

CONTROLLING PUBLIC FEEDING OF ZOO ANIMALS

Steve Bitgood, Jerry Carnes,
Angela Nabors, & Don Patterson
Jacksonville State University

Summary of a Paper to be Presented at the Southeastern Psychological Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA., March, 1988.

Problem

The public feeding of zoo animals is a universal and perplexing problem shared by zoo administrators world-wide. While the problem has been well-documented (e.g., Thompson, 1984; Wilson, 1976), an effective solution has not been reported in the literature. This study compared the effectiveness of three types of "Do-Not-Feed" (DNF) signs at the monkey island in the Birmingham Zoo.

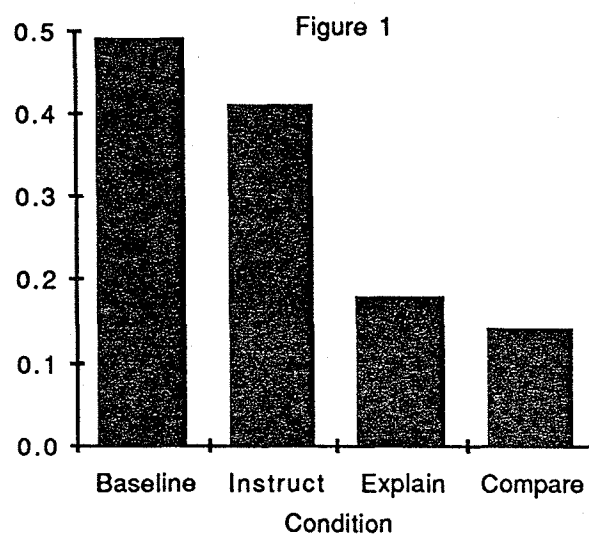
Method

Four conditions were compared: (1) baseline, in which no DNF signs were present; (2) an instructional DNF sign that said, "Please do not feed the animals"; (3) an explanatory DNF sign that said, "Please do not feed. These animals are on special diets"; and (4) a comparative sign that said, "Please do not feed. Would you like it if someone fed your child peanuts and popcorn all day? Help us keep these animals healthy by not feeding them. They are on special diets."

During each day of recording the four conditions were alternated every half hour between 11 am and 3 pm. The order of presenting these conditions was changed each day in a Latin square format: A-B-C-D; B-C-D-A; C-D-A-B; and D-A-B-C. Observers recorded several events unobtrusively. The first observer recorded (1) all instances of feeding on one side of the monkey island; (2) demographic characteristics of the feeder; (3) group size; (4) whether feeding appeared to be cued by other visitors' feeding; and (5) all other relevant events. A second observer recorded the total number of persons at the exhibit at the end of each 5-minute interval in order to obtain a measure of visitor density. Finally, a third observer selected individual visitors as they approached the monkey island and tracked them while they were at the exhibit recording all relevant behaviors including presence or absence of feeding.

Results

Since the density of visitors varied considerably among days and within observation intervals, the rates of animal feeding were corrected for the density of visitors at the exhibit. Figure 1 shows the feeding rates, corrected for visitor density, by visitors under each of the four conditions. The density correction was determined by dividing the total number of feeding episodes per hour by the average number of visitors present during the recording interval. As shown by Figure 1, the instructional sign ("Please do not feed the animals") was as ineffective as no sign at all. The explanatory and comparative signs, on the other hand, were equally effective in drastically reducing public feeding of the monkeys.



Discussion

The results demonstrate that DNF signs that give a reason for not feeding are more effective than signs that simply direct visitors to restrain such behavior. Since the DNF signs used in this study were small and could be viewed only in one area of the exhibit, it is surprising that they were effective. Increasing the salience of the signs might prove to be even more effective.

References

- Thompson, V. (1984). Noncompliant behavior in zoo visitors. *Zoological Garten*, 54(3): 177-190.
- Wilson, C. G. (1976). Public feeding of zoo animals. Regional Proceedings of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums. Wheeling, WV: AAZPA