

POSITION STATEMENT ON TRAINING METHODS

Conservation Dog Alliance promotes evidence-based, effective, and ethical training for conservation dogs. As such, our central goal is to promote welfare-focused, Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive (LIMA) dog training methodologies for our members. Conservation detection dog teams engage in training not only for deployment, but in a variety of situations including home skills, husbandry, behavior modification and all other activities the dog may be involved in.

The Conservation Dog Alliance aims to be inclusive rather than exclusionary in membership. We recognize that learning is a stepwise process and that altering longstanding approaches to training can be difficult. Our goal is to assist members in moving towards training that adheres to the Humane Hierarchy put forward by Dr. Susan Friedman and the LIMA guidelines set forth by the majority of dog training organizations worldwide.

LIMA: A COMPETENCY-BASED FRAMEWORK

Within the field of behavior analysis, there is a 50-year-old standard of most positive, least intrusive behavior reduction procedures enshrined both in U.S. federal law for children (IDEA, 1997) and professional standards for behavior analysts. The Conservation Dog Alliance is proud to follow suit with these best practices for our canine partners.

LIMA is a framework for conservation dog professionals to follow when choosing humane and effective training techniques. When considering the options that are likely to address a training objective, Conservation Dog Alliance members should focus primarily on the approaches that are least intrusive first.

A core component of LIMA training is competency. A handler who has a large foundational knowledge and experience with a variety low-intervention training strategies is better equipped to succeed in implementing or troubleshooting a training plan than a handler who relies on more intrusive and aversive techniques as a first resort. It is important for Conservation Dog Alliance members to develop expertise with least intrusive and minimally aversive training techniques rather than relying on “what works.”

LIMA and the Humane Hierarchy do not justify the use of punishment or more severe intervention strategies; they provide an outline of less-intrusive approaches to consider and guidance on when to seek help from peers and mentors in order to mitigate the use of intrusive and aversive training techniques.

Environmental management, behavioral wellness, and positive reinforcement should be the primary tools of all Conservation Dog Alliance members. We urge members to seek input from mentors before attempting extinction, negative punishment, or negative reinforcement; and we

strongly recommend a pause and reassessment with qualified peers and other animal behavior professionals before implementing positive punishment procedures.

In the case of handlers who are not experienced with behavior modification for behavior concerns such as, but not limited to, aggression, reactivity, fear, and stereotypies the handler should recruit a Veterinary Behaviorist, Applied Animal Behaviorist, or Certified Dog Behavior Consultant who makes LIMA a central tenant of their training methodology. Attempting to address training outside of an individual's area of expertise without expert guidance is incompatible with the Conservation Dog Alliance's interpretation of LIMA.

Preventing Abuse

The Conservation Dog Alliance takes a strong stance on the welfare of our canine coworkers. As part of the LIMA framework, we seek to eliminate the use of:

- Training that relies on depriving the learner of food, water, social interaction, adequate space or the reasonable opportunity to express natural behaviors with the goal of increasing motivation;
- Overly restrictive housing, management or confinement;
- Lack of opportunities to practice species appropriate behavior, including free exercise, affection, play with conspecifics if safe and reinforcing, chewing, digging, and more;
- Reliance on corrections to mitigate unwanted behaviors;
- Poorly applied or inappropriate punishment.

As part of these goals, the Conservation Dog Alliance is open to all practitioners seeking to follow best practices and grow. We also aim to provide a collaborative and educational forum for all members to learn and improve.

Emergencies are Not the Same as Training Plans

The Conservation Dog Alliance recognizes that members work in highly dynamic and potentially high-risk environments that require fast thinking and action. Safety protocols and training plans should reflect this, including the situational utilization of long lines, spotters, muzzles, strategic search times, and more.

However, the Conservation Dog Alliance also recognizes that unforeseen circumstances do occur. It is not a contradiction to strive for LIMA while also recognizing that corrections may be applied in emergency circumstances to prevent greater harm to the dog, handler, wild animals, livestock, or other humans in the area.

When this occurs, this should be treated as a near-miss incident and handlers should assess what went wrong to require a correction for safety. The team should then take steps to prevent these near misses in the future and bring emergency prevention strategies back within the LIMA framework.

To summarize, punishment (both negative and positive), extinction, and negative reinforcement should rarely figure as part of a *training plan* but may occur in “real life” situations. When this occurs, it is the responsibility of the handler to critically assess and plan alternative strategies should a similar situation happen in the future.

THE HUMANE HIERARCHY - A BASELINE OF WELFARE

The Humane Hierarchy was originally proposed in 2008 by Dr. Susan Friedman, in an article titled “[What’s Wrong With This Picture? Effectiveness is Not Enough](#).” This article outlines the central component of LIMA and Humane Hierarchy: something that works is not necessarily best practice.

We require all members to navigate the Humane Hierarchy when implementing training and behavior modification plans for their dogs. When training is successful, there is no need to continue to progress along the hierarchy.

Conservation Dog Alliance members are typically the primary caretakers of their canine partners, and they have the critical responsibility to the welfare of their canines and the outcome of their training efforts.

It is the responsibility of the owner, trainer, or handler to set the learner up for success. Layering in distraction, difficulty, duration, and distance to training in a progressive manner will significantly reduce the utility of punishment in training. When a trainer finds themselves utilizing punishment, extinction, or negative reinforcement in training it is time to consider that either the training is moving too quickly, or the trainer needs to revisit and fortify their foundational training knowledge.

Before embarking on a new training plan, handlers should define:

1. The target behavior;
2. The purpose of that behavior;
3. The consequences that will maintain the behavior.

Focus continually on what you want the dog to do. Punishment and extinction do not offer the dog this information and are not acceptable as a primary strategy for training.

This simple approach should be supplemented by carefully considering what other difficulties the dog will need to navigate to succeed. Layering in distractions, duration, distance, and other difficulties is part of the training plan and should be done in a way that introduces the dog to manageable approximations rather than “testing” the dog or overwhelming the dog and then punishing the dog for failure.

Neglecting these difficulties can lead to a dog that looks well-trained at first but suffers from performance decline in the field which, again, can lead to a frustrated or confused handler applying an aversive that is unfair to the learner.

The Humane Hierarchy in Practice

Distant Antecedents

Prior to doing any training consider the following distant antecedents:

- Is the dog eating a diet that is sufficient in both quality and quantity?
- Is the dog well-hydrated?
- Does the dog have unmet medical needs?
- Has *all* potential pain, GI upset, itchiness, and other discomfort been eliminated?
- Does the dog have ample opportunities for rest and recovery?
- Is the dog well-groomed and in good physical condition?
- Is the dog sufficiently exercised?
- Is the dog housed in an environment of sufficient size and cleanliness that is enriched with ample opportunities to practice species appropriate behaviors and social interactions?

Immediate Antecedents

Prior to training consider the following intermediate antecedents:

- Setting events
- Priority motivators
- Discriminative stimuli (cues)
- Antecedent arrangement to prevent unwanted behavior

For example, ensure that the environment is set up such that the dog can be successful.

Thinking proactively may include:

- Exercising a dog prior to long period of crating;
- Limiting visual access to other dogs during a demonstration;
- Putting on dog-boots in rough terrain instead of depending on the dog's excessive motivation to override the dog's desire to avoid pain;
- Utilizing a long line and strategic search timing to prevent predatory behaviors

Over time, it may be desirable to reduce or remove purposeful antecedent arrangement that interferes with work. In training it is best practice to set the dog up for success prior to increasing difficulty and reducing management.

Positive Reinforcement

Contingently deliver a consequence to increase the probability that the target behavior will occur. The consequence should be more reinforcing and/or salient than the unwanted behavior.

This approach builds and maintains a target behavior with minimal stress or frustration for the learner. Every effort should be made to set the learner up for success through thoughtful antecedent arrangement, successively more difficult training scenarios, and counter control.

Differential Reinforcement

Reinforce an acceptable behavior and remove or reduce the maintaining reinforcer for the unwanted behavior.

Differential reinforcement aims to reduce an unwanted behavior by withholding the reinforcer that is maintaining the undesirable behavior with the caveat that the learner is given an immediate opportunity to access the reinforcer by performing a more desirable alternative behavior. This is distinct from pure extinction procedures because it offers the learner choice and counter-control by targeting a more desirable behavior and providing an alternative pathway for the learner to obtain the reinforcer they were seeking in the first place.

Negative Punishment, Negative Reinforcement and Extinction

- **Negative Punishment** - withdrawing reinforcers to reduce the likelihood of an unwanted behavior.
- **Negative Reinforcement** - withdrawing an aversive stimulus to increase a behavior
- **Extinction** - permanently removing the reinforcer to suppress a behavior.

These approaches increase the probability of frustration and distress in a learner and therefore should be used with caution. Reevaluate training plans and consult with an expert or experienced colleague before utilizing these methods.

Positive Punishment

Applying an aversive consequence to reduce an unwanted behavior.

Positive punishment often appears immediately effective and can therefore be reinforcing to the handler. However, punishment must be swift and consistent to be effective and often needs to be escalated in severity to maintain suppression. Examples may include utilizing a shock collar to interrupt prey-chasing behavior, a leash pop to correct pulling, or pinching a dog's ear to cause them to spit out a training aid.

Handlers must be aware the punishment-based interventions have a high risk of fallout including, to quote the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: "aggression or counter-aggression; suppressed behavior (preventing the trainer/consultant from adequately reading the animal); increased anxiety and fear; physical harm; a negative association with the owner or handler; increased unwanted behavior; and, new, unwanted behaviors."

For all these reasons, it is recommended that trainers stop and reassess training plans in their entirety while consulting with other experts before applying punishment.