

Humans as Enrichment: Human-Animal Interactions and the Perceived Benefit to the Cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), Human and Zoological Establishment

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Abstract : Engagement with non-human animals is a rapidly-growing field of study within the animal science and social science sectors, with human-interactions occurring in many forms; interactions, encounters and animal-assisted therapy. To our knowledge, there has been a wide array of research published on domestic and livestock human-animal interactions, however, there appear to be fewer publications relating to zoo animals and the effect these interactions have on the animal, human and establishment. The aim of this study was to identify if there were any perceivable benefits from the human-animal interaction for the cheetah, the human and the establishment. Behaviour data were collected before, during and after the interaction on the behaviour of the cheetah and the human participants to highlight any trends with nine interactions conducted. All 35 participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire prior to the interaction and immediately after to ascertain if their perceptions changed following an interaction with the cheetah. An online questionnaire was also distributed for three months to gain an understanding of the perceptions of human-animal interactions from members of the public, gaining 229 responses. Both questionnaires contained qualitative and quantitative questions to allow for specific definitive answers to be analysed, but also expansion on the participants perceived perception of human-animal interactions. In conclusion, it was found that participants' perceptions of human-animal interactions saw a positive change, with 64% of participants altering their opinion and viewing the interaction as beneficial for the cheetah (reduction in stress assumed behaviours) following participation in a 15-minute interaction. However, it was noted that many participants felt the interaction lacked educational values and therefore this is an area in which zoological establishments can work to further improve upon. The results highlighted many positive benefits for the human, animal and establishment, however, the study does indicate further areas for research in order to promote positive perceptions of human-animal interactions and to further increase the welfare of the animal during these interactions, with recommendations to create and regulate legislation.

Keywords : *Acinonyx jubatus*, encounters, human-animal interactions, perceptions, zoological establishments

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