

THRIVING BY DESIGN

SPECIAL THANKS...

to Cheryl Meehan and Brian Greco from AWARE Institute for presenting.

DESIGN FOR THRIVING 3

At the very beginning of the design process, we consider this full range of behaviors and embed those considerations into exhibits. Based on the species we are considering, what are its competent behaviors? AWARE uses a great framework to understand this: cognitive skills, physical skills, and social skills.

In exploring and understanding how this animal would engage its environment, we can begin to create some similar challenges. How would they identify and process food? How would they reduce risk in their environment? We've been exploring elements like adjustable rock walls, multidirectional and changeable water flows, furniture that isn't totally stable, smell distribution systems, opportunities for intra- and inter-species interactions when safe, and more.

All these things, partnered with animal care, create curiosity and learning opportunities for the animals. The goal is to create compelling opportunities within the space for animals to practice natural behaviors.

ONE PART PHILOSOPHY 4

As we create dynamic, complex environments, it is essential that the philosophy and method of animal care aligns with the space. We can create an incredible space with tons of opportunity, but if the care staff doesn't utilize it, it won't enhance the lives of animals. Conversely, if the space won't allow for it, even the best animal care staff can't implement these behavioral opportunities.

There is a core belief that is worth addressing at this point: Some animal care staff believe it is their jobs to provide for every possible need of the animal. Have you ever heard of helicopter parents? It can be a bit like that. Sometimes, our animal care staff actually over-provides and doesn't allow animals to face adversity. But challenge and failure are necessary for mental and physical stimulation!

Another consideration among animal care staff is that, deep down, most people feel good when we take care of animals. They like that very personal connection. This is often also good for the animal! However, when the animal's behavioral engagement becomes dependent on the keeper's presence, training sessions, and enrichment provision, they fail to have control of their own experience. To thrive, animals can't be dependent on keepers. A good example of this dependency is if animals' pace by shift gates or if they perk up every time they hear keys. If animals rarely perk up outside of keeper-dependent instances, this is a negative behavioral indicator. Animal care staff need to be able to understand their role as "architects of experience" for the animals.

Yes, incorporating complexity can add to the cost of exhibits. However, our belief at GLMV is that investing in the quality of life for animals may be one of the most essential elements to ensuring a great guest experience. After all, animals who are thriving are more engaging and compelling from a guest perspective.

At GLMV, we are also exploring ways to connect guests to the environmental opportunities within exhibits. What if guests could actually push buttons to open up new opportunities for animals? What if behind-the-scenes tours could help alter the physical environment?

One other key cost-saving aspect is creating flexible habitats. Historically, our habitats are designed for a specific species – and they look like Asian rainforests, African plains, etc. If we think of spaces instead from a behavioral perspective, we can create environments that allow the thriving of multiple species, even if they would live in different locations in the wild. As species and SSPs change, this forward thinking allows our exhibit design investments to stay relevant and functional for many years.

COUNT THE COSTS 5

NECESSITY ISN'T ENOUGH 1

We need to make sure each exhibit provides the basic necessities: animal and human safety, hygiene requirements, easy maintenance, and pleasing aesthetics. Most design processes stop there and bank on animal care staff to use enrichment and training to bring life to the physical space. What would it look like to design for animal thriving?

AWARE Institute, experts in zoological animal welfare, define thriving as individuals having the ability to engage a full array of competent behaviors. This is multifaceted: First, what is thriving, and how do we measure it? And second, how do we ensure that we consider thriving throughout the entire design process?

From the animal perspective, most exhibits have very little dynamic, engaging, or curious aspects for the animals. Natural substrate and living plants alone are rarely enough to create compelling opportunities for the animals. If animals are not engaging a wide array of natural behaviors, then we need to look to enriching the environment. For far too many animals, they are dependent on staff presence to create those behavioral opportunities.

There is significant room to improve the physical space animal residents have. We need to be more thoughtful about natural behaviors and how they perceive their worlds. What sounds, sights, smells, textures, and flavors exist in and around them? We often limit our thinking to what exists within the exhibit, but the experience of the animals goes way beyond that.

We also need to understand that animals in the wild are incredibly responsive to the dynamic environments they call home. Many zoo exhibits may look natural, but they are rarely truly dynamic. We may change perching once a year or change pool levels. We might rearrange tank furniture or allow for seasonal lighting adjustments. For the most part, our exhibits require very little discovery, learning, and challenge of our animal residents which doesn't lead to a full range, thriving experience.

ONE PART PHYSICAL 2

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