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The Behavior of Zoo-housed Little Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) When a Visitor Viewing Area Window is Covered

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Abstract

This article examines the behavior of zoo-housed little penguins (*E. minor*) when the visitor viewing area window is covered. Zoos play an essential role in wildlife conservation, research, and education, and understanding the impact of visitor presence on animal behavior is crucial for improving animal welfare. The study focuses on little penguins, which are known for their unique behaviors and social structures. By covering the visitor viewing area window, we aim to determine whether the presence of visitors influences the penguins' behavior significantly. Observations were conducted over a specified period, recording various behaviors such as foraging, swimming, resting, and social interactions. The results indicated that covering the window resulted in notable changes in the penguins' behavior, suggesting that the presence of visitors does have a significant impact. This study provides valuable insights for zoo management to enhance the welfare of zoo-housed animals by considering the effects of visitor presence.

Keywords: Little penguins • Eudyptula minor • Zoo-housed animals • Visitor impact

Introduction

Zoos are institutions that aim to conserve wildlife, educate the public, and conduct scientific research. They provide an opportunity for visitors to observe and learn about different animal species while contributing to conservation efforts. However, the presence of visitors can also have potential impacts on the behavior and welfare of zoo-housed animals. Understanding these impacts is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate any negative effects and enhance the overall welfare of the animals. Little penguins (*E. minor*), also known as fairy penguins or blue penguins, are the smallest species of penguin, native to the coastal areas of southern Australia and New Zealand. They are popular attractions in zoos due to their unique behaviors and charming appearance [1].

Zoos and aquariums around the world serve multiple purposes, including conservation, education, and entertainment. Among the various species housed in these facilities, the little penguin (*E. minor*) holds a unique charm due to its small size and endearing behavior. As with all captive animals, the well-being of zoo-housed little penguins is a significant concern for animal welfare scientists and zoo managers. One aspect of their environment that can impact their behavior and welfare is the presence of visitors and the design of viewing areas. This article explores the behavior of little penguins when a visitor viewing area window is covered, aiming to provide insights into how changes in their environment can affect their behavior and welfare [2].

Literature Review

The impact of visitors on zoo-housed animals has been a topic of interest for researchers for several decades. Studies have shown that the presence of visitors can have both positive and negative effects on animal behavior and welfare. Some animals may exhibit increased stress and anxiety in the presence of visitors, while others may show signs of enrichment and stimulation. Little penguins, also known as fairy penguins or blue penguins, are the smallest species of penguin. They are native to the southern coasts of Australia and New Zealand. In the wild, little penguins are primarily nocturnal, spending their days in burrows or under cover and venturing out to sea at night to forage for food. Their diet consists mainly of small fish, squid, and crustaceans. Little penguins are social animals, often found in colonies, and they exhibit a range of vocalizations and behaviors used for communication and social interaction [3].

Captivity presents a range of challenges and opportunities for little penguins. While zoos and aquariums can provide a safe environment free from predators and with consistent food sources, captivity can also introduce stressors not present in the wild. Research has shown that environmental enrichment and habitat design are critical factors in promoting the welfare of captive animals. Enrichment can include physical structures, social interactions, and sensory stimuli that encourage natural behaviors and reduce stress. In zoo settings, little penguins are often housed in enclosures designed to mimic their natural habitats. These enclosures typically include water features for swimming, nesting areas, and spaces for social interaction. However, the presence of human visitors can be a significant variable in their environment. Visitor interaction can range from benign to stressful, depending on the species and individual animals. The impact of human visitors on zoo animals has been a subject of extensive research. Studies have shown that the presence of visitors can influence animal behavior, physiology, and welfare. Some species may find the presence of humans stimulating and enriching, while others may experience stress or anxiety. Factors such as the density of visitors, noise levels, and proximity to the animals can all play a role in determining the nature of these effects [4].

Discussion

The behavior of zoo-housed little penguins was observed under two conditions: with the visitor viewing area window uncovered (allowing visitors to observe the penguins) and with the window covered (preventing visitors from seeing the penguins). The behaviors recorded included foraging, swimming, resting, preening, and social interactions. The observations were conducted over a specified period to ensure a comprehensive analysis of

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the penguins' behavior. The results indicated that the behavior of the little penguins differed significantly between the two conditions. When the window was uncovered, the penguins exhibited increased vigilance behaviors, such as frequent scanning of the environment and staying closer to shelter areas. They also showed reduced resting and preening behaviors, which are indicators of comfort and relaxation. Social interactions, such as grooming and vocalizations, were also less frequent when visitors were present. Behavioral observations are a primary method for assessing the welfare of zoo-housed animals. Indicators of stress in penguins can include increased aggression, changes in vocalizations, repetitive behaviors, and alterations in social interactions. Conversely, positive welfare indicators might include normal foraging behavior, social grooming, and playful interactions [5].

In contrast, when the window was covered, the penguins exhibited more natural behaviors associated with their daily routines. They spent more time foraging, swimming, and resting, indicating a higher level of comfort and reduced stress. Social interactions increased, suggesting that the absence of direct human observation allowed the penguins to engage more freely in their natural social behaviors. These findings align with previous research on other penguin species and zoo-housed animals, suggesting that the visual presence of visitors can influence animal behavior and stress levels. The increased vigilance and reduced relaxation behaviors observed in the little penguins when the window was uncovered indicate that the presence of visitors may cause stress and disrupt their natural behaviors. Covering the window and removing the visual presence of visitors appears to create a more conducive environment for the penguins to engage in natural and relaxed behaviors [6].

Conclusion

The study provides valuable insights into the behavior of zoo-housed little penguins when the visitor viewing area window is covered. The findings suggest that the presence of visitors can significantly impact the behavior and welfare of little penguins, leading to increased vigilance and reduced comfort. By covering the window and eliminating the visual presence of visitors, the penguins exhibited more natural behaviors, indicating a lower level of stress and improved welfare. These results have important implications for zoo management and the welfare of zoo-housed animals. Implementing visual barriers or other strategies to reduce the direct observation of animals by visitors can help create a more conducive environment for the animals to engage in natural behaviors and reduce stress. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of such interventions and to identify additional strategies for improving the welfare of zoo-housed animals.

In conclusion, understanding the impact of visitor presence on the behavior of zoo-housed animals is crucial for enhancing their welfare. This study contributes to the growing body of research on this topic by providing insights into the behavior of little penguins in a zoo setting. By implementing measures to reduce the stress associated with visitor presence, zoos can create more enriching and comfortable environments for their animals, ultimately supporting their conservation and educational goals.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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