

THE SHAPE OF ENRICHMENT

A Quarterly Source of Ideas for Environmental and Behavioral Enrichment

The Bear Essentials

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Martine Colette's Wildlife Waystation is a nonprofit, donor-supported refuge providing medical treatment, shelter, rehabilitation, and placement services for more than 4,000 wild and exotic animals, comprised of 194 species, annually. We house more than 1,000 of these animals at any given time. We are not open to the public on a daily basis, but Tour Days are held regularly on the first and third Sundays of each month, weather permitting. Wildlife Waystation also provides educational tours to school children virtually every day of the year. Wildlife Waystation's staff consists of 16 paid employees, 54 full-time volunteers that live on the premises, and 150 part-time volunteers, who receive continuous training in the care and enrichment of animals.

Each of our 17 bears (of 5 species) stays in a chain-link enclosure both daytime and nighttime that contains trees, platforms, and a den holding area. Most also have pools to lounge in, and on the whole they seem quite content. Masha, our brown bear (*Ursus arctos arctos*) was the exception. She came to

Wildlife Waystation from a circus and was accustomed to a lot of attention and noise. She did not appear content in our compound and tried to destroy her enclosure. She also repeatedly rubbed her head on the chain link, which created a bald spot over each eye.

To make her feel more at home, we placed a radio approximately two feet from her enclosure. The radio is on an automatic timer and is tuned to a "mellow music" station, and we play it from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. every day. What a success! Masha calmed down, stopped her destructive habits, and, on occasion, dances with a sort of swaying two-step. If she is interrupted, she will wait to pick up the beat of the music before beginning to dance again. Her repetitive head rubbing has stopped and her fur has grown back, covering the bald spots.

Every few weeks, one of our volunteers provides beef hip and leg bones for the bears to chew on. The more meat and gristle left on them, the more interesting they are to the bears. They carry their bones around, tug at them and pull on them, exercising a variety of muscles. The other day, Masha was seen laying on her back, next to the radio, with one paw on her bone—the picture of a contented bear!

The day after Christmas, each of our bears received a Christmas tree (Acuña, 1993). Scottie, one of our black bears (*Ursus americanus*), took all the pine needles off the tree and lined his den with them. Bailey, another black bear ignored his until the wind started blowing. Then, as bears do in the wild, he pulled the tree into the opening of his den to block the wind. Masha appeared quite content as she lay on her tree for hours at a time, resting or sleeping with her foreleg draped across the tree. Jake, a grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*), dragged his into his den and slept with

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Grizzly Bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*)



it. All that could be seen in the enclosure of Hummer the sun bear (*Ursus malayanus*) was the skeleton of a tree, looking like it had gone through a tornado.

The bears seemed to like the pine scent so much that every few weeks we spray a corrugated cardboard box with Christmas pine tree scent, which can be purchased at any Christmas

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tree market, put a few handfuls of cereal, popcorn, and raisins in the box, and give one to each of them. They don't eat the box but tear it to pieces, eat the food

inside, and then roll on the cardboard. Every month or so we also spray the pine scent on their Boomer Balls®. This creates new interest in the ball. They lay on it, roll it around, and some even lay on their backs, feet in the air balancing it.

We are often contacted by schools and children's groups that would like to visit Wildlife Waystation and spend a few hours "working" for the animals. One of their favorite things to do is stuff pinecones for the bears. We usually provide large, fresh pinecones, supervision, and a safe area for their project. They provide the peanut butter, raisins, dates, peanuts, and honey. All pinecones are brushed clean and stuffed with all the ingredients except the honey.



The stuffed pinecones are then dipped in honey and ready for the bears.

As a reward, the children are allowed to watch one of our staff members give a pinecone to each of the bears. Although we have five species of bears, not one has ever turned down a pinecone! They lick it, crunch it, and within a few minutes nothing is left! What could be better than happy bears, happy children, and a lesson learned that giving warms the heart? The excess pinecones are stored in one of our freezers, to be used at a later date.

Because most of our bears are lethargic during the day and our Tour Sunday visitors just get to see sleepy bears, our volunteers prepare bear popsicles that are dispensed to the bears on these Tour Sundays. We originally tried freezing the treat in five-gallon pails. However, in order to place the popsicles in the enclosure, each bear had to be moved into a holding area. This proved to be stressful, not only for the bears but also for our staff.

We now use small plastic dishpans (10 by 12 by 6 inches), which are small enough to slide through each animal's feed opening. They are partially filled with a juice/water mixture and pieces of seasonal fruit (apples, peaches, berries, melon, etc.). The containers are left in our freezer for several days until they are completely frozen. The dishpan needs only to be turned upside down for the frozen concoction to slide out.

As with the pinecones, we find that the lure of the popsicle is common to all species. Masha will immediately push hers into a corner, sit down with one leg on each side of the treat, and break it up into little pieces before consuming it. Jake prefers to slide his along the cement floor of his enclosure and then lick the cement. He'll spend quite a bit of time just sliding it back and forth—about two feet one way and two feet the other way. Slide and lick, slide and lick! Each bear seems to have its own way of eating the popsicle, but the results are the same—cool, contented bears!

Through such enrichment ideas, we feel that the animals in our care and our volunteers receive greater behavioral opportunities. We continue to explore new options and will keep you advised of our progress. ♦

References:

Acuña, M. 1993. Christmas Trees for Environmental Enrichment. *The Shape of Enrichment*, 2(4): 1-2.