

# Exotic Companion Mammal Enrichment

## What is enrichment?

Enrichment simply means to enhance the quality or value of something. For the case of our exotic companion animals, enrichment enhances the quality of life providing stimuli for their mental and physical well-being. The goal is to provide an environment that will encourage our pets to express species-appropriate behaviors as well as mental activities.

## Types of enrichment

Enrichment can be divided into two broad categories: social and non-social enrichment. Non-social enrichment refers to the environment and all items a pet is exposed to within its enclosure or general living space. This includes items like toys, beds, substrates, sound, and light. Social enrichment refers to interactions with animals belonging to the same species, other animals, or with owners.

- Consider the social preferences of your pet species in the wild. Many different species, such as rabbits, rats and chinchillas, are very social and enjoy living with others of their species—although individual preferences should be observed. If keeping animals together is not an option, it can be beneficial to have animals close together but in separate cages. Animals can then safely interact (visually and vocally) at a distance.
- On the other hand, some species like hamsters are not social and problems can arise when they are kept in groups.
- Interactions with the owner or other caretakers can include time spent petting, grooming, holding or playing with your pet. These types of interactions require trust from your pet, which needs to be built slowly.

## Benefits of enrichment

Research has shown there are multiple benefits of providing enrichment to not just our exotic companion mammals, but to all animals. Some of those benefits include an increased variety of normal behaviors expressed, decreased abnormal behaviors, decreased anxiety, improved learning abilities, and reduced depression. Even small changes, such as scattering or hiding food, can have a positive impact on exotic companion mammal behaviors.

Enrichment also serves as a tool for owners to monitor animal health. An animal that is not interested in interacting with any of the stimuli provided might be ill or injured.

## Potential negatives

- Time required to create the initial enrichment plan
- Time to monitor the pets during the introduction phase of new enrichment item
- Cost of materials or enrichment items
- Use of materials that are not easy to clean or disinfect
- Trial and error required to find the most suitable enrichment for a particular species
- Injury to pets due to accidents or inadvertent use of toxic materials
- Frustration if the pet does not enjoy the enrichment item selected

## General enrichment concepts

Every enrichment program created should take into consideration the natural history of your exotic companion mammal of interest as well as the range of normal behaviors that may be exhibited.

## Enclosure

Obtain the largest enclosure possible and consider adding vertical space, when appropriate for your species, by including ropes, hammocks, and extra floors.

Research has also shown that animals prefer solid flooring over wire surfaces. Wire is also not typically recommended as it can cause pain and injury to your pet's feet.

The substrate selected will depend on your exotic companion mammal species. The ideal bedding material should be dust free, non-palatable, absorbent, and free of toxic components. Many species like to dig, so providing a deep enough bedding to allow for this behavior is recommended. *Caution:* If the bedding becomes wet this can potentially lead to hypothermia.

## Toys or huts

Providing different toys with different functions and different materials can encourage your pet to play.

- Many rodents like to gnaw, so providing safe sticks or wooden blocks to encourage this behavior is recommended.
- Rabbits like to toss toys around, so providing stacking cups or other plastic toys can keep them entertained (Fig 1).
- Huts of different sizes and materials are also enjoyed by many species to hide during the day when they are resting or if they are stressed out.

Make sure you can easily clean any toys or huts provided.



Figure 1. Stacking cups can be used as toys for small mammals

## Exercise

Species-appropriate items can encourage exercise in the cage, however placing animals in a separate pen can further stimulate exercise by encouraging exploration. This exercise pen can be kept indoors or even outside, weather permitting.

Certain species, such as ferrets and rabbits, can be trained to walk on a harness. Confine these walks to the backyard to minimize any safety risks.

Always monitor your pet when it is outside (whether in a pen or on a harness) to ensure it does not get injured or manages to escape.

## Light and Sound

Some exotic animal companions, such as rodents and rabbits, are usually more active during dusk and dawn so they benefit from decreased light levels to encourage activity. A constant, low-level background noise can help reduce stress in general as well as the impact of loud, sudden noises.

## Puzzle feeders or foraging toys

When we look at the wild counterparts of our exotic companion mammal pets, research has found that they spend most of their waking time searching and foraging for food.

- We can easily encourage this natural foraging behavior by spreading food out in the enclosure instead of placing it all within a bowl. This encourages movement and exploration.

- You can further challenge your pet by hiding food items in simple household items, such as paper bags or untreated cardboard egg cartons. An empty toilet paper roll filled with hay and treats is another great alternative.
- Puzzle feeders are also commercially available. Your pet can be encouraged to use them by using regular food or treats. Ball treat dispensers are great for feeding pellets to our larger exotic mammal companions. They have the benefit that the opening, and therefore the difficulty, can be adjusted. .
- The possibilities are endless and you can combine pellets, a variety of safe treats (freeze dried fruit, cheerios, hay based treats, etc.), as well as different kinds of hay, dried herbs or flower petals (Fig 2).



Figure 2. Examples of commercial and homemade foraging toys that can be used for exotic companion mammals

## Training

Training is another great strategy to provide enrichment by stimulating your pet. Training can also strengthen the owner-pet bond. Find a high reward treat for your pet and start slowly by conducting brief training sessions and slowly creating the behavior you want. This can be a fun experience and you can also train your pet to be comfortable with things such as regular nail trims and accepting medication via syringe (Fig 3).



Figure 3. Training of a rabbit with pellets as a reward to accept medication given via syringe

## Species-specific enrichment suggestions

Each species will require different tactics to provide enrichment in their lives and the following are examples of easy

Species	Enrichment examples
Ferrets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multilevel cage connected with ladders and ramps</li> <li>• Appropriately sized tubes to run in</li> <li>• Boxes with shredded paper</li> </ul>
Rabbits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plastic toddler toys and chew sticks</li> <li>• Box filled with shredded paper and hay for digging</li> </ul>
Guinea pigs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiding food in bedding</li> <li>• Multiple homes to hide in</li> <li>• Brushing</li> </ul>
Chinchillas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of rope perches in the cage</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dust baths</li> <li>• Compressed hay cubes</li> </ul>
Rodents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tube maze within cage</li> <li>• Objects to chew</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

Environmental enrichment is a necessity for all our exotic animal companions to ensure they can express their normal behaviors and are able to cope with any changes in their life without too much added stress. Many different options are available and it is important to work with the needs of your species of interest to be able to encourage them to express their normal behaviors.

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