Enriching the Lives of Small Exotic Pet Mammals

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All too often, clients ignore the concepts of environmental enrichment, socialization, and exercise for their small exotic pet mammals. Sometimes, these pets, such as guinea pigs, rabbits, ferrets, hamsters, gerbils, and rats, live most of their lives in cages or tanks with little regard given to their mental and physical stimulation. With poor husbandry and inappropriate diets, animals become obese, lazy, and less likely to interact and provide pleasure as pets. It is also well known that constant confinement can lead to stress, as well as certain otherwise avoidable behavioral and health problems.

This article briefly discusses various aspects of environmental enrichment, including methods to help ensure appropriate exercise for small pet mammals. However, this is a complex topic, and it is difficult to cover all aspects in a single article. Veterinarians treating pets that live in cages or tanks should not only be familiar with the species’ native habitats, lifestyles, and social interactions but also know how to educate clients to ensure that these unique pets receive the best care. It is a misconception to think that these animals are maintenance-free because they do not need to be walked. Although the ancestors of today’s pocket pets were wild animals, those living in clients’ homes are captive-bred and entirely dependent on their human caretakers for food, care, exercise, and company.

General Concepts

The Cage

Because exotic small pet mammals live in cages (or tanks), each should have the largest cage that owners can afford, make room for, and maintain. When most of a pet’s time is spent in a cage, extra inches or feet make a big difference. Larger cages also allow for greater creativity and enrichment with the addition of shelves for multiple levels or deeper bedding for burrowing. Clients should ensure that cages have proper bar spacing to prevent injury and escape and have platforms so that pets can be off the cage floor. A number of bedding choices exist, and the type should be chosen based on the pet’s needs and potential use. If wood is used, cedar shavings should be avoided in favor of aspen; if paper bedding products are used, enough should be provided to promote cleanliness and allow digging.

Supervised Time Out

Because constant confinement can lead to stress, anxiety, and health problems, clients should occasionally provide a safe environment outside of the cage. Allowing pets to run around and explore a larger area provides great exercise. Proper supervision is a must when pets are outside of their cages. Owners should cover holes to ensure that rooms are escape-proof and ensure that electric cords are inaccessible to prevent their pets from chewing on them. They should also take precautions to keep exotic pets safe from other pets in the house and alert other family members when a pet is out of its cage.

Company

Safe group housing is ideal for many exotic pets—especially species that normally live in groups. With the exception of hamsters, most small mammals are happier with others of their kind; however, clients may need to be educated about such issues as gender mixing and dominance hierarchy, which may be a factor relating to increased cage space requirements for some species. In most cases, clients should not own just one of any species, but they should consult their veterinarians and breeders for advice on which sexes coexist best.

Exercise Wheels

Exercise wheels are the most common and familiar form of exercise for small mammals; almost all rodents like to use a wheel. Clients may need to be reminded that the wheel should be the right size for their pets to ensure that workouts are valuable. Some wheels are specifically designed for a particular species (e.g., chinchillas). Breeders can also offer guidance.

Cardboard Boxes

Boxes are one of the cheapest and easiest ways for clients to provide their pets with an excellent source of enrichment. Almost any type of box will work, although many people believe that boxes
that contained food (e.g., cereal) are less likely to have harmful chemicals or toxins. Some animals will make a home in the box; others chew or tear boxes apart. Owners can be creative and design a luxury playhouse for pets or even build a castle from boxes.

**Tubes**

Another easy way for clients to enrich their pets’ lives is by providing tubular objects—a popular favorite for pets. Most pets enjoy running through and hiding in them. Cardboard tubes from toilet paper, paper towels, or rolled carpeting are excellent choices. Tubes are a must-have for most rodents.

Certain types of ceramic fish tank sculptures can also be used in cages. Some species even accept terracotta drainage pipes. PVC pipes can be connected (they fit together without glue or metal connectors) and made into a maze or hung in cages to provide exercise. Pipes should be cleaned regularly and not hung too high.

**Hiding and Nesting Places**

All small mammals should have some type of hiding spot in their cage (FIGURE 1). Commercially available wooden or plastic houses work well; other ideas include flowerpots (especially for prairie dogs), shoeboxes, and baskets. Clients should provide material for nesting; some pets may appreciate cut-up pieces of T-shirts and towels. Commercially available cotton squares also make good nest material. Most clothing is acceptable if it has been washed, rinsed, and dried. Articles should be free of hanging strips, fringes, embroidery, sequins, etc, and material that frays easily should be avoided.

**Toys**

Most “bird-approved” toys constructed of wood, rope, leather, or plastic (available at pet stores) are suitable for small mammals. A variety of toys can be hung in cages for pets to chew and shred. No metal objects, glass, or mirrors should be used.

Wooden blocks, chew sticks, and other wood toys are available for small mammals. Clients can also try to satisfy their pets’ chewing needs with branches of safe woods. Branches are available at pet stores, or clients can make their own as long as the wood is clean and pesticide and pest-free. Most common trees (e.g., oak, elm, apple) are safe.

**Chews**

Nylabone (Neptune City, NJ) dog chews are excellent for pocket pets. They are readily available, inexpensive, and last a long time. Although most are meat flavored, some are made from vegetables or are carrot flavored. Owners should pick a size appropriate for their pet.

**Dust Baths**

Dust bathing is not only for chinchillas. Most rodents enjoy having access to a dust bath, and gerbils and degus are particular fans. Dust is sold in pet stores. It can be placed in a shallow dish and offered to the pet a few times a week.

**Hiding Food**

An excellent technique for enrichment is for clients to creatively make a small percentage of the pet’s food less readily available, so pets get exercise while working for their food. Food items and treats can be hidden in toys, hung from the cage, or hidden in bedding. Hiding food in hay racks or toys with openings also provides work and exercise (FIGURE 2). Promoting foraging encourages natural behaviors, increases cognitive problem solving, reduces boredom and aggression, and decreases the likelihood of developing compulsive behavioral disorders.

**Hammocks**

Clients may typically associate hammocks with ferrets, but chinchillas and guinea pigs will also use them. Hammocks are commercially available, but pet owners can make their own from old shirts or denim pants. Cloth used for hammocks should be large and without frayed edges, zippers, buttons, or other decorations. A leg from a pair of jeans is an excellent choice.

**Changing the Environment**

Another simple way for clients to enrich their pets’ lives is by periodically changing the cage setup. They can place shelves and ropes in different places and move nests around. Clients may offer foods in different locations to stimulate their pets to think and adapt to change.

**Species-Specific Ideas**

The following tips offer species-specific guidelines for interacting with small mammals.

**Ferrets**

The typical curious nature of ferrets and their ability to be loose in the home allows them to get exercise. As they age, however, ferrets sleep more and spend less time exploring and playing. Owners are advised to have more than one ferret, since these mammals provide not only company but also playmates (and, often, accomplices) for each other.

- Ferrets can learn to tolerate wearing a harness, and clients may walk them on leashes near the home or in parks or other public places. This provides exercise, mental stimulation, and socialization opportunities for the ferrets and their owners.
Most ferrets love to run through lengths of tubing. Dryer exhaust tubing or any flexible, tube-like material that is wide enough will work. Ferrets typically play when they meet in a tube. Keeping safety in mind, owners can be creative with designs.

Creating a multilevel cage in which different levels are connected by ladders and ramps provides an environment that encourages ferrets to exercise.

**Rabbits**

As they age, many older rabbits tend to become lazy and overweight. Rabbits that are not litterbox trained are often kept in cages when unsupervised. Some rabbits live only in small rabbit hutches, but rabbits need to stretch and have room to exercise. Exercise is an important way to both prevent and treat gastric stasis syndrome in these small mammals.

- With the right yard space and setup, clients can place their rabbits in outdoor exercise pens. Most pet supply companies sell pens that confine the rabbit while allowing it to graze and enjoy fresh air and sunshine. Owners should ensure that their rabbits have access to a sheltered area (out of the sun) and plenty of clean water. Having a reserve water bottle is advised.
- Many rabbits play with toys—small stuffed animals or many types of plastic baby toys are ideal options. Clients can offer their pet rabbits toys to see if they throw them around, carry them, and entertain themselves. Toys can be dangled in the cage as well.
- Many cat toys work well for rabbits. Chew sticks and rings are ideal, and many rabbits play by tossing or carrying them. Rabbits in research settings are given empty tin cans (with no sharp edges), which they carry or push around for long periods.

**Guinea Pigs**

- Well-socialized guinea pigs are outgoing and do not resent handling. They enjoy social time with their owners and permit brushing or petting.
- Many guinea pigs naturally exhibit rooting behaviors. Clients can encourage this behavior by hiding small amounts of food and treats in clean bedding or inside rubber balls.

**Chinchillas**

- It is important to take advantage of a chinchilla’s natural jumping and bouncing behaviors when designing a cage. Pet owners may include a number of platforms, rope perches, and even concrete bird perches (FIGURE 3). Some owners provide chinchillas with cholla (dried cactus; available from pet stores and pet supply companies) for chewing and climbing.
- Carpeted cat towers make great environments for chinchillas when they are out of the cage. Chinchillas should always be supervised when they are out of their cage.

**Rodents**

- To enrich rodents’ environments, owners can construct mazes or bury tubing under bedding or shavings.
- Many rodents learn tricks when their owners apply positive reinforcement.

**Conclusion**

As veterinarians see more pocket pets and small mammals, they must consider the pets’ total health—not just the immediate medical needs. The ideas for improving environmental enrichment listed in this article are basic ones for veterinarians to suggest to pet owners, but the options are limitless. Clients can use their creativity to make ownership of pocket pets more rewarding. More importantly, they can provide a better quality of life for their special pets by creating more ethical captivity conditions, which can help prevent many psychologic disorders that may be common in rodents in poorly enriched captive environments.

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**Recommended Reading**