeling” which excites the audience more than any other element of the show. Every
rehearsal and refinement leads to a performance that more readily adjusts to each
audience’s needs and makes each audience feel uniquely involved in the show. This
inspires greater public interest and excitement about wildlife.
CHAPTER IV
WORKING WITH THE ANIMALS

The job of training and handling show animals is as important to the whole production as the performer’s job is of communicating to the audience. Since the show is about wildlife, it stands to reason that the production depends on the species that are in the show, the behaviors they are trained to perform, and the ability of the trainers to safely handle the animals. This chapter discusses the craft of training captive animals based on the operant conditioning methodology, also known as positive reinforcement. First it looks at why training is at times necessary. Then operant conditioning is defined followed by an explanation of how a behavior is trained. Next, regarding the production, the chapter looks at how trainers decide what behaviors to train. Finally, the chapter talks about the art of working with an animal in front of an audience and handling unintended behavior problems on stage.

Is Training Necessary?

Several reasons exist for training animals in captivity. In captivity, animals do not need to search or hunt for food, find a mate, or migrate. Their movement and mental stimulation are greatly reduced, while the predictability of their daily lives is increased. Captive animals make fewer choices and have less control over their activities than their counterparts in the wild. To combat these limitations, training is employed to encourage
physical exercise and mental stimulation. In many cases, animals are trained to walk, jump, and fly on cue which guarantees a certain amount of movement. Training teaches animals to make choices and learn that that their are consequences for their choices. The ability to make choices increases their control over their activities. Michael Gormaley, the Assistant Mammal Supervisor at the Bronx Zoo, says that his animal keeping staff use training “to enhance the lives of [their] animals by giving them more control and choices, and to improve [the staff’s] ability to handle and care for [their] charges.”

A second reason to train captive animals is to de-sensitize them to close human contact. When the trainers and veterinary staff need to examine the animals or perform other husbandry duties such as cleaning their enclosures, shifting the animals to other enclosures, and administering medication, the animals’ levels of stress are greatly reduced if they have been trained to accept the close contact.

The third reason to train captive animals is for public entertainment and education. Shows serve a valuable purpose in that they can display wild animals in a way that zoo exhibits cannot by presenting active animals interacting with trainers. Presenting live animals in action is a way to inspire greater public appreciation for wildlife.

Should an animal be trained because it is in captivity? No. Not every animal makes a good candidate for training. There are a wide range of temperaments and modes of thinking in the animal world. Just as humans react individually to traditional classroom teaching, animals also have individual reactions to training. These reactions are based on both species and individual behavioral tendencies, which develop from millions of years

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of natural evolution as well as the individual’s current living situation. Some animals are good candidates for basic husbandry training.

At the Living Desert Reserve, keepers have successfully trained a stallion Grevy’s zebra to accept immunization injections. Keepers at the San Diego Zoo are teaching a pigmy hippopotamus to hold her mouth open and allow keepers to file down its tusks. While these particular animals are desensitized to human contact, they might not adjust to a show performance atmosphere. Show training requires that animals be safe to handle without a barrier, and that it be desensitized to large groups of people, music, and close proximity to other incompatible species. The Grevy’s stallion is an imprinted individual, or one that associates itself with humans. If there was no barrier, He would treat people as he treats other zebras which includes biting, kicking, herding, in addition to nuzzling, and playing. The pygmy hippo is shy and territorial which translates into defensive behaviors such as biting and charging.

Some animals do not adjust well to any type of training. "Ahmad," is a male Arabian oryx at the Living Desert Reserve. An Arabian oryx is a species of Saharan antelope armed with a belligerent attitude and two long, pointed horns that are used to skewer threatening predators and other territorial challengers. Of the herd at the zoo, "Ahmad" is the one that consistently threatens the keepers with aggressive displays such as charging and stabbing his long, pointed horns through the fence at the keepers. The keeping staff wondered whether he would respond well to training since he appears to have almost no fear of humans. When the keepers attempted to train him to "target," they encountered difficulty with rewarding him. In general, Arabian oryx in captivity do not choose to eat any food or treats other than their daily ration of grain, hay, and leafy browse. Hence,
finding a treat that was rewarding enough to him became a detriment to the training.

When the keepers tried to use his a portion of his daily grain ration as a reward, they were stumped by their inability to give him the reward safely and effectively. Either they had to approach him too closely from the other side of the fence barrier, or “Ahmad” did not take the reward in a timely manner from a bowl passed under the fence, and it did not serve the purpose of a behavior reward. The staff ceased the training sessions for the time being.

Apart from training, another way to provide mental stimulation and physical exercise for captive animals is to provide variety in the arrangement of its enclosure, or living space. The trainer can exchange the furniture, perching and toys for unfamiliar ones, or rearrange their configuration within the enclosure. Providing toys and hiding the food are other methods that help to keep the animal active and engaged with its surroundings, thus contributing to its well being.

**Operant Conditioning Training Method**

Simply stated, operant conditioning is a training method that “rewards desired actions and ignores unwanted ones.”48 The animal, or operant, is being conditioned to make choices that result in rewards. Thus, the training experience is always a rewarding and positive experience.

Operant conditioning became popular as recently as the 1960s. The theory that animals perform better if the experience is positive led animal trainers to experiment with the rewards they were giving to the animals. They figured that if a desired behavior is positively reinforced on a consistent basis, then the animal is more likely to perform the

48 Ibid.
behavior more consistently. Their hypothesis proved to be true, and the method is widely used today.

They also realized that withholding food as a punishment for doing unwanted behaviors only starves the animal and creates aggression problems. At first the animal may mask, or hide, the aggression in order to receive the food. At an undetermined point, the masking breaks down and the animal acts out aggressively toward the trainer. Instead of withholding food when the animal does not perform a behavior asked by the trainer, the trainer ignores the behavior for several seconds and then again asks. If the animal continues to not perform the desired behavior, the training session is ended and the animal is fed its daily diet at a later time unassociated with the training session.

Happy animals lead to a successful show. "Happy" is an anthropomorphic term the author uses to describe an animal’s physical and psychological signs of comfort. Once during a Barnum and Bailey Circus show, a trainer entered with a hippopotamus that did not appear to be happy. The hippo in the circus show displayed several signs of discomfort. She had drool coming out of her mouth, and there was mucous all over her muzzle. The trainer had to give the cues for the behaviors several times before the hippo performed them. The trainer appeared to be forcing the hippo to complete the behaviors and not rewarding her after they were completed. The scene in that ring was very distracting and disturbing, and it imparted a poor impression of the circus on the audience. Upon inquiry, it was learned that the trainer was being investigated by the circus for mistreating his animals. It was rather unprofessional of Barnum and Bailey to have tolerated that trainer because, at the very least, he degraded the quality of the show. More importantly, he degraded the quality of the animal’s life.
If captive animals are treated well, they perform well. Regardless of how unknowledgeable about animals an audience appears to be, they can often gauge whether the animals are treated well and will respond to their assessments. Treating performing animals “well” is a broad term that includes several aspects such as not forcing animals to perform behaviors, not forcing them to work with a trainer they do not like, not allowing them to perform if they are unhealthy or in unsafe conditions, and not withholding food if they fail to perform behaviors. In essence, they perform consistently only if the experience is going to be positive for them. The methodology fosters a positive relationship between the animal and the trainer. The animal is choosing to participate because it trusts that it will be rewarded for performing behaviors that are asked. The trainer trusts that the animal will give a consistent performance when it is rewarded consistently.

Positive reinforcement training methods changed the entertainment world’s perspective on animals. Building positive relationships between trainers and animals led to the mindset that the process was a collaboration effort rather than a human control effort. Instead of forcing animals to do behaviors, trainers now “love them, respect them, and, above all, try to understand them.”

Training and Maintaining a Behavior

At the Living Desert Reserve and SeaWorld, animal trainers train animals by either capturing a behavior, using successive approximations, using the target command, or using various combinations of these processes. The subsequent paragraphs describe these

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processes and how the reward, or positive reinforcement, is applied. Additionally, a
description of the importance of maintaining trained behaviors finishes the section.

When a trainer wants to reinforce an action, she uses a bridge. A “bridge” is a
signal, usually audio, that immediately tells the animal that what it just did is correct and
a reward will follow. Of course, prior to training other behaviors, the animal must be
taught to associate the sound of the signal with the reward. The bridge is a very important
tool because it can immediately reinforce the animal’s action, whereas there is a delay
between the moment the animal performs the behavior correctly and the moment it
receives the reward. If the desired behavior is not immediately reinforced, then the
training is less effective.

The reward is usually the animal’s favorite food such as a small piece of fruit, a
sunflower seed, or a piece of meat depending on the animal. Using small amounts is
preferable, otherwise the animal could quickly become full. The reward can be something
other than food. A favorite toy, ice cubes (for some marine mammals), and attention from
the trainer in the form of verbal responses, petting, or scratching the animal can easily
reinforce a behavior. The animal must be first taught what the signal means by
associating it with a reward.

When an animal is asked to do a behavior, ideally, it should not be shown the reward
prior to doing to the behavior. Showing the reward in order to get an animal to do a
behavior is called baiting an animal. Baiting reduces the element of making choices
because the animal thinks less if it sees the reward and follows it. In addition, animals are
known to reject the reward and refuse to do the behavior.
However, there are moments when an animal needs to be baited. When a trainer is teaching a behavior for the first time, the animal may need to see the reward before it is asked to do something. Shortly thereafter, when the animal understands the process, the reward should be concealed until the animal earns it. Also, if an animal is in position to injure someone, food can provide a distraction and lure it into a crate or away from the situation. Baiting should occur very rarely, or else the animal can become too accustomed to food offerings and often choose to ignore them.

“Capturing a behavior” is the simplest method of training an animal to do it on cue. A trainer captures a behavior by bridging and rewarding the animal immediately when she observes it doing the specific behavior. The author trained a sulfur-crested cockatoo to bob his head side to side because she observed him bob him head once while she was weighing him on a scale. Upon her fortunate observation, she immediately bridged, or reinforced, the bird’s head bob and rewarded him with several sunflower seeds. To encourage the cockatoo to do it again, the author bobbed her head side to side. When the bird mimicked her action, she bridged and rewarded the bird with more seeds. When the bird clearly understood that the action of bobbing his head was being rewarded, the author shaped the behavior by presenting a hand signal at the same time she bobbed her head. Gradually, she stopped bobbing her head and only presented the hand signal when she wanted the bird to bob his head. The final outcome was that bird learned to perform the behavior on the hand cue. This involved a series of successive approximations.

“Successive approximation” is a process used to train a behavior in which small progressive steps the animal makes toward performing the desired behavior are reinforced. The process is used when a bird is trained to fly from point A to point B. The
distance between the points is at first very short, perhaps one foot. The bird is rewarded for traveling the short distance. When the bird successfully accomplishes the behavior of traveling from perch A to perch B, the perches are moved a little farther apart. Gradually, the perches are moved further apart a little bit at a time until they are as far apart as necessary to complete the behavior. The desired behavior is learned by reinforcing successively approximated steps toward the final goal.

The third animal training process is the “target” command. “Targeting” is used to teach an animal to move itself from one place to another. Targeting serves to avoid having to force an animal to move from one place to another. It also forms a basis upon which to train other behaviors.

To “target” means that the animal touches a specific object with its nose or head when the object is presented by a trainer and verbal command, “target” is given. “By simply touching a buoy, or any object, to the animal’s head or rostrum, then bridging and reinforcing, the animal will quickly be conditioned to initiate the touching (targeting) on its own.”50 When the animal understands that it must touch the target, or object, for a reward, the command can be used to teach other behaviors such as entering a transfer crate, shifting to an adjacent enclosure, as well as sitting, lying down, and jumping.

By presenting the target over the animal’s head, it reaches upwards to touch it. Step by step, through successive approximations, the animal learns to jump higher and higher until it reaches the goal height. Marine mammals are trained to jump into the air through this combined process of targeting and successive approximation.

When training an animal to do a show routine that involves several behaviors linked together, the final behavior in the link is taught first followed by the next to last behavior in the link and so forth until the all the steps from the end of the routine to beginning are trained. These types of behavior routines are trained in reverse order so that animal always knows where to go and what to do next. This ensures that the training session always ends on a positive note for the animal.

A training session is ended on a positive note, meaning that the session ends at a moment when the animal receives a reward for successfully performing a desired behavior. When this strategy is employed, the animal is more likely to remember the steps, and more willing to do the steps.

The job of maintaining a trained behavior begins once the animal consistently executes the behavior when the cue is given. When an animal is asked to perform the same routine every day, the animal may become bored and refuse to do it. Training ceases to be a source of mental stimulation when it becomes predictable to the animal. Providing variety in the training sessions is the key to reducing the predictability factor. This can be accomplished by offering a variety of rewards: several types of food treats instead of only one type of food; petting, scratching or rubbing the animal; and toys. The length and location of the training sessions can be varied instead of always working in the same space or for the same amount of time. Play sessions can be substituted for or follow training sessions. Of course, various combinations of these suggestions increase the level of variety.

In order “to help keep an animal alert and help maintain sharp stimulus discrimination” the trainer can also “vary the order in which the behaviors are asked”
during a session and during a show.\textsuperscript{51} Instead of always asking the animal to “sit” when it reaches a specific point on the stage, the trainer could ask it to “look to the left” and then move to the next station where she asks the animal to “sit.” The ideas can be combined and provide a nearly infinite number of ways to vary the training as well as the play sessions, which help maintain a level of mental stimulation for the animal.

Behavior maintenance also includes maintaining the quality of the behaviors. Over time as different trainers work with the same animal, the trainers can cause the behaviors to degrade by rewarding the animal for doing behaviors that do not meet the appropriate criteria. For example, when a cat is asked to lie down, the criteria for that behavior requires that both elbows are touching the ground and that the cat remains in that position until the trainer gives the release signal. For a variety of reasons, trainers may reward the cat when the elbows do not completely touch the floor, or when the cat does not remain in that position. Gradually, the original behavior of lying down is lost and must be trained a second time. To avoid this, trainers maintain the behaviors by clearly stating the criteria for each behavior in a written training log and periodically observing one another during the shows and training sessions.

\textbf{Choosing the Behaviors to Train for a Show}

There are three parameters to follow when deciding what behavior to train an animal to do: the animal’s psychological and physiological make-up; the trainer’s imagination, the limitations of the performing space. Using a few of the animals in the Wildlife Wonders show as examples, the first parameter can be explored.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 256 and 257.
In the Wildlife Wonders show, there are two Harris’s hawks in the show that perform in separate segments. One flies from the theatre to the top of a mountain in the zoo’s bighorn sheep exhibit, then she dives back to the theatre. The other hawk flies back and forth several times from the performer’s gloved hand to a trainer standing at the top of the audience. Why were those particular hawks trained to do those behaviors? Harris’s hawks have the strength and stamina to soar long distances and do repeated flights without tiring. They are highly intelligent, fast moving, and fast acting animals that are capable of learning complex behaviors. Complex behaviors are those that require more than simply moving from point A to point B.

The barn owl is not trained to do these behaviors because the psychological make-up of a barn owl does not lend itself to performing complex behaviors. It is trained to fly from one perch to another perch. This behavior often needs continued training and requires a lot of time to perform in the show as the owl tends to fly elsewhere in the theatre and makes decisions rather slowly. Owls think in terms of one step at a time while hawks can think about several steps at a time.

Behavior in the wild indicates much about the animals’ psychological and physiological composition. Harris’s hawks soar high over open desert habitat looking for prey after which they dive up to one hundred miles per hour. Owls “forage mainly by perching and watching for prey.” Their wings are structured to fly silently so as to sneak up on prey rather than dive after it.

The second parameter is the trainer’s imagination. A trainer imagines how the performing space can best be used to showcase the animals. Hawks can show off their

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best assets of speed and agility through specific flight patterns. The former bird show at SeaWorld San Diego, California featured two Harris’s hawks diving from a hot air balloon that floated over 300 feet above the stage. The Wild Wings bird show at the former SeaWorld Cleveland, Ohio had two Harris’s hawks simultaneously flying patterns over the stage and audience. The stages and audience seating areas for both bird shows were large enough to accommodate such behaviors.

Wildlife Wonders does not have the budget to house enough animals to do such behaviors, nor does it have a stage space large enough to fly multiple birds without risking a collision into one another or into the audience. Rather than resigning oneself to carrying the birds around the stage, a trainer assesses what the space can accommodate and then choose behaviors based on that.

The seating arrangement in the Wildlife Wonders amphitheatre allows for birds smaller than an eagle to fly directly over the audience. Because there is no roof, birds can easily fly in and out of the theatre. The show action is not required to stay within the confines of the stage area. The animal need not always approach the audience closely to give the best experience. When the hawk stoops, or dives rapidly, back to the stage, it is far from the audience, who enjoy this behavior because it showcases one of the hawk’s best talents.

The barn owl’s best assets are its senses of sight and hearing and its ability to fly silently. Since the team cannot devise a behavior to showcase its hearing and sight, the decision is made to showcase its silent flight by having the owl fly over the audience in a triangular pattern. Although the behavior only involves two simple A to B patterns, the use of space allows the bird to go close to the audience so they can see the bird and listen
for its silent flight as it comes and goes. Whether the behavior is simple or complex, a
good show behavior is one that showcases the animal’s best assets and uses the space in
such a way that the audience can best experience the animal.

Finally, the third parameter concerns the limitations of the performing space. How feasible is it to have the hawk fly back and forth from the performer to the top of the audience? How close to the heads of the audience members should the hawk fly? This behavior of flying over the audience requires a bit of trust that the audience will not interfere with the bird’s flight. Almost never is there a problem. Either the audience understands that interfering is not welcome, or they are too nervous to try to interfere. Whatever the reason, the trainers take a chance everyday and trust that the audience will cooperate.

The case was different in the bird show at SeaWorld Cleveland. "Wally," the
Andean condor, began its flight from the top of the audience on stage right, swooped low over the stage and used the momentum to reach the perch at the top of the audience on stage left. Nearing the end of the flight, the condor began to bring its feet forward to grab the perch. In two different shows his toenails unintentionally tapped the heads of two people which caused great concern for the safety of the audience. After all, "Wally" had a wingspan of ten feet and stood over three feet tall. Subsequently, lines were added to the script asking the audience on the whole left side to duck their heads. In addition, orange traffic cones were placed on the upper seats on the left side to prevent people from sitting there.

Showcasing the animals need not always involve trained animal behaviors. Often the presence of the animal sitting on stage engages the audience. Furthermore, showcasing
can be as simple as demonstrating the differences between two similar species such as the serval and the caracal. Stage limitations are opportunities for the trainers to exercise their research muscles and imaginations in order to develop innovative ways of using the space.

**Juggling the Cues, Rewards, Props, and Animals**

The animal has just performed a behavior correctly. How does the trainer deliver the reward, signal the next behavior and not trip over the leash? She practices these tasks. The trainer rehearses both with and without the animal in order to perfect her timing and coordination. Attention is given to such details as how to hold the reward in her hand, how to give it to the animal and where to stand. Finding the most efficient and graceful means of executing the trainer’s actions makes the show run more fluidly and look more polished.

Small, subtle hand and vocal cues are preferable. Some types of shows, such as dolphin and killer whale shows, utilize larger cues as the animals are often far away from the trainer or under water, and the audiences are large enough to diminish training gestures. In smaller theaters, the audience can be easily distracted by training signals and becomes more interested in what the trainer is doing than in what the animals are doing.

Trainers sometimes confuse subtle for sloppy, and present obscure hand signals that confuse the animal. The hand signal that Wildlife Wonders trainers use for asking a cat to sit is to hold the right hand up in front of the cat in a fist with the index finger pointed straight upwards. During a show, the trainer holds her hand lower nearer to her body so that the cat’s body blocks the audience’s view of her hand. The temptation is to hold the index finger only part way up and to not completely curl the other fingers into a fist. The
cat stops responding to the signal because it does not resemble the original signal, which leads to a break down in the behavior. In order to maintain the animal’s precise response and performance, the trainer pays close attention to her own precision.

Animals are commonly handled with the left hand and the signals and food are given with the right hand; birds perch on the trainer’s left hand and mammal leashes are held by the left hand. The loop of the leash handle goes around the wrist and the hand holds onto the leash. By rotating the wrist and gripping the leash with the fingers, it can be shortened and lengthened with the left hand alone thus preventing the animals from tripping on a leash that is too loose, or being yanked by a leash that is too tight. Simultaneously the right hand retrieves pieces of food from the trainer’s food pouch located on her belt, executes signals to direct the animal to do behaviors and quickly delivers the food to the animal. To build good timing and hand coordination, trainers rehearse with the items prior to rehearsing with the animals.

There is a specific manner in which food is given to animals on stage. The food is presented in small easily consumable pieces so that the animal can quickly eat and move on to the next behavior. The piece of food is usually hidden inside the trainer’s fist. At the appropriate moment, the fist is quickly opened and the hand is put in front of the animal’s mouth so that it does not need to reach for it with its claws or lose its balance. When the animal is not next to the trainer, the trainer may toss food rewards to the animals. Sea lions are quite capable of compensating for indirect tosses by reaching to grab the fish out of the air. In other shows, trainers deliver food with a stick. Regardless of how the reward is given, the action is quick and precise so as not to interfere with the pace of the show.
When rewarding a raptor, a small piece of meat is placed in the gloved hand between the index finger and thumb. The bird cannot see the food until it lands on the gloved hand. While it eats, the trainer wraps the jesses around her fingers. They prevent the bird from flying away or from striking the trainer with its talons should it become agitated. Then the trainer straightens her arm so the bird can fly straight off to the next perch.

**Handling Problems as a Trainer**

When an animal deviates from the show behavior, the trainer follows a training protocol in order to redirect the animal back to the normal show behavior. The first step is to continue the show as if a problem has not occurred. In this case, the trainer ignores the animal’s undesired deviation, then waits two or three seconds prior to asking again for the behavior. Ideally, the animal resumes the desired behavior and the show continues.

If the animal does not resume, the trainer decides to either move on to the next behavior, or ask a third time based on the level of the animal’s focus on the trainer. When the animal is very much focused on something other than the trainer such as a lizard in the bushes or a plane flying overhead, the trainer can do nothing but wait for the animal to refocus on her. She can encourage the animal to refocus by putting herself between the animal and the object of its attention, or by keeping the leash taut so that the animal is the only force pulling on the leash.

When waiting and re-asking have been unsuccessful, the performer explains what the animal is doing and expounds further on the animal’s natural history. As stated in Chapter Two, the animal may present an opportunity to enhance the show by
spontaneously displaying additional natural behaviors. The trainer can only wait until the animal is ready to resume and prevent the animal from deviating further from the desired behavior.

The third step comes into play when there is no hope of regaining the animal’s attention in enough time to continue the show as normal. The show must also deviate and follow the animal, and the audience is given a chance to ask questions or given instructions on what to do if the animal approaches them. Several times each year, the African crested porcupine becomes highly interested in scents on the stage. Generally, the performer, who handles it on stage during a show, regains its attention and the show continues. Prior to recent adjustments to the barrier between the stage and the audience, the porcupine was able to follow the scent off the stage and up into the audience, thus provoking much excitement from the audience. Occasionally the show had to be canceled when every effort to redirect "Linus" back to the stage had failed and portions of the audience were forced to scatter from their seats due to his untactful investigations.

The protocol alters when the situation involves free flying birds. Free flying birds in a show are notorious for flying in directions not included in the normal routine. They land in trees around the theatre or fly away from the theatre making it immediately clear to the audience that they are not cooperating with the trainer. While the performer explains the situation to the audience and gauges whether the show can continue or be canceled, the trainer on stage follows the bird and communicates the situation to the performer.

When the performer is supposed to handle the bird in the show, she makes the training decisions in addition to doing her other duties and communicates the situation to the trainers backstage. In the middle of a show, the author once climbed a tree to retrieve
a parrot without canceling or stopping the show. Once the parrot was retrieved, the show resumed as normal.

For the sake of timing during a show, baiting the animal with a food treat is sometimes necessary, although not preferred, as it instills in the animal a pattern of refusing to do a behavior unless the reward is presented first. In the event when the golden eagle flies away from the theater, the trainer follows her and gauges the bird’s level of interest in returning the trainer. Baiting is unnecessary when the bird appears to be interested in the trainer and allows her to approach. If the bird flies or runs away from the trainer, then the eagle is baited to return to the trainer’s gloved arm since she is in a public area of the zoo and poses a potential harm.

There are times when an animal displays aggression toward the trainer or another person during a show. Many factors can lead to an act of aggression: an animal displaces frustration because it is prevented from doing something or going somewhere; an animal does not understand what the trainer is asking and becomes frustrated; an animal does not like a particular trainer; or, an animal attempts to protect its territory and trainer from something. Trainers can often predict from the immediate surroundings and the animal’s temperament that the animal is becoming agitated. If the aggression comes quickly, the trainer can tighten the leash to prevent the animal from making contact with her or anyone else while other trainers try to place themselves between the animal and the target.

If the animal is only agitated, there is time to distract the animal from the source of agitation by asking it to do different behaviors that are incompatible with the aggression, offering a toy, guiding it in a direction away from the object of its aggression, or placing
a physical barrier between the animal and its target. Every effort is made to prevent an aggressive act, but as animals can be highly unpredictable, there are occasions when even the most experienced trainers cannot prevent an animal from injuring someone. These instances are handled on a case by case basis and afterwards investigated from all perspectives in order to learn from them. Understanding an animal’s temperament and idiosyncrasies is the trainer’s best tool in preventing aggression.

In some cases, the animal’s action is mistaken for aggression when it advances toward someone or inflicts an injury, but it is not actually displaying aggression. "Sabi," the Wildlife Wonders cheetah, finds amusement in stalking small children. Once in a while she lunges toward them in an attempt to chase them while she is walking on a leash through the zoo with the trainers. Since she has never been taught to hunt and kill prey as cheetahs in the wild are taught by their mothers, “Sabi’s” trainers have determined that her lunge is not an aggressive act, but rather a desire to play with the children as if they are toys. While playfulness is a positive attribute, the trainers do not want to encourage her to lunge like that while she is on a leash for several reasons: "Sabi" could potentially get away from the trainer and injure someone; the public is frightened and the trainers do not wish to inspire an unnecessary fear of the cheetah; the public is amused and the trainers do not wish to inspire misguided amusement of a captive animal; finally, when "Sabi" is prevented from playing with the child, she may become frustrated and take it out on the trainers. The trainers go through the same steps as if she is acting aggressively. They might also ask that the child be removed from the immediate area and explain the situation to onlookers.
In all cases, trainers are taught to maintain a calm disposition while handling a problem. Emotional reactions could heighten the animal’s aggressive state, especially if the animal is testing the trainer and seeking a reaction. Remaining calm helps to keep the audience calm and more capable of listening to instructions. Most importantly, a calm disposition allows the trainers the necessary mental capacity to make decisions toward a safe resolution.

Just as cleaning, feeding, and providing playtime allow the trainer to build a relationships with an animal, training, too, is another relationship building vehicle. The more the trainer varies the daily routine for the animal, the more she learns about the animal through its reactions. The animal learns to trust the trainer when the rewards are consistently given and the trainer never forces them to do anything. In addition, the interaction provides exercise and mental stimulation for the animal. Shows that present positively trained animals provide a positive show experience for all parties including the audience.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Even though the business of handling wild animals in captivity has vastly improved since the 1900s, how can the life of a captive animal compare to the life of an animal in the wild? Wildlife shows display the wildness of wild animals, yet, the reality of a captive show animal’s life is anything but that of a free, wild animal. Show animals are shuffled to and from their ten-foot by ten-foot enclosures and doled out pieces of food until the end of the final show when they can finally finish the remainders of their daily diets. Many show raptors spend their lives attached to a three foot long nylon line; otherwise they would attack the trainer every time she enters the bird’s enclosure. This is perhaps the gravest paradox, for birds are the most free of all living organisms. As discussed in the first chapter, zoological institutions have been responsible for the conservation of numerous endangered species and protection of sensitive ecosystems. Are these same institutions justified in entertaining the public with live animal shows in the name of education?

Questions arise concerning the actual amount of education the public gains from these facilities and shows. The process described in previous chapters plays out in daily performances for audiences who may not remember most of what they hear and see. Critics claim “that zoos are no better than prisons, designed for the amusement of
mindless gawkers.” These are same “mindless gawkers” who attend wildlife shows. At the end of the day, one may ask, “what are these captive animal facilities and shows worth?”

Zookeepers and educators from the Living Desert Reserve conducted a study in 2004 to determine the amount of time visitors spent at exhibits and whether or not they read the exhibit signs. Fifty-four seconds was the average amount of time visitors spent looking at an exhibit. If there was any type of activity in an exhibit, including keeper activity, the average time doubled. Fewer than thirty percent of the visitors read any portion of the signs.

The Animal Enrichment Committee was then assigned the task of implementing an annual weekend event called “Enrichment Days.” The public was invited to watch scheduled enrichment activities in certain exhibits. The activities were timed such that visitors would encounter one activity after another on a walking tour of these certain exhibits. The animals investigated and played with their enrichment toys, and in front of the exhibits, keepers led discussions about the importance of captive animal enrichment in addition to daily care and feeding. The plan worked; crowds of visitors remained in front of the “enriched” exhibits for up to five minutes enjoying the activity. Not to mention, attendance at the zoo increased during that weekend of “Enrichment Days.” This was a clear indication that visitors were truly interested in seeing the animals in an active state. Visitors also learned more about the animals by observing the various animal behaviors, which is exactly what educational wildlife shows strive to demonstrate.

In an ideal world, zoos and shows would not exist because they would not be necessary. Humans would not so negatively impact the earth’s wild flora and fauna. Animals would not be showcased for the enlightenment and entertainment of man because man would already understand the importance of preserving them in their wild habitats. However, at this time, man needs help in understanding his role in ecological stewardship. Wild fauna and flora are being replaced by unnatural landscapes, and many species have little hope of survival without the conservation help that zoos can offer.

If some animals are “sacrificed” to the captive show life for the greater good of education, or enlightenment, then perhaps criticism of captivity can be assuaged by the argument that these sacrificial captives receive a full daily diet, veterinary care, are never hunted by predators, or injured while hunting prey. Also, they are never displaced by new shopping malls or persecuted by farmers protecting their livestock. Additionally, animal care providers spend much time enriching the lives of their charges with toys, play structures, scents, foods, positive reinforcement training, and other positive interactions with the keeper or trainer.

Because a wildlife show harnesses the age-old human fascination with live wild animals, it provides an attractive medium with which to influence the public and increase their sense of respect and appreciation for wildlife. This influence is the reason show teams put detailed effort into the show elements. Every “wow” fact is as important as the show’s whole objective. Lines are rehearsed, tasks are practiced, and the movement on stage is set. Furthermore, trainers and performers perfect their animal handling skills and procedures. All of the technical elements are prepared so that every team member can help the show run from moment to moment as smoothly and spontaneously as possible.
for the audience’s utmost enjoyment. If the audience enjoys the show experience, they remember more of what they hear and see. At the end of the day, the worth of the show is its value to those who watch it.
SOURCES CONSULTED

Books and Articles


**Primary Sources**


**Electronic Sources**


APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Akron, OH 44325-2102
(330) 972-7666 Office
(330) 972-6281 Fax

January 30, 2006

Candice J. Weber
PO Box 3469
Palm Desert, California 92261

Ms. Weber:

The University of Akron’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) completed a review of your application for continuing review entitled “The Process of Writing and Performing in a Live Wildlife Show”. The IRB application number assigned to this project is 20040226-3.

The protocol qualified for Expedited Review and was approved on January 28, 2006. The protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and matches the following federal category for expedited review:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation or quality assurance methodologies

This approval is valid until February 27, 2007 or until modifications are proposed to the current project protocol, whichever may occur first. In either instance, an Application for Continuing Review must be completed and submitted to the IRB.

Enclosed is the informed consent document, which the IRB has approved for your use in this research. A copy of this form is to be submitted with any application for continuation of this project.

Please note that within one month of the expiration date of this approval, the IRB will forward an annual review reminder notice to you by email, as a courtesy. Nevertheless, please note that it is your responsibility as principal investigator to remember the renewal date of your protocol’s review. If your project is funded, failure to comply with IRB requirements could jeopardize your continued funding. Please submit your continuation application at least two weeks prior to the renewal date, to ensure the IRB has sufficient time to complete the review.

Please retain this letter for your files. If the research is being conducted for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, you must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Sincerely,

Sharon McWhorter
Interim Director

CC: James Slowiak, Advisor
Department Chair
Phil Allen, IRB Chair
APPENDIX B

“WILDLIFE WONDERS” SHOW SCRIPT

Preshow Action

(Great-horned owl enters from behind audience seated on stage left side and flies over audience. It lands on boulder located stage right; exits upstage right. Red-tailed hawk enters by flying from back stage to a perch on the roof of the cabin located upstage left. It then flies to eight foot tall platform and then exits through an opening in stage right wall behind the boulder. From backstage, a greater roadrunner jumps up to top of stage right wall that extends along audience seated on stage right. It runs along the top of stage right wall and flies down to stage floor. It runs across stage and enters the cabin located upstage left where it exits.)

Preshow

(Speaker enters upstage left immediately following the roadrunner’s exit.) Good morning, everyone! (Pause for audience response. If response is low in volume, then proceed with next line.) What?! I can’t hear you. Let’s try that one more time. (Speaker may choose to exit and re-enter. Fit the moment to the speaker’s personality.) Good morning, everyone! (Pause for audience response. If response is louder, then proceed with next line.) Hey, that’s more like it. Thanks! How did you like those animals? (Pause
for audience response.) Great, glad you liked them. Come back at 2:00pm to see a repeat performance. Thank you for coming! (Performer starts to exit upstage left.)

You’re not buying it. Do you want to see some more animals? (Pause for audience response.) Ok, but first, let me introduce you to the ones you just saw. Coming in from the back of the audience we had a great-horned owl. Landing on this platform was a red-tailed hawk. And who was that last little guy zooming across the stage? That’s right, a roadrunner. How fast does the roadrunner run? (Listen for an audience member to say “very fast” or a variation of that.) Very fast! Correct. Actually, they are known to run up to 18 mph.

Welcome to the Tennity Amphitheater. Deserts are full of amazing wildlife. Right here we have some really cool animals from some of the world’s hottest places. They’ll show you a few natural behaviors that they would do in the wild. As you can probably guess, we encourage your responses!

**Harris’s Hawk, “Sonora”**

We’ll get started with this next animal, a desert specialist. She is found in the deserts of southern Arizona, New Mexico and Texas as well as in Mexico and South America. Let’s give it up for, “Sonora.” (“Sonora” enters from the stage right wall, flies across the stage and lands on the cactus skeleton located at the audience left theatre perimeter.)

“Sonora” is a Harris’s Hawk. You may notice that she is smaller than the red-tailed hawk. Harris’s hawks have a unique behavior that compensates for their smaller size. Typically raptors live and hunt independently. The Harris’s hawk is the only raptor that lives and hunts in groups averaging five birds, which allows them catch prey weighing fives times their weight such as a jackrabbit. (“Sonora” flies toward the bighorn sheep mountain.) If
you’re a raptor, the best perch is the highest perch. “Sonora” is headed for a high perch on the upper right side of this nearby mountain, which is our bighorn sheep exhibit. (Keep an eye on the hawk and describe her position as she makes her way up to the perch.) From a high perch, a group of hawks can spot that jackrabbit. Together they dive after it reaching speeds up to 90 miles per hour. (“Sonora” is flying back to the stage.) Sonora may not be flying quite that fast, but she’s really moving! (“Sonora” continues flight across stage and lands on rock at stage right wall entrance. “Sonora” exits through wall.) And that’s the last thing the jackrabbit ever sees. How about that! Thank you, “Sonora”!

**Harris’s Hawk, “Hudson”**

(“Hudson” and “Sonora” are not presented in the same show; they are presented on an alternate basis.)

We’ll get started with this next animal, a desert specialist. He is found in the deserts of southern Arizona, New Mexico and Texas as well as in Mexico and South America. Let’s give it up for, “Hudson”! (“Hudson” enters from the upstage wall entrance and flies to the trainer standing behind the last row of the audience. Audience gasps because he flies relatively close to their heads. During the performer’s dialogue, “Hudson” makes four round trip flights between the trainer and the performer.) “Hudson” is a Harris’s Hawk. You may notice that he is smaller than the red-tailed hawk. Harris’s hawks have a unique behavior that compensates for their smaller size. Typically raptors live and hunt independently. The Harris’s hawk is the only raptor that lives and hunts in groups averaging five birds, which allows them catch prey weighing fives times their weight such as a jackrabbit. They are often referred to as “the wolves of the sky.” By the
way, when you duck, “Hudson” simply flies lower. (*Audience laughs when timing is right.*) One more flight down here. “Hudson” has done a fabulous job for us. It’s time to send him home.

**Barn Owl, “Ty”**

**Transition**: The Harris’s Hawk is what we call a diurnal bird of prey, or a bird of prey that is active during the day. When I say, “nocturnal bird of prey,” or “nighttime bird of prey,” what type of bird do you think of? (*Audience usually answers, “owl.” If they don’t, then prompt them again.*) That’s right – an owl! Look over there at the cabin and you will see a special kind of owl called the barn owl. (*“Ty” appears in the open window of the cabin located stage left.*)

The barn owl is also called the “heart-shaped face owl,” and the “monkey-faced owl” due to the large facial disks. The disk-arrangement of the feathers on the face actually functions to channel sound directly into the owl’s ears. The ears are located behind the eyes, and one is higher than the other to allow multi-directional hearing. So, those distinctive facial disks are not only accessories. (*“Ty” flies from the window to the t-perch.*)

It is true that owls can rotate their heads. However, they cannot rotate them in a full 360 degree circle. If they could do that, their heads might unscrew and fall off! (*audience laughs.*) Instead, they can only rotate their heads 270 degrees, or three-quarters of a circle. They can do this because they have fourteen cervical vertebrae; that’s twice as many as we mammals typically have. From giraffes to mice, all mammals have only seven vertebrate. (*“Ty” flies from the t-perch down to the boulder located stage right and*
exits through the wall access. If “Ty” is too slow to leave the window and t-perch, then next paragraph can be added to fill in the time.)

When “Ty” flew over your heads, you didn’t hear anything because owls have the gift of silent flight. They locate their food with their powerful eyesight and hearing and then remain undetected by the mouse, rat, or whatever they like to hunt, as they swoop down to catch it.

Did you know that farmers throughout central California employ barn owls to catch mice and rats? Altogether, this is one supreme rodent controller! That was “Ty,” our barn owl!

American Kestrel, “Kricket”

Transition: Already we’ve seen two different types of hawks, and two different types of owls. Each group has its own hunting strategy. During the day, hawks perch up high and look for prey down below and dive after it once they spot it. Owls perch quietly at night both listening and looking for prey after which they silently glide. Can anyone guess another type of raptor? (Listen for answers, and if no one says “falcon,” then say it.) Yes, a falcon! (or) Did anyone say, “falcon”? “Kricket” flies from the nest box, located on the stage right wall, to the tree stump at downstage center. She eats the piece of meat on the stump. The time she remains on the stump during the following segment before flying back to the nest box to exit varies from show to show. Add or delete lines accordingly.)

Say hello to “Kricket” the American kestrel. Kestrels are also known as “sparrow hawks,” but this is a misnomer as they are not hawks; they are falcons. In fact, the kestrel is the smallest type of falcon in North America. When “Kricket” flies back to her nest
box, take a look at the shape of her wings. They are long and slender and come to a sharp point as opposed to the broad and more rounded shape of a hawk’s wing. Falcons are known for flying faster than any other bird. The famous peregrine falcon uses its long aero-dynamic wings to dive after prey at speeds reaching 200 miles per hour. Instead of catching prey on the ground, the falcon prefers to catch other birds in flight. On a rare occasion, the kestrel may catch a small songbird like a sparrow. However, her favorite foods are insects and mice.

If any of you would like to attract kestrels to your backyards, we can provide you with instructions on how to build a nest box like that one on the wall after the show. While they will help to control your insect populations, they will not deter the songbirds from your feeders. Nest boxes are a great way to help you get a closer look at these amazing little falcons. How about a hand for, “Kricket,” our American kestrel.

**Golden Eagle, “Olympia”**

**Transition:** That was “Kricket,” our gorgeous little American kestrel. You’ve already met two different hawks, a couple of owls and one falcon. As you can see, raptors come in all different shapes and sizes from that little American kestrel to one of the largest aerial predators in the country. Let’s meet “Olympia.” *(During the transition, the performer places a reward on the t-perch, located downstage left, steps over the small split rail fence, and stands to the stage left of the audience. Since the perch is so close to the audience, the performer acts as a barrier to anyone who might be tempted to approach the bird. From behind wall stage right, “Olympia,” lands on a perch on top of the stage right wall. She then flies across to the downstage left T-perch.)*
Folks, say hello to “Olympia.” She is a golden eagle. With a six-foot wingspan, the golden eagle soars high over the wide open lands of the western United States. She can see prey from up to a mile away. Once she spots something such as a jack rabbit or a cottontail, for example, she dives after it reaching speeds of 150 miles per hour. How’s that for amazing skills?!

Golden eagles get their name from the golden colored feathers on the backs of their necks. What is the other type of eagle found in the continental United States? (Audience answers, "bald eagle.") That’s right, the bald eagle. The golden eagle is similar in size to the bald eagle, but the color of its plumage, or feathers, is quite different. ("Olympia” usually finishes her food and flies back to the stage right wall. If she delays her return, continue to discuss eagle facts: size versus weight, nests, and habitat differences, de-listed from the endangered species list.)

It looks like “Olympia” is ready to return home. Please give a big hand for our awesome golden eagle and all the other raptors!

**White-Nosed Coati, “Monty”**

**Transition:** How do you like these birds? (Audience cheers.) Do you want to see some more? (Audience shouts, “yes!”) Great! But, our next animal is a mammal! (Pause) He’s not just any mammal. You can find this one in the deserts of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and all the way down into the rainforests of South America. Let’s welcome, “Monty,” the very versatile coati.

(“Monty” runs along the rails of the short split rail fence downstage from stage right to center. He climbs the downstage center tree stump and pulls up a coconut shell
by the rope attached to it. He scrapes out his meat reward from the shell.) The coati, or coatimundi, as they were once called, looks a lot like that wild animal we often find rummaging through our trash cans. I’m talking about the raccoon. Black mask and rings around the tail bear a strong resemblance. “Monty” is actually a close cousin to the raccoon as well as the ring-tailed cat, another desert mammal.

“Monty,” the coati, is versatile in his choice of habitat – found in deserts and rainforests – and his choice of food. Like the raccoon, the coati is an omnivore. “Omni” means all, everything. “Monty” likes to eat everything from meat, insects, spiders and scorpions, as well as fruits and vegetables. If you ask him, he’ll tell you that his favorite treats from the Tennity Amphitheater are meal worms and grapes.

(During rest of monologue, “Monty” does the following actions. He descends the stumps and runs across the left side of the stage. He climbs the t-perch. Upon cue, he jumps onto the trainer’s left shoulder and exits with the trainer.) With that long nose, a coati can sniff out termites hiding underground, and use his long claws to dig them up for supper. Then, when he wants to retire for the evening, the coati will swiftly climb up into a tree, where he spends much of his time, to sleep for the night. At dawn, the coati descends the tree, to forage again on the ground for breakfast.

Most animals cannot climb down head first, and must instead back down a tree. Since coatis have flexible ankles that rotate backwards, they are able to easily scale down a tree. Or, in “Monty’s” case, leap onto his trainer’s shoulder and hitch a ride home.

Thank you, “Monty”!
Serval, “Ruka”

**Transition:** It is time to travel across the ocean and check out a few from Africa.

Ready to go? *(Audience responds.)* Great!

There are thirty-six different species of cats throughout the whole world. We hear so much about the few big cats like lions, tigers, and leopards. Perhaps some of you did not realize that thirty of the thirty-six species are not large, but small cats weighing twenty pounds or less. Today you get to meet a couple of these small cats.

This is “Ruka.” She’s an African serval. Those rather long, slender legs make the serval the tallest of the world’s small cats. Since she spends her time on the ground in the African savannahs, her long legs help her to see over the tall grasses. *(The serval, “Ruka,” enters upstage right on a leash. Trainer follows holding leash. “Ruka” jumps onto large boulder and then onto downstage right platform.)*

Like many cats, the serval is a renowned bird hunter. She patiently stalks a bird flying over the grass. At the right moment, she uses her powerful hind legs to leap up to eight feet into the air to snag the bird out of mid-flight. *(“Ruka” jumps onto the stage right log then five feet vertically up to the tall platform.)*

“Ruka” would like to demonstrate for you another one of the serval’s hunting strategies. First, the serval seeks out a rodent burrow in the ground with her excellent hearing. Note the rather large ears. Rodent burrows are usually in the ground, but occasionally they look just like this clear, acrylic, tube burrow in my hand that now holds a juicy piece of rodent. When “Ruka” is ready, she’ll show us what she does when she finds a burrow. *(Performer puts a piece of meat in the tube and hangs it on the front side of the stage center box. On cue, “Ruka” jumps on top of the box, reaches down into the*
burrow, and grabs the meat. Action is fast. When she leaves the box, the performer removes the tube and puts it away). Just like that, she finds a meal. How would like a giant paw with claws to scoop you out of your house? It happens so fast that you wouldn’t have time to think about it!

You’re probably mesmerized by “Ruka’s” beautiful coat. This is one of the only cats that wears both spots and stripes. The pattern works as a clever camouflage in the African savannah. (Performer opens a stage left box and removes a fur coat which she shows to the audience for the following point. When finished, she replaces the coat in the box.) Unfortunately many people have found this pattern to be so beautiful that they want to wear it too. When I look at this coat in my hand and the one on “Ruka,” I have to say that a fur coat looks much better on the animal than on any person. Don’t you agree? (Audience applauds. “Ruka” and trainer exit stage left.) Thank you, “Ruka,” our African serval.

Caracal, “Persia”

**Transition:** Coming up is another one of Africa’s small cats. By the color of her coat, you can see that she’s found in rockier and sandier regions of Africa and all the way up into the Middle East.

(Trainer enters with “Persia” on a leash stage left. “Persia” jumps onto stage left box, then onto the downstage left tree stump. When the performer is ready with the target pole, trainer cues “Persia” to head toward performer.) Say hello to “Persia” the caracal. Pound for pound, the caracal is the fastest and strongest of the world’s small cats.

Like the serval, the caracal is also a great bird hunter. At times though, she catches two birds with one swipe. (Performer holds target pole out in front of her so that the
tennis ball target at the end of the pole is approximately 6 feet above the ground. When “Persia” taps the ball, trainer rewards her and performer puts away the pole.) At this time, “Persia” is going to show you how she stalks and catches the elusive tennis ball bird. (“Persia” leaps and taps the ball.) How about that?! (Audience applauds.) I tried that earlier, and it wasn’t so pretty.

(“Persia” jumps onto downstage center tree stump, then goes to stage center box. From the box, “Persia” leaps to the eight foot tall platform that stands six feet from the box.) “Persia” is a small cat, but don’t let her small size fool you. Out in the wild, this cat has been known to take down antelope more than twice its own weight such as an eighty-pound impala.

(“Persia” jumps down from the platform. She goes to the downstage right tree stump and finally to the center stage tree stump.) The word “caracal” is a Turkish word meaning “black ears.” As you can see, she indeed does have black ears. People sometimes confuse the caracal with the lynx because they both sport dark tufts of fur on their ears. Lynx cats are found way up in northern boreal forests, while caracals are found in the … (encourage audience response) desert. That’s right! Thus, caracals are also called “the desert lynx.” (“Persia” and trainer exit stage left.) Please give a hand for “Persia,” the caracal.

**African Crested Porcupine, “Linus”**

Get ready for Africa’s largest and heaviest rodent. Come on out, “Linus,” let’s show them what we’re talking about. (“Linus” enters upstage right and follows performer to downstage right tree stump on which performer places a reward.) This is the African crested porcupine – getting his name from the crest of quills extending from the top of his
head. (Performer points to or holds up the crest.) Like I said, this is Africa’s largest rodent weighing in at forty pounds. If you’re sitting in the first few rows, you need not worry; porcupines DO NOT shoot their quills. The quills are simply hairs just like the hairs on our heads – only modified. (If time allows, add the following two sentences.) He cannot shoot the quills from his head any more than we can shoot the hairs off of our heads. But if you can, let me know and I’ll put you in tomorrow’s show. (“Linus” follows behind performer to downstage left tree stump on which performer places a reward.) He has several types of quills: long, thin quills he flares up to make himself look bigger (Speaker, if comfortable with the animal, lifts some of the quills to indicate them specifically); shorter quills that act like feelers for his backside; and on the base of his tail, there are much shorter and hollow quills that he rattles as a warning. Like a rattlesnake, the porcupine warns an on-coming intruder of his presence by rattling his tail. If the intruder persists, the porcupine flares up all of his quills and runs backwards into the intruder impaling its face. Even if you’re a 400 pound lion, you would avoid dealing with this forty pound rodent. Now that’s quite the defense! (After porcupine exits, performer finishes segment with joke – optional.) Oh, would you like to hear one more fact? (Encourage an excited “yes!” response from audience.) There was a study completed recently on porcupines which determined that porcupines never have a bad hair day. (Play off of the audience’s reaction.)

Sulfur-Crested Cockatoo, “Echo”

Before we continue, we’d like to mention a little fact about the Living Desert. Every year the Living Desert donates money to research projects and causes around the world that protect wild, arid habitats and the animals that live in them. We feel that it is
important to educate our local population about the importance of arid lands and support organizations that protect them. If any of you would like to unload your spare change, you can put in the “Coins for Conservation” mailbox right over there, and it will go directly to our conservation funds.

At this time, I’d like ask if anyone could donate a coin to our show today. A nickel, dime, quarter, or twenty dollar bill will do. (Performer steps over fence and retrieves a coin from a guest. She returns to the stage.) Thank you! Now, you may not get this back, but you can write it off since we are an official non-profit zoo. I have a quarter, and all I need is my assistant, who comes from Australia. (“Echo,” a sulfur-crested cockatoo flies from backstage to the large boulder on stage right. Performer cues “Echo” to fly to her by raising her left arm.)

Hi, “Echo”! Are you ready to show these people what they can do with any unwanted spare change? (Give cue to nod “yes.” Can add other behaviors if there is time. Present coin on flat hand to “Echo.” He picks it up with beak. Point to mailbox downstage left. “Echo” flies to platform beside the mailbox, and put coin in the slot. Then he flies to the cabin window upstage left and exits through window.) Hey, thanks, “Echo”! He is not an endangered species, but he likes to help out those that need some extra help.

**Bighorn Sheep, “Rosie”**

Finally, we’d like to bring you back to our desert valley in southern California and introduce you one of its most famous residents. You might recognize her from billboards, buses, and coffee mugs (sold in our gift shop). She’s famous because she represents one of Coachella Valley’s endangered species.
(“Rosie,” the bighorn sheep enters on a leash with trainer. She jumps onto the stage left box, then she goes to downstage left tree stump, and then she jumps onto the downstage center tree stump.) Meet “Rosie,” our peninsular bighorn sheep. The peninsular bighorn sheep are a species of bighorn sheep that range from the southern half of our Coachella Valley all the way into the Baja, California peninsula. Today there approximately seven hundred remaining in the wild. We are proud to still have a few herds living here in our mountains.

You may wonder where her big horns are. Only the males have the large horns. In fact, their horns grow so large that they can weight up to forty pounds. Since “Rosie” is a female, her horns will remain much smaller. The males put up with the big horns for one important reason: that is the way the ladies like them. During the breeding season, the males spar over territory and females by clashing their horns together. The females then select the strongest males to father their offspring. (“Rosie” steps onto the downstage right tree stump. She ends the show by leaping onto the stage right large boulder. After the show, she descends and comes downstage.)

Bighorn sheep live in mountainous regions. They climb formidable rock walls in order to evade predators, find food, and protect their young. Their secret is in the hoof. If you look at “Rosie’s” feet, you’ll see that they are split, or cloven, hooves allowing flexibility. Also, her hooves are equipped with tough, somewhat rubbery pads that provide traction. Not to mention, bighorn are extremely strong animals with powerful hind legs. “Rosie” makes that jump look easy.
CONCLUSION

(During the conclusion, “Treasure,” a thick-billed parrot enters on a perch from the upstage wall, “Hercules,” a desert tortoise walks from upstage right entrance to downstage center, and other trainers enter each with a reptile.) We hope you enjoyed the animals today and discovered that the world’s deserts are full of amazing creatures, all of which are worth protecting. Everyone can begin to take part in conserving our wild spaces by simply learning more about them. We invite you to come down to the stage and take a closer look at “Rosie,” “Treasure,” the thick-billed parrot, “Hercules,” our desert tortoise, and a few other reptiles. Thanks for coming, and have a great day at the Living Desert.

Alternative Finale

(Instead of the bighorn sheep, a cheetah is presented on stage with her companion yellow Labrador dog companion. The show ends with the cheetah and dog on stage. The audience is invited to approach the front of the stage to ask questions and see the cheetah more closely.)

Cheetah, “Sabi,” and Dog, “Henry”

For our final animal, I am going to let you guess what it is after I give you few clues. She is from Africa. She is an endangered species. She is tall. She has black spots. She runs very fast. Can you guess? (Audience usually shouts, “cheetah.” “Sabi” enters on leash with trainer. During the following monologue, “Sabi” and trainer move to different stations on the stage.)
Yes, you got it! This is “Sabi,” a cheetah, representing the fastest land animal in the world. Cheetahs can reach seventy miles per hour. It’s a fast, powerful run, but also very short. They can only run for less than a minute. To increase their success, a cheetah will get as close as possible to its target. The black spots camouflage her until the last moment before she runs.

How does a cheetah run so fast? She has several key physical adaptations, or features. First, notice how thin and streamlined she is. Cheetahs are built with an aerodynamic frame for speed. Her tail has a unique rudder shape. It is round at the base, but flattens towards the tail to provide steering and balance. Thirdly, cheetahs have semi-retractable claws that look more like thick dog claws instead of razor sharp cat claws. The thick claws act like cleats that provide traction. Other adaptations include a flexible spine that elongates and retracts, an enlarged heart to pump more blood, and enlarged lungs and nostrils to inhale more air. Altogether, the cheetah is perfectly engineered speed machine.

Our ambassador cheetah, “Sabi,” represents an endangered species. Cheetahs used to range throughout Africa, the Middle East and the Indian peninsula. Currently they live in small pockets of East and Southern Africa. They continue to lose habitat and prey species due to agriculture and hunting. Also, farmers eliminate cheetahs in order to protect livestock.

A few organizations are practicing effective conservation measures. They purchase land to set aside as protected habitat. They communicate with farmers to implement alternative methods of preserving livestock such fencing and guard dogs. Cheetahs always avoid conflict with stronger animals like large guard dogs. The Cheetah Conservation Organization in Namibia has documented positive results and increases in
cheetah numbers due to their conservation efforts. You can learn more about cheetah conservation at www.cheetah.org.

“Sabi” has a companion guard dog of her own. Come on out, “Henry”! (“Henry, “the yellow Labrador retriever, enters stage left on leash with trainer. He joins “Sabi” on the stage left box.”) “Henry” and “Sabi” met at the age of four months and have been playmates ever since. “Sabi” is a wild animal, and may be nervous in new presentation situations and venues. Since “Henry” is very comfortable in every situation, he provides companionship for her, which helps to keep “Sabi” calm and comfortable. Together they make a successful conservation ambassador duet.

We hope you enjoyed the animals today and discovered that the world's deserts are full of amazing creatures, all of which are worth protecting. Everyone can begin to take part in conserving our wild spaces by simply learning more about them. We invite you to come down to the stage and take a closer look at “Sabi” and “Henry.” We would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for coming. Have a great afternoon here at the Living Desert.
Recorded Voiceover

Welcome to the Living Desert’s Wild Winter Fashion Show – the show that defines the function and flare of desert winter fashion. Now, coming straight from the roadrunner’s runway ("Charlie," the roadrunner runs across stage), please welcome the hosts of our show! (Fast-paced, funky house music, similar to that heard during a major haute coutour fashion show plays throughout the show.)

Hello and welcome! I’m Fenneca Fox! We’re live here, at the Living Desert, ready to watch some of the world’s finest models show off the desert’s most exciting fashions. You should see the dressing room back there. It’s a zoo! We scoured the deserts across the globe and came up with a thrilling array of styles that are both beautiful as well as functional.

Great-Horned Owl, "Bubo"

("Bubo," the great horned owl, enters stage from a release box behind the audience. He flies over the audience and lands on the boulder on stage right. He exits stage right. This action is done during the performer's monologue.)

This winter it’s camouflage camouflage camouflage! Blending into your environment, as marvelously demonstrated by "Bubo," the great horned owl, is key this year. It's chic,
sophisticated, and functional. Be seen at just the right moment rather than at every moment. Makes a stronger impression, don’t you think?? Yes.

There are many ways of achieving a successful camouflage ensemble. Accessories are a must. Start with your own nails. "Bubo’s" are striking, (literally) and so useful. I can’t take my eyes off them! Ha! Ha! And let’s take note of a little known winter accessory – ear muffs turned into ear tufts. Although they’re not actually ears or horns, "Bubo's" ear tufts help make this night time predator appear larger and more impressive. It is all about appearing to be intimidating, not whether you are intimidating.

**Barn Owl, "Ty"**

For all you winter desert snow birds, who just can’t wear enough white, our barn owl, "Ty," shows us the beauty of white-wear. White IS in after Labor Day. *(Barn owl, "Ty," enters from cabin window stage left. He flies to t-perch at the top of the center stairs in the audience, and then he flies to stage right boulder where he exits through stage right wall. This action happens during the performer's monologue.)*

Go ahead and add some 1980s fringe flare to your sleeves. "Ty’s" fringed flight feathers are bold and fun. His fringe functions as a flight silencer too. Leave it to nature to teach us something about fashion’s flare and function. The next time you want to fly undetected and successfully sneak up on your dinner prey, employ a bit of fringe flare.

**Serval, "Ruka"**

The ears seem to be the focal point of accessorizing this year. For our next super furry model, they really do define function. *("Ruka," the serval enters on leash with a trainer. "Ruka" jumps onto the stage left box, then the tree stump, then the center tree stump. She then retrieves the meat from the tube when cued by trainer. "Ruka” leaves the*
center box and pauses on two other platforms. All action is done in time with the performer's monologue.) Check out "Ruka," the African serval. I must say, that large round ears are certainly nothing to hide. They not only enhance her auditory capabilities, but they also offset her delicate facial features ever so cleverly. With her amazing ears "Ruka" is able to listen for a rodent hiding beneath the ground and then with her agile, long, slender legs, she plucks a rodent right out of its burrow.

Enough about ears. Let’s talk about patterns. Incorporating patterns to your camouflage can be tricky. Yet, when done correctly, they are really a valuable fashion asset. Especially if you find yourself amidst African grassland shadows. With her perfectly sleek build, "Ruka" can sport spots like nobody else.

Her spots are truly impressive. How do we get those spots for ourselves? Faux fur, my darling. It not only saves you money, it save lives. Now that’s function that we all can be proud of!

**Caracal, "Persia"**

This next model usual frequents arid habitats in the Middle East and Africa, but she took time out of her busy schedule to spend a little time out here with us. If you like the sandy desert, take a tip from "Persia," the caracal. ("Persia," the caracal enters on leash with trainer stage left. She goes to stage left box, then downstage let tree stump, then taps a target six feet from the ground. She then jumps onto center stage box and leaps across to the eight foot high platform. "Persia" descends and sits on two more stage right platforms before exiting. All action is in time with the performer's monologue.)
Just when you thought beige was bland, this sleek hottie shows how blending with beige is back. And when combined with the short hemline, exhibited by the bobbed tail, makes a uniquely feminine active wear.

Last season, thin was in but this season it is all about looking athletic and healthy. Sportswear is great for working, jogging, or just relaxing. With this new athletic style, "Persia" makes catching prey look easy. Notice Persia’s wide feet. Wide feet are the pride of desert fashion nomads. Traveling across sandy dunes can't be done with any other feature.

Don’t forget to accessorize! Just because you blend in, doesn’t mean you can’t add a little flare. "Persia" does it with those perky ear tufts. Again, ear tufts are so in!

**White-Nosed Coati, "Monty"**

If you aren’t as light as a feather or as sleek as a serval, don’t worry! Our next model has a more ... realistic body shape. ("Monty," the coati enters stage right on leash with trainer. He walks along the rail of the split rail fence. Climbs up on top of the downstage center stump and retrieves a treat from the coconut. He descends and runs to the stage left t-perch. He climbs the t-perch and then jumps onto the trainer's left shoulder. All action happens in time with the performer's monologue.)

This is "Monty," the White-nosed coati, a member of the raccoon family. If you are short and squat like our young coati, you too can look great in this all-weather gear. Since coatis are found in the hot, dry, southwestern deserts and the humid rain forests of South America, versatility is a must.

"Monty" has chosen to accessorize with a distinctly ringed tailed. This tail helps the coati balance when he’s climbing the branches of his arboreal home. He knows the many
values of long, strong, natural nails. Acrylic just won’t do when you’re up in the trees or
digging in the dirt for your next meal.

You’ve already noticed his prominent nose. No nose jobs required here; "Monty"
wouldn't have it any other way. His enormous sniffer finds food hiding under six inches
of soil. "Monty’s" versatile little get-up is so comfortable, that maintaining an active and
healthy lifestyle is a snap!

(Voiceover commercial promoting bats as necessary pollinators)

Cheetah, "Sabi," and Dog, "Henry"

("Sabi," the cheetah enters stage right on leash with trainer. Throughout the performer's
monologue, she pauses on various platforms and finishes on the stage left box where
"Henry" joins her later.)

Ahh, the ultimate in wild winter camouflage wear – this African queen, "Sabi," the
cheetah, demonstrates the wonder of polka dots. Where do we begin with this beauty?
Long, graceful hemlines complete with that strikingly long tail which functions as a
counterbalance while she’s running at seventy miles per hour.

If you’re a cheetah, you can’t be too thin. Thin is in for this gal. You can’t run 70
miles an hour if your built like basset hound.

Oh, the drama of it all! Take note of that lush eyewear. She shows how thick black
eyeliner creatively minimizes the glare of that bright UV light while hunting for your
next meal.

Every beautiful feature has its own function. That is something both women and
men can appreciate. Speaking of men, we haven’t forgotten about you. Where’s our
men’s wear model? "Henry," our yellow Labrador retriever sports a very versatile cream
ensemble, which can be worn in all seasons and on all terrains. It's also appropriate for any occasion whether you’re going to a football game or to a formal dinner. Men, something every one of you will embrace, it needs no ironing! Wash and wear, or, simply wear as "Henry" does.

While quite the handsome view on his own, "Henry" is actually Sabi’s companion. Yep, he’s Sabi’s best friend while she’s performing her cheetah ambassador duties in public, and a playmate while she's off duty. Together these two make a most memorable conservation ensemble. In fact, let's give it up for all of our gorgeous models this evening.

Well, folks, I hope you were able to gather some new ideas for your desert winter wardrobes. Fashion can look good, but it’s not complete without function. We thank you for joining us this evening. Feel free to come down and say hello to "Sabi" and "Henry." Happy Holidays!