

ENVIRONMENT **ENRICHMENT**

Ensuring the mental and physical well-being of your donkeys.

 27 October 2020  [Read on The Donkey Sanctuary website](#)

“Are my donkeys happy?” is a question that most donkey carers ask themselves from time to time. Our donkeys are well fed and physically want for very little, but once these basic needs have been met is there anything more that can be done to help them enjoy their lives?

The answer is yes. Enrichment for domesticated animals, especially those in zoos and conservation parks throughout the world, is commonly practised as a way of maintaining the well-being of their animals.

Looking after the mental well-being of our donkeys and mules is very important as it can affect both their physical health and behaviour. A frustrated or bored donkey can show reluctance to interact with us or may become dull and uninterested in life, which can lead to health problems.

WHAT IS **ENVIRONMENT ENRICHMENT**?

Environment enrichment is a process for creating greater variety and choice in an animal’s environment, this can be through changes to structures or husbandry practices.

Domesticated environments often provide limited opportunities for animals to perform natural and normal behaviours such as feeding or exercise to the levels that are required to meet the animal’s innate needs. Enrichment helps to ensure the animal’s mental and physical needs are more fully met through increasing amounts of mental and physical stimulation.

THE TWO APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENT ENRICHMENT

There are two approaches to environmental enrichment. We can try to create a more natural or “wild” environment for the animal or we can provide toys and activities that animals can operate to provide stimulation. Using both approaches increases the enrichment provided for the animal. In this document we will provide ideas for both types of enrichment.

WHAT THE DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF ENRICHMENT?

SOCIAL – CONTACT

Contact can be with a friend or in a group of same species or with other animals (human or non-human.) Non-contact visual, auditory, human or non-human.

OCCUPATIONAL

Psychological puzzles and allowing them control of environment, exercise and movement including how often, how far the animal moves.

PHYSICAL

This includes the size of the housing or enclosure and the complexity of the environment including accessories, which can be internal and permanent such as furniture, gates and stables or temporary such as toys and different surfaces. Physical also refers to external objects in the animal area such as hanging objects, puzzles and toys.

SENSORY

Anything that stimulates the animals senses such as visual, windows, views. Auditory sounds like music, vocalisations and others that stimulate smell, feel and touch.

NUTRITIONAL

How often is food available and how is it delivered? what do animals have to do to access food and the types of food available from staple diet to browse and treats



WHAT DO DONKEYS DO **IN THE WILD?**

Donkeys in a natural environment walk up to 12 miles (20 km) a day in search of rough, coarse vegetation on which they can browse, by comparison, the domesticated donkey will often be kept in a small grass paddock and with the addition of straw, hay or haylage.

The high energy diet of the domesticated donkey means that their nutritional requirements can be met within 2-3 hours of foraging, they can gain all their nutritional requirements by walking less than one mile a day. In a wild situation, donkeys will interact very much with a rich and varied environment that includes watering holes, high and low ground, open spaces, possibly wooded areas as well as dealing with other species.

WHAT ARE THE **BENEFITS OF ENRICHMENT?**

Enrichment is now recognised as essential to an animal's wellbeing. Enrichment for domesticated animals, especially those in zoos and conservation parks throughout the world, is commonly practised as a way of maintaining the wellbeing of their animals. Mental stimulation helps to:

- Maintain normal behaviour
- Prevent problems associated with boredom
- Ensure that the instinctual needs are met
- Cope with the challenges of domestication
- Increase exercise
- Maintain healthy weight

Donkeys placed through our [Rehoming Scheme](#) are the lucky ones, having their basic needs met, living with suitable companions and being given access to appropriate feed, shelter and human company. But as a result it can be difficult to create new activities for them. After all, we know that we have to be careful to limit treats, especially those that come in packets and are high in sugar, so we have to find other ways to make their lives varied.

GOALS FOR ENRICHMENT

- Increase behavioural diversity (give them more things to do)
- Reduce the frequencies of abnormal behaviours (reduce stress and frustration)
- Increase the range or number of normal behaviour patterns (follow their ethogram)
- Increase positive utilisation of the environment (make it easy for them to do more)
- Increase the ability to cope with the challenges in a more normal way (being calmer and coping better).



Before beginning an enrichment program it is vital to assess the individual needs of your animals and identify where their needs are not being met.

To ensure you are meeting your animals' greatest needs, you should complete two important exercises:

RESOURCE MAPPING

Use this exercise as a starting point to explore what your donkeys' environment currently provides for them and begin to plan how you can further meet their needs

TIME BUDGETS

In this exercise we examine how your donkeys spend their entire day. This allows us to understand where our donkey might get bored, and from there, work on ways to help.

24 hours time budget for donkeys instructions 396.22
KB PDF



HOW ENVIRONMENT **AFFECTS ENRICHMENT**

Environment is the key to good enrichment. While a flat paddock with post and rail fencing is safe and visually very appealing to us humans, it may be a less than stimulating environment for a donkey or mule. The creation of a more varied and interesting living area is vital for overall enrichment success.

If possible, the introduction of a more varied pasture can be of great help in enriching the donkey's environment in a natural way; this may include access to safe, wooded areas (provided of course, there are no **poisonous trees or plants** for the donkeys to eat); the addition of sandpits for the donkeys to roll and dig in; a mound of topsoil creating a small hill which donkeys can climb or stand on; access to streams or shallow water, if possible.

Obviously, these options are not always possible and if this is the case, the addition of larger logs for donkeys to climb over and search round or herbage strips at the edges of fields so that donkeys have a variety of different plants to consume, may be considered. Of course, an enriched environment will provide an increased number of possible hazards.

All additions to the environment should be considered from a safety point of view and a head collar should never be permanently left on a donkey in the field – this prevents the donkey being caught up on anything. Always consider if enrichment activities are appropriate for your donkeys age and vision, as such a big log pile or mound of earth may not be suitable for elderly or blind donkeys.

THE 'DO ONE THING' APPROACH



Enrichment does not mean your donkey runs around all day trying to do all the things that you have set up.

Enrichment is about providing greater opportunities for your donkeys to interact with their environment, make choices and to be more mentally and physically active. Good enrichment is a mixture of changing the way we carry out routine activities like feeding and creating an environment that more fully meets our donkeys' needs. We don't have to change everything all at once.

TRY THE 'DO ONE THING' APPROACH

Just think of one thing each day that you can do differently in your donkeys' environment and change it. From there develop a one week or two week programme and just write down the things that you want to change, move, create and rotate them on a 7-14 day basis so there is always something new or novel being introduced to their environment.

MOVE

Move things around, put food in different places, offer access to different water sources, and change parts of the environment the animal can gain access to; move location of feed sources, move logs and other toys on a daily or weekly basis. Move the donkey to different areas for grooming and training.

RENEW

Renew the toys, familiar toys become boring, so change toys and introduce novel objects, in and out of the animals' environment on a regular basis. Renew logs when the bark is stripped.

REFRESH

Refresh those logs, change them as soon as the donkeys have eaten the bark and lose interest, refresh branches, salt licks, buckets, toys etc, simply by cleaning them.

INVENT

Invent new ways of presenting enrichment ideas; put a couple of pieces of carrot at the bottom of a wellington boot, put small hazel branches at different heights and in novel locations.

NATURAL

Try to keep things natural, think of what the donkey naturally needs. If you can meet their natural needs they remain happier and healthier.

IDEAS FOR ENRICHMENT

Before planning any enrichment activities, please consider these important safety tips:

1. Ensure any enrichment items are strong enough and won't break
2. Slice carrots/fruit/vegetables lengthways to reduce choking risks
3. Make sure your donkey can't get caught or hung up
4. Ensure there is enough to go around to avoid conflict between donkeys
5. Avoid anything sharp that could cause injury, when played with by donkeys

6. Make sure all food is suitable and non toxic to your donkeys and mules



Always consider the suitability for your animals and environment, adapt and amend to suit your situation but always think about safety, avoiding conflict and frustration between individuals.

MORE **INFORMATION**

Our skilled and experienced team of welfare advisers are on hand to give advice and appropriate support during office hours. If you're having problems caring for your donkeys or mules, [contact our welfare team](#) or telephone 01395 578222 and ask to be put through to the welfare department.