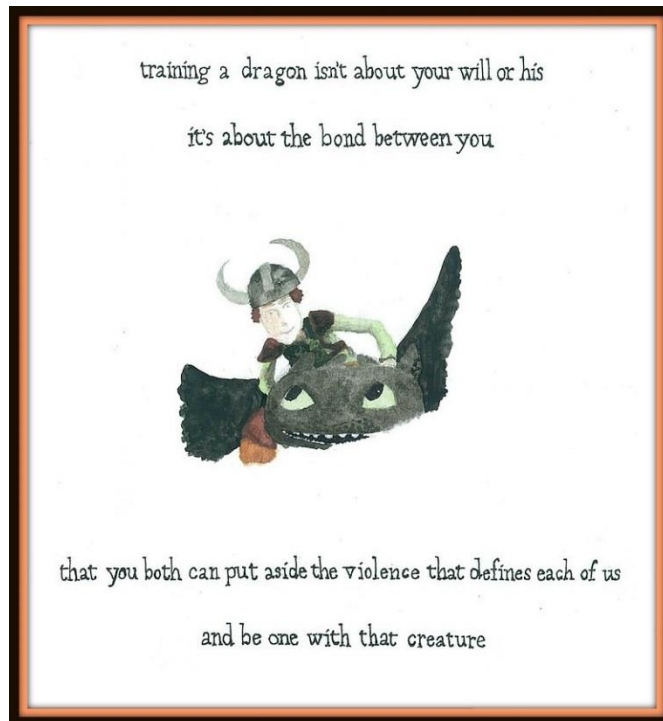


Clicking with Dragons!

June 19, 2015 by [Amy Martin, Owner, Founder, and Chief Operator of Conscious Companion™](#)



What's the first animal you trained? Was it a mammal or bird? Was it your dog, cat, rat, guinea pig, or parrot?

Mine was a reptile. In fact, it was a Komodo Dragon.

You may be wondering why, and where on earth I would train a Komodo Dragon. It's not as crazy as you think. I promise. I'll explain, and hopefully after I do, you might see these intimidating lizards in a new light!

Back In The Day

I used to work at Audubon Nature Institute. I worked there for a decade training all kinds of creatures from poison dart frogs to crocodiles. There were many reasons for training them all, but the first and most important one was safety.

Why Does Safety Matter?

When you are working with an animal that can kill you, either accidentally, or because you are on their species' menu, you have to put safety first. We did this a number of ways. Sometimes it was through protected contact (managing the animal without touching them) and other times we did it using a team of backup staff watching the animal while you worked elsewhere in the exhibit. My favorite way to stay safe around them was training them! Yes, you can train a dragon. In fact, you can train any lizard, including yours at home! (more on that later.)



Kadar, the Komodo Dragon – copyright Amy Martin

Why Does Stress Free Matter?

When you are working with endangered species, their well-being is always a priority in your mind. Some of the animals in zoos and aquariums are the last of their kind on Earth. They are being maintained, and bred to preserve their species. This is what we were doing with the many types of lizards under our care.

We had many challenges caring for these critically endangered species. One of the challenges was determining when they were stressed. It can be difficult to determine when a reptile is stressed. This is because iguanas and other reptiles do not show the same physical signs of stress as mammals do. But scientists at Copenhagen Zoo found a way to [measure the stress levels in reptiles by analyzing their faces!](#) When reptiles are stressed they release stress hormones into their blood stream. These stress hormones can cause a myriad of physical and mental problems. Reptiles can become stressed from a number of different sources: harmful temperature or humidity, or an enclosure design that prevents the reptile from behaving naturally. Extremely elevated levels of stress hormones can inhibit reproduction. This is not good when we are dealing with endangered animals! Just like in humans, chronic stress affects reptiles' immune system and makes them more vulnerable to disease and even death. So *minimizing their stress was of the utmost importance to me!*



Using Low Stress Handling Techniques with a critically endangered Blue Iguana – copyright, Conscious Companion

Using the Clicker To Train Lizards

As I mentioned above, we trained our reptiles for all sorts of things. If we had to go into an exhibit to feed a hungry crocodile, we asked them each to “station”. This was teaching them to go to their place in the exhibit and feed them at their special spot. (I can hear the gasps of disbelief) ... Yes, crocodiles and alligators are very smart. In fact, *every reptile I have ever known is very smart*. They knew their names and knew exactly where to go when we asked them. Many reptiles have complex parental behavior and have been known to play!



“Blue” & “Cooper” learning how to be calm at feeding time, through the use of clicker training – copyright Conscious Companion

These critically endangered Blue Iguanas (pictured above) were mates at the Audubon Nature Institute. This image is a snapshot of me teaching Blue and Cooper to station. They are learning “manners at meal times” through the use of clicker training. By teaching them how to “station” and “wait”, I was able to eliminate feeding aggression from the male, and competition over food at meal times. His mate, Cooper learned to feel safe around Blue, and was able to eat her meals without being challenged and intimidated by him. They became quite the pair!

We also trained them for medical purposes (or what we referred to as husbandry purposes). This allowed us to collect blood from them without stress. Blue and Cooper both learned how to give blood voluntarily through their tails. *We never restrained them.* It was amazing to see how much trust you could build with an animal who is naturally afraid (and sometimes very aggressive) toward humans! Through this kind of force free training Blue and Cooper became a healthy and happy breeding pair. They also become two of my best reptile friends.



Blue and Cooper snuggling in their “night house” “Close the door, human! Can’t you see we want some privacy?”

Training Your Lizards at Home

Just because reptiles are cold-blooded animals doesn’t mean they’re “cold” in the sense of their personality lacking. They have feelings. In fact, many are very affectionate. If you are wanting to create a lasting friendship and bond with your lizard at home, you can! If you want to maintain their health and well-being, train them! Do you want them to live a longer, healthier life? Train them using a clicker!

Clicker training is at the forefront of the effective animal training. These techniques can be used on the reptiles (and amphibians) in your own home! This kind of training uses ethical and scientifically based methods. It’s cruelty-free training based on science. Science shows us that we can make more progress by using patience, kindness, and allowing choices – rather than creating fear. *Reptiles are no exception.*



Handsome "Blue" a critically endangered Blue Iguana – Their wild population is estimated to be fewer than 30.

Don't Believe Everything You Hear or See In The Movies.

Have you seen the latest Jurassic Park film? We saw it opening night. (I am a reptile lover, so of course, I adore dinosaurs!) If you haven't seen it, don't worry; I won't spoil anything for you. I will just say that it was dramatic. And it was amusing at times. At other times it was upsetting and frustrating. One of those amusing moments was a scene pictured below.



Riding on motorcycles in the rain forest is *not* how we train lizards in real life. It's fun to imagine, but it's not reality. And if you want to try clicker training with your lizards at home, don't follow what the film does. In the film, the veloceraptor trainer uses a clicker to get the raptors to listen to his

commands. *But how he used the clicker was complete nonsense.* Like I said, I won't spoil it for you, but don't take the clicker training to heart. But if you want to learn more about how you can train your lizard with compassion and kindness, feel free to email me! In the meantime, you can [learn more about clicker training here.](#) Happy Clicking!

“When we understand that all animals are our relatives, perhaps then we will treat them as our brothers and sisters.” ~ A.D. Williams

Related Reading

- [Read about the Kadar the Komodo Dragon here.](#)
- [Target Training and Voluntary Blood Drawing of the Aldabra Tortoise \(*Geochelone gigantea*\)](#)
- [WILD INSIDE THE NATIONAL ZOO: REPTILE REJUVENATION](#)
- [The Emotional Lives of Reptiles: Stress and Welfare](#)
- [Handling Reptiles](#)
- [Stress, reproduction, and adrenocortical modulation in amphibians and reptiles](#)

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