

BIAZA Advice on Operating Walkthroughs and Animal Contact Experiences/Displays; Covid-19 Management

It is essential that animal contact and animal handling experiences are carried out only if the relevant national/regional Government regulations allow it. Even after Government regulations are lifted, they should be managed in line with the necessary requirements for physical/social distancing, cleaning and hygiene. Changes in guidance, including additional periods of lockdown on a local or regional scale must also be adhered to.

In each case a full species-based Covid-19 risk assessment should be carried out for each walkthrough exhibit/animal contact experience, with input from animal keepers and veterinary teams as appropriate. This should assess risk in both directions; from human (staff and visitors) to animal and from animal to human. Where possible, Local Authorities and Environmental Health Officers should be informed of reopening plans, and documentation demonstrating risk assessment should be made available if required.

It is probable that some taxa and species are at a higher risk of infection than others. For those species currently considered less susceptible (e.g. birds, fish and reptiles), the zoo's standard policies already in place should apply; alongside additional mitigation steps against Covid in terms of public management, as in any other building in the zoo/aquarium.

Special attention should be paid to those higher risk species known to be susceptible or likely susceptible because of genetic proximity to humans, i.e. chiroptera, felids (and other carnivores), ungulates, mustelids and primates. Covid-19 risk assessments for these groups should include consideration of extra protocols to support animal health and biosecurity, to be put in place in addition to Covid public management protocols. Public access to these high-risk species should be linked to regional levels of circulating virus and if regional level of risk and restrictions are increased then access to high risk species should be prevented.

Steps to mitigate risk should be clearly detailed in the risk assessment and should include consideration of the following points.

Walkthrough exhibits

- Signage at the entrance and throughout the exhibit clearly stating requirements from visitors and emphasising the need to consider the animal's health as well as their own;
- Use of masks throughout the exhibit;
- Because some animals, in particular primates, may act adversely to visitors wearing masks, some trials with unfamiliar staff in civilian clothes could be carried-out to ensure no negative or aggressive reactions from the animals (although staff may have been wearing masks for some time, it should not be assumed that the animals are habituated to visitors wearing them);
- Such trials with staff, as mentioned above, can be useful to reacquaint animals to visitors walking through the enclosure after a lengthy period of closure, in case some individuals may have become more nervous or over-confident;
- Social distancing between people, and between people and animals (this could be by limiting entry to small groups or by managing steady visitor flow);
- Permanent staff presence to support public in social distancing and ensure public maintains distance with the animals;
- Ask visitors to use hand sanitiser and/or handwashing stations at entrance (to prevent infecting surfaces that the animal could touch) and also exit;

- If members of public are allowed to feed animals then this should be closely supervised, and gloves should be worn and disposed of appropriately;
- Ensure animals do not make contact with any personal belongings of the public;
- Disinfectant and cleaning equipment should be on hand in case of animal contact with bags etc;
- Plans should be in place to manage any suspected infection linked with the walkthrough e.g. closure for set period following symptoms displayed, and samples should be collected and stored, in line with standard zoonosis prevention protocols. In the event of multiple animals displaying respiratory symptoms, testing for Covid shedding by PCR should be carried out in order to rule out Covid-19 infection.

Animal Experiences/Feeding/Displays

- Information should be presented at point of booking and again at the start of any animal experience clearly stating requirements from visitors and emphasising the need to consider the animal's health as well as their own;
- Social distancing between people (staff and visitors), and between people and animals (aided by limiting group sizes);
- Experiences that would usually require the staff to be closer than the recommended social distances for safety reasons should be carefully reviewed;
- Use of masks throughout the experience;
- Ask visitors to use hand sanitiser and/or use handwashing stations at the start of the experience and also the end;
- If members of public are allowed to feed animals then this should be closely supervised, and gloves should be worn and disposed of appropriately;
- Remember that where staff/public touch animals without proper PPE, there is a risk of fomite transmission to other staff/visitors (e.g. via fur or feathers).
- Ensure animals do not make contact with any personal belongings of the public (visitors should not be bringing bags or any other carried items into the area);
- Disinfectant and cleaning equipment should be on hand in case of animal contact with bags etc;
- Plans should be in place to manage any suspected infection linked with the experience e.g. experiences stopped for set period following symptoms displayed, and samples should be collected and stored, in line with standard zoonosis prevention protocols. In the event of multiple animals displaying respiratory symptoms, testing for Covid shedding by PCR should be carried out in order to rule out Covid-19 infection.

Further Reading and Resources

- APHA Advice for vets - SARS-CoV-2 in Animals – Case Definition, Testing and International Reporting Obligations: <http://apha.defra.gov.uk/documents/ov/Briefing-Note-1820.pdf>
- European Association of Zoo and Wildlife Veterinarians – Transmissible Diseases Handbook for further information: <https://biaza.org.uk/covid-19-guidance-for-zoos-and-aquariums>
- HSE Preventing or Controlling Ill Health from Animal Contact at Visitor Attractions or Open Farms: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/topics/visitor-attractions.htm>
- UK Government: Covid-19 Advice for People with Animals: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-people-with-animals>

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