

Animal Care in Zoos

Lincoln Park Zoo is home to almost 200 different kinds of animals, from eastern black rhinoceroses to Jamaican iguanas. Caring for these animals takes hard work and patience. At Lincoln Park Zoo, animal care includes five (5) areas: 1.) Animal Management, 2.) Environmental Enrichment, 3.) Nutrition, 4.) Positive Reinforcement Training, and 5.) Veterinary Services. Continue reading to learn more about each area.



1. Animal Management

At Lincoln Park Zoo, animal management is a team effort. Staff work together to support many different kinds of animals. Their goal is to provide the best care for each animal.

Zookeepers and staff take care of animals throughout their entire lives. This includes introducing mates to one another, preparing for an animal to be born or to arrive at the zoo, and providing extra care and support as an animal grows older.

Animal management also includes designing and building habitats. Animal habitats have behind-the-scenes spaces where animals can spend quiet time, give birth, or raise their babies. Habitats also have special features for different types of animals. For example, the polar bear exhibit has an ice machine that provides large piles of crushed ice for the polar bears to enjoy!



2. Environmental Enrichment

The animals at Lincoln Park Zoo are given special enrichment. Enrichment is something that is added to an animal's home, like a new plant or a puzzle filled with food. Enrichment engages an animal's senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Enrichment is different for every animal.

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Environmental Enrichment, continued

Creating new enrichment requires creativity and science, and nothing is ever given to an animal until it is safe. Animal management staff studies each animal to better understand the way it behaves. They might look at...

- Adaptations that help the animal survive—Where does this animal live?
- Diets—What does this animal like to eat?
- How the animal spends its time—Is this animal nocturnal?

Then, they design ways to encourage this behavior. Every design is reviewed by a veterinarian and an enrichment manager to check for safety.



3. Nutrition

Each animal at Lincoln Park Zoo receives a diet made just for them. When creating a diet, the nutrition staff looks at an animal's age, weight, body features, and health. Sometimes zoo animals choose not to eat the food given to them. The staff works hard to learn each animal's favorite foods and which foods are healthiest for the animal.

If an animal is not eating or is showing signs of allergies or illness, their diet will be reviewed. Sometimes, staff put on their chef hat and create new recipes. “Yummy Bars” are an official Lincoln Park Zoo recipe for primates. These bars are made of oat bran, whole wheat flour, salt, raisins, dried cherries, dried blueberries, dried apricots, tofu, apple juice, dark brown sugar, eggs, and peanut butter!

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4. Positive Reinforcement Training

Through positive reinforcement training, Lincoln Park Zoo's keepers teach animals to be a part of their own care. This relationship between animal and keeper is important to each animal's care.

All the animals choose whether or not to take part in training sessions. During positive reinforcement training, the keeper will ask an animal to complete actions, such as waving a flipper or showing teeth. If the animal completes the action, keepers provide a reward, such as a tasty snack! This tells the animal that this action is important. If the animal does not complete the action, the keeper will ask again or ask for a different action.

Training is important for many reasons. Teaching animals to be a part of their own care helps them feel more comfortable during different situations, like when a keeper is cleaning their habitat or if the animal needs to visit the veterinarian. Training sessions have helped the polar bears offer their paws for x-rays, the eastern black rhinos stand still during routine blood draws, and the Asian small-clawed otters receive medication for diabetes.



5. Veterinary Services

Lincoln Park Zoo's veterinarians do it all! They help take care of more than 800 different animals from young to old, from fish to mammals, and from tiny Henkel's leaf tailed geckos to huge eastern black rhinoceroses. Zoo veterinarians provide general checkups and emergency services, and address illnesses from allergies to heart disease.

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Extension Questions

1.) How do people take care of animals at the zoo?

2.) How would you describe “positive reinforcement training?”

3.) Why is it important for zoos to have veterinarians?
