

A Different Approach

Trainers at the San Diego Zoo click to teach big cats new tricks.

By Robin Rockey

Kya the clouded leopard leaps through the air, each graceful jump punctuated by a staccato clicking sound. She turns and bares her long, saber-like teeth in a Cheshire cat grin. The audience responds with a burst of applause, and Kya is rewarded with a treat.

Next up, Karroo, a majestic South African cheetah, enters stage left, led by a trainer with a clicker in hand. No stranger to the spotlight, this confident cat made her first TV appearance with animal expert Jack Hanna as a kitten.

Welcome to the San Diego Zoo, where the art of training big cats is a staple of the zoo's educational outreach. The clicking sounds audiences hear while big cats perform in shows are a key component of clicker training, a technique used to reinforce desired behaviors in cats and other animals.

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