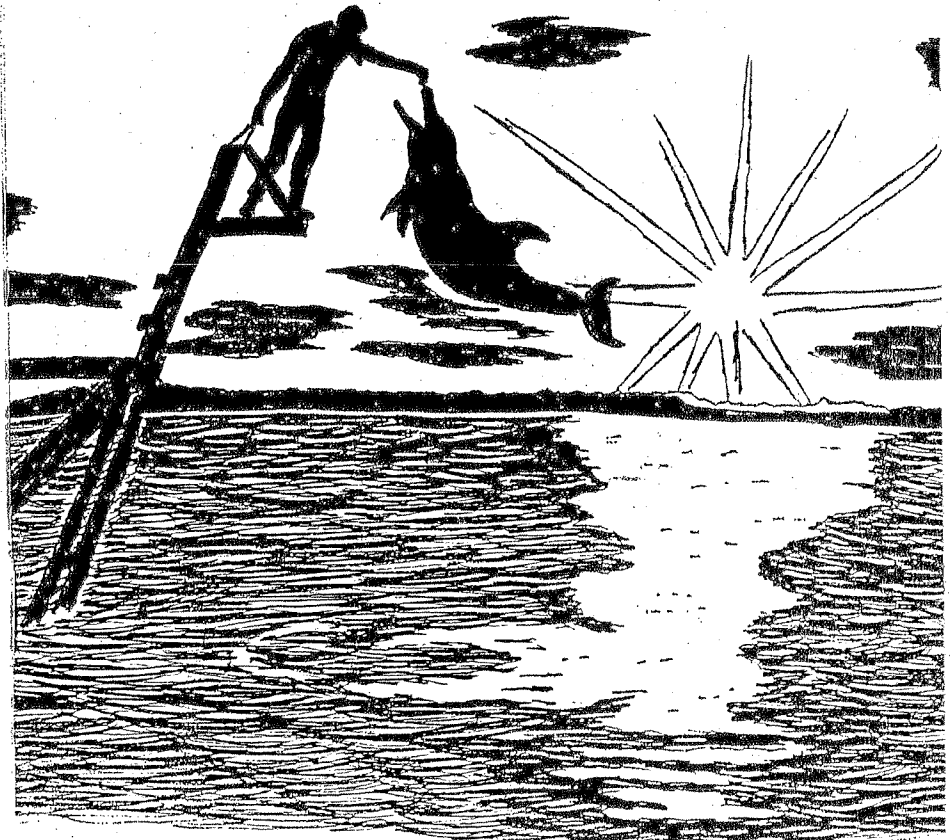
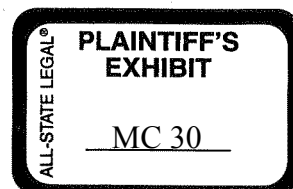


Animal Keepers' Forum



Dedicated to Professional Animal Care

JULY 1979



ELEPHANT CONTROL

by
Ed. Roberts, Sr. Zoo Keeper
W.D. Stone Zoo, Mass.

My topic today is "Elephant Control", and you have probably all heard the expression, "how do you stop a wild charging elephant?" "You take away its credit card." Right?

Well, elephant jokes are almost as endless as the ideas different elephant men have on how to control their animals. But there is one unalterable fact, and all of them will agree on this--that discipline in the form of punishment is the force necessary to gain an elephant's respect.

So how do you discipline an elephant? There are a number of ways a good elephant handler can accomplish this. In the first place, you must enjoy working with the largest of all land animals. Since elephants are known to be very intelligent, it could be said that they make up their own minds on whether they will let you handle them! Elephants form their own likes and dislikes of certain people and others they will tolerate, very much like humans. I have seen zoo people stepped on, batted by a swinging trunk, and have seen an elephant handler get sandwiched between two elephants. If I hadn't yelled a warning to drop to the floor, that handler would have ended up seriously injured, if not killed! Ordinary persons seeing things like this, would think that the elephant was getting even for something that she was punished for. The fact of the matter was--the elephant did not respect the handler, did not fear him, and therefore tried to take advantage of the situation and, let me tell you now, an elephant will test you time and again, just to see if you've got the moxie to stand up to them.

So, to get down to basics, you gain an elephant's respect through fear of punishment. Never punish an elephant for no reason at all, only when it has done something it shouldn't have. Elephants are exceptionally inquisitive, and if they have access to wheel barrows, water hoses, rakes, shovels, buckets, water pipes, almost anything that their trunks can reach, they will, in their playful moods, proceed to become a demolition unit. If you happen to catch the brute doing something it shouldn't, discipline it immediately and not ten minutes later, for it will never understand what it is being punished for.

Now, you ask, what exactly do you do to discipline an elephant when it has done something it shouldn't have. All elephant men usually carry an elephant hook. A good elephant man never hits an elephant with the steel end part of the hook. You rap the animal smartly along the rib cage or the upper hind quarter with the wooden curved part of the hook which is shaped like a cane and shout "no!" a couple of times. Don't worry, the elephant will get the meaning very quickly, for as large as the animal is, they do not like punishment. The keeper who knows when to mete out punishment when necessary and praises his elephant with kind words and a lump or two of sugar or carrots when the elephant is good, will gain the respect and love of the animal, and, in turn, will love the animal also.

Once the keeper has gained this respect, he or she can start working the elephant from chain commands to doing some basic tricks like putting a foot on a wooden block if you wish to trim some toe-nails or work on the pads. To get an elephant to lay down may pose a problem, but I

Elephant Control, continued

have found that by exerting pressure down with the hook on the elephant's top neck, it will get the idea you want it to lie down. The command, along with the hook, would be 'down' followed by the elephant's name. To keep the elephant down, exert light pressure with the blunt end of the hook on its neck repeating the word 'steady' if it starts to rise up.

To move an elephant out of a building, freeze it in one spot with the command 'steady' repeated at intervals as you unchain. I often use the words 'easy, girl' and 'steady now' to freeze an elephant. Always walk on the left of your elephant; if she moves ahead, hook her above the left knee and pull back. Never hook an elephant on the trunk. If you want her to raise her trunk, pat the underside and give her the command 'trunk up' followed by her name.

To back an elephant up from a standing position, use the flat of your left hand, with you hook in your right hand (opposite for lefties) against her trunk, push forward with the command 'back' followed by her name. Chaining up for the night, you may have to hook her on her rear flank to get the leg you want to chain, and once she is in position, give again the command 'steady' while you proceed to put the chain around her leg.

Practice calling from a distance with the command 'come here'. She should come at a run and stop dead in front of you, if you've trained her right. Always praise your animal when she's good. Once she has accepted you as her handler and trainer, then you can trust her with your life.

Elephants manifest their pleasure in different ways. All of them rumble deep in their throats when contented, flap their ears rapidly when you come close, and some roar out a greeting and trumpet noisily when called by name. Our elephant "Babe" used to get so excited each morning she'd wet herself much like a puppy.

Remember, if you have the slightest fear or working with elephants, it would be to your advantage to stay away from them. If you decide to work with them, then punish only when necessary. If you let her get away with something she shouldn't have, then you have lost your control over your elephant.

The elephant must fear punishment and discomfort, and I repeat this, for if you don't chastise when necessary, then some day, she will get you. The reason would be that she did not respect you. More handlers have been maimed or killed by elephants than any other animal in the zoo (or in circuses without the attendant publicity) and the reason was, the elephant had no fear--fear of punishment--from her handler and trainer.

This is how you gain an elephant's respect and love, and you, in turn, can find that you, too, can love and respect such a huge beast.

This paper was presented at the AAZK National Conference, Gainesville, Florida.

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