

■ Alpaca Enrichment



Using a target on the end of a wand, Gypsy learns to jump over obstacles in one of the winter clicker training “games.”

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en·rich·ment noun

1. **enrichment** – *act of making something fuller or more meaningful or rewarding*
2. **enrichment** – *something that enriches*

Few would argue that owning alpacas enriches our lives. Much has been written about their calming effect on humans and certainly “alpaca watching” is one of the many joys of ownership. But do we enrich their lives? Given the many gifts alpacas offer humans, shouldn’t we consider it our duty to do everything we can to provide fulfilling lives for our alpacas?

For South American alpacas, the procurement of adequate forage is Job 1 and requires most of an alpaca’s attention. The search ends up providing exercise and interesting and varied food stuff,

leaving the animals happy to rest when they can. In this country we provide, if anything, too much of a good thing when it comes to food. Our animals are often overweight, requiring that we restrict their access to pasture by keeping them penned where they cannot roam. Some breeders lack space and their alpacas live in confined areas, sometimes even in crowded conditions. Some alpacas do not have access to pasture at all, and some only for part of each year. In these settings, alpacas receive their allotment of food in one or two concentrated servings per day, leaving the rest of the day empty.



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Gypsy slurps a tasty treat from the Wobbly Dish Toy.

According to Dr. Susan Brown, exotic animal veterinarian and behaviorist, “In the world of behavior and animal keeping ‘enrichment’ is defined as the process by which the environment of captive animals is modified to benefit the inhabitants.” As defined by Shepherdson (1989) and Chamove & Moodie (1990), the goals of environmental enrichment are to:

1. Increase behavioral diversity.
2. Reduce the frequencies of abnormal behavior.
3. Increase the range or number of normal (i.e., wild) behavior patterns.
4. Increase positive utilization of the environment.
5. Increase the ability to cope with challenges in a more normal way.

While alpacas do spend a lot of time eating, they also have rich behavioral palettes besides that. The more enrichment opportunities you offer, the more varied behaviors you will see.

The following is a list of enrichments to get you thinking about the possibilities:

- creating browse by offering limbs and branches
- rotational grazing to provide access to new areas periodically
- offering hay in multiple locations outside in winter (weather permitting), requiring foraging behaviors
- offering a variety of hay instead of the same type
- offering oat straw
- offering smaller amounts of hay more often
- varying the location and method of offering hay, grain or treats
- providing scratching posts or street sweeper-type brushes mounted on the wall
- providing mirrors
- providing summer water features, such as hosing or wading pools
- creating varied terrain, such a “king of the hill” mound in the pasture.
- arranging pastures so that the animals have things to watch such as traffic, bicyclists, or walkers.



Left, the “Carrot Treat Panel” consists of little doors attached by one screw over holes in a wooden panel. Carrot pieces are put behind the doors for the dexterous lips of Gypsy who simply moves the doors aside. Below, the “Roll-Around,” a plastic jar with a hole in the side, randomly dispenses carrot treats.



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Getting Your Alpacas to Try New Foods

Getting alpacas to try new things often involves food. Grain works, but carrots, grapes, and other garden vegetable treats are preferable to too much grain or sugary treats. Just because your alpaca will eat something, doesn't mean that you want to use it for enrichment—make sure that you are offering healthy foods. If your alpacas don't know about carrots, for example, it can be a challenge to get them to try this new food. Here are a few ideas:

- Cut the carrots up into very small pieces that are easily chewed.
- Introduce the carrots with a grain treat that your animals already love.
- Mixing shredded carrots with alfalfa leaves can encourage the animals to get a bit of a taste, as it is difficult to separate the small bits of carrots from the leaves.
- Be persistent!

There are some who might question the value and practicality of providing enrichment. After all, we all lead busy lives. Dr. Brown explained, “There is a large amount of scientific evidence based on experimental design that shows conclusively that environmental enrichments are beneficial to the emotional, psychological and physical health of captive animals. Using environmental enrichments is a PROACTIVE approach, meaning we are working to prevent behavioral problems, not waiting until there IS a problem and then reacting to it (the REACTIVE APPROACH) and trying to fix it... which often doesn't work. Many problem behaviors occur because the animal is highly motivated to do a behavior and then finds a way to express it—often in a way that is a problem for you!”

There aren't too many alpacas luckier than Gypsy and Canela. These gelded males live in Alaska with Nina Faust, one of the most dedicated alpaca enthusiasts you are likely to find. Given the long winter and necessarily limited access to grazing Nina has made it her job to provide enrichment all year long, but particularly in the winter months. She told me, “I started with toys, things to entertain them, especially in the winter. Gypsy liked turning on the lights, figured out how to move the light switch cover, and loved doing things with his lips. A treat panel with holes covered by small, movable doors secured with one screw provided an interesting place to hide carrots. Little bowls with holes drilled in the middle and mounted on a dowel secured to a ledge created the “Wobbly Dish Toy,” Gypsy's all time favorite. Plastic jars with holes made “carrot roll-arounds.”

Nina also takes her show on the road, explaining: “When the winter footing is good we head out for a fun walk. To spice it up, I walk the route ahead of taking them out so I can hide some carrots and a bit of hay in depressions I make in the snow. This “treasure hunt” really appeals to their seeking instincts and love of finding food. They know we are going out on a hunt and clearly enjoy finding the hidden tidbits. Sometimes if we cannot go out of the pen I will hide food inside the pen. They will scour the pen looking for every morsel!”

Given my particular bent, I believe that training when done in a way that involves the animal can serve both as enrichment and works toward your interests as well. Clicker training is both remarkably efficient and fun, and, given that clicker training is based on positive reinforcement, has the added ben-



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enefit of insuring that the animal is a willing participant.

Nina Faust is also a fan of clicker training and has used it with great success. “The first thing I trained them to do was come to a target and to follow it. Then I worked on getting them to push. Pushing took a while as I was clicker training the behavior as it was performed (also called capturing behavior). Seeing the flash of insight on their faces when they finally understood that I was asking them to sit down was a feeling of total connection with them. This was the moment they understood what the click means and we finally had a common language, the click!”

Off-lead work is a great way to increase the level of trust between human and alpaca. Nina told me, “Once the boys understood the clicker I started creating mazes, jumps, and other tasks for them to master, like weaving between poles, walking through a hoop, standing and sitting on a rug, walking under a tunnel, and ringing a bell. What thoroughly amazed me was that as they caught on to the clicker training ‘game,’ they truly looked forward to these daily training sessions. Even better, I noticed that their level of trust with me increased dramatically, and they were really cueing in to everything little thing I did.”

Martha, my friend, helper, and chief of pasture maintenance, came in from the pasture the other day hands on hips and said, “You will never guess what Woody did!” Woody is deaf, incredibly clever and always into something. Martha had been out in the pasture poop scooping with the Gator, a John Deere

run-about with a dump bed. The animals are always very interested in the Gator, and follow it around the pasture. They have been known to help themselves to Martha’s water bottles, snacks, gloves, or anything else on the seats or in the open glove box.

On this particular day the animals created a new wrinkle. Martha said, “I couldn’t find the key and I always leave it in the ignition! I was just about to panic when Woody walked over and spit the key out right onto the hood!” Who knows what Woody was thinking but it was a darn good thing he decided to deposit our one and only key where Martha could find it... had he chosen another time and place, the Gator still might be parked in that field. I suppose the moral of this story is provide enrichment or the alpacas will provide their own!

In writing this article I relied heavily on information and support from Susan Brown, DVM. Dr. Brown is an exotic animal veterinarian with extensive experience with animal behavior.

Many thanks to Nina Faust for her help with this article, the wonderful photos and on-going inspiration!

Left, obviously, Gypsy and Canela must enjoy the mirror. They have been rubbing noses or something with the alpaca in the glass!

Above, a treasure hunt in a snow-filled paddock.

For over 25 years, Marty has traveled the world, devoting her professional life to the well-being of camelids and the education of their owners. Her clinics, books, and videos have helped thousands of camelid owners more fully understand, appreciate, and enjoy their animals. Marty and her husband, Brad, operate the Camelidynamics Training Center in Bend, Oregon. She can be reached at marty@camelidynamics.com.