(19) Europäisches Patentamt
European Patent Office
Office européen des brevets

(11) **EP 3 273 773 B1**

(12) **EUROPEAN PATENT SPECIFICATION**

(45) Date of publication and mention of the grant of the patent:
06.10.2021 Bulletin 2021/40

(21) Application number: **16716099.3**

(22) Date of filing: **23.03.2016**

(51) Int Cl.:
A01K 5/01 *(2006.01)* ***A01K 15/02*** *(2006.01)*

(86) International application number:
PCT/US2016/023693

(87) International publication number:
WO 2016/154257 (29.09.2016 Gazette 2016/39)

(54) FEEDING DEVICE FOR FEEDING CATS, FEEDING SYSTEM AND METHOD OF USE OF THE DEVICE

FUTTERVORRICHTUNG ZUR FÜTTERUNG VON KATZEN, FUTTERSYSTEM UND VERFAHREN ZUR VERWENDUNG DER VORRICHTUNG

DISPOSITIF D'ALIMENTATION POUR ALIMENTER DES CHATS, SYSTÈME D'ALIMENTATION ET PROCÉDÉ D'UTILISATION DU DISPOSITIF

(84) Designated Contracting States:
AL AT BE BG CH CY CZ DE DK EE ES FI FR GB GR HR HU IE IS IT LI LT LU LV MC MK MT NL NO PL PT RO RS SE SI SK SM TR

(30) Priority: **24.03.2015 US 201562137501 P**
22.09.2015 US 201562221768 P
18.03.2016 US 201615074557

(43) Date of publication of application:
31.01.2018 Bulletin 2018/05

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Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The disclosed invention relates to dispensing devices and more particularly to feeding systems for use by a cat to dispense cat food therefrom when played with by the cat, methods of feeding a cat, and packaging for such feeding systems.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The American Veterinary Medical Association recommends that cats in urban and suburban environments be kept indoors. However, a cat's health and welfare can be affected by its surroundings. In this regard, cats are natural hunters. Even indoors, cats retain their predatory instincts and behaviors, including stalking, clawing, chewing, and marking. When cats live indoors, they are deprived of natural outlets for these behaviors. Under these circumstances cats may begin to express undesirable behaviors, including scratching furniture and eliminating outside of the litter box.

[0003] While commercially available dry cat food satisfies the nutritional needs for domestic cats, it does nothing to allow a cat to express its natural hunting behavior. It is much healthier for cats to be given the option to hunt for prey. Failure to provide opportunities to hunt deprives cats of mental stimulation and physical activity. This can cause obesity and other health and behavioral problems. Accordingly, a need exists for a cat food feeding system that enables an indoor cat to employ its natural hunting instincts.

[0004] The subject invention addresses that need by providing feeding systems for indoor cats to enable such cats to feed themselves several times a day with dry cat food in a safe, easy-to-use manner that enriches their body, mind and spirit.

[0005] GB2492110 describes a pet toy having propulsion means and a means to dispense a treat or an attractant such as catnip in response to a command signal. Optionally the command signal includes receipt of a stimulus signal that arises as a result of interaction with a pet. The control means uses information from the one or more sensors to control release of the treat. The toy can be programmed or remotely controlled. The toy may also be co operable with an animal ID device such as a RFID tag implanted in the animal or in the animal's collar. The toy may respond to behavior patterns and may only respond to specific animals. The toy can take various forms such as a ball or an animal. Also described are a motorized toy which emits the sound of a distressed rodent when caught and a pet toy system comprising a dispensing pet toy and a pet identity device such as a collar.

[0006] US2010251966 describes an animal treat dispenser which includes a treat container having an aperture, an aperture adjustment mechanism that is capable of varying an effective size of the aperture to regulate passage of animal treats through the aperture, and a plush toy at least partially covering the treat container.

[0007] US2010300363 describes a container for storing or delivering a consumable liquid or semisolid to an animal, such as a human or domesticated pet, the container including a receptacle for holding its contents and two or more openings. At least one opening is an elongated opening formed in the side of the walls of the container to allow lapping or licking of the contents by the animal, when the container is laid on its side. The opening in the walls is covered by a corresponding cover, which is affixed using adhesives, mechanical devices, or a combination thereof. The cover prevents spilling of the contents when in place. The container is manufactured so that the opening in the walls can be opened by manually removing the cover, either partially or completely. The cover may be reattached to the container using a fastening technique or device.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The present invention provides a feeding device, feeding system and method of feeding a cat as in the appended claims.

[0009] In accordance with the invention, there is provided a feeding device comprising the features of independent claim 1.

[0010] In accordance with an embodiment which does not form part of the present invention the hollow container has a longitudinal axis an arcuate sidewall bounding the interior cavity. The interior cavity is filled with dry cat food. The arcuate sidewall has an outer surface providing the appearance of a creature that constitutes prey of a feral cat and includes a plurality of frangible areas. Each of those areas is configured to be opened to form respective outlet ports in the sidewall. The outlet ports are in communication with the internal cavity and are configured to enable a portion of the dry cat food to gradually pass therethrough when the cat plays with the feeding device.

[0011] In accordance with the invention and independent claim 5, there is provided a feeding system kit including plural feeding devices, each of which is arranged to hold a portion of the cat's daily ration of dry cat food and which can be located in various locations to which the cat has access. This enables the cat to utilize its natural hunting instinct to feed itself several times a day.

[0012] The present invention also includes a method according to independent claim 9 for feeding a cat a predetermined portion of a daily ration of cat food each day such that the cat eats its daily ration each day.

[0013] The method basically entails making a feeding device constructed in accordance with this invention available to the cat so that the cat will "hunt" for the feeding device and play with it when found, whereupon a portion of the cat food disposed within the internal cavity can gradually exit the at least one port when the cat plays with the device.

[0014] In accordance with one preferred embodiment

of the method plural, e.g., five, feeding devices, each filled with a predetermined portion of the daily ration of cat food, are disposed at various locations to which the cat has access, such that the cat can find each of the feeding devices to play with each of them and thereby have access to the food contained therein.

[0015] In accordance with an embodiment which does not form part of the present invention there is provided a package holding a plurality of feeding devices. Each of the feeding devices is configured for use by a cat to dispense dry cat food therefrom. Each of the feeding devices comprises a container, e.g., an ovoid, ellipsoid, sphere or other three dimensional shaped hollow body, having a longitudinal axis and an arcuate sidewall bounding an interior cavity. The interior cavity is filled with dry cat food. The sidewall has an outer surface providing the appearance of a creature that constitutes prey of a feral cat. The arcuate sidewall includes a plurality of frangible areas, e.g., a line of perforations, each of which is configured to be opened to form respective outlet ports in the sidewall. The outlet ports, when formed are in communication with the internal cavity and are configured to enable a portion of the dry cat food to gradually pass therethrough. Each of the feeding devices is configured to be played with by a cat so that the action of the cat playing with the feeding device results in the automatic gradual dispensing of a portion of the cat food out of the outlet ports.

[0016] One preferred aspect of the package includes a sufficient number feeding devices, each holding a portion of the cat's daily ration of food, and which collectively provide the cat with his/her daily ration of cat food.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING FIGURES

[0017]

Fig. 1 is an isometric view of one exemplary hollow container and one exemplary simulation covering which together make up a feeding device forming one component of a cat feeding system;

Fig. 2 is a slightly enlarged isometric view of the exemplary hollow container shown in Fig. 1, with its lid being opened to enable it to be filled with a portion of a cat's daily ration of dry cat food;

Fig. 3 is a slightly enlarged isometric view of the filled hollow container shown in Fig.1 after its lid has been closed and after it has been inserted into the simulation covering to result in a feeding device which has the appearance of a creature that constitutes prey of a feral cat;

Fig. 4 is an isometric view of an exemplary hollow container constructed in accordance with the invention and configured for use with another exemplary covering constructed in accordance with the invention;

Fig. 5A is a top plan view of the exemplary hollow container shown in Fig. 4;

Fig. 5B is an end view of the exemplary hollow container shown in Fig. 4;

Fig. 6 is an isometric view of the exemplary hollow container shown disposed within another exemplary covering constructed in accordance with the invention;

Fig. 7 is an isometric view, partially broken away, of one exemplary package holding a plurality of feeding devices, each of which is configured for use by a cat to dispense dry cat food therefrom but does not form part of the present invention;

Fig. 8 is an enlarged isometric view of one of the exemplary feeding devices shown in Fig. 7; and

Fig. 9 is an enlarged sectional view of the exemplary feeding device taken along line 9 - 9 of Fig. 3.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0018] Referring now to the drawings wherein like characters refer to like parts, there is shown in Fig. 1 an exemplary embodiment of a feeding device 20.

[0019] The device 20 forms a portion of a feeding system including plural feeding devices. Each feeding device is configured so that it provides the appearance of a creature on which a feral cat preys for food. It has been determined that in nature the average feral cat hunts and eats five times a day. Accordingly, the system may include five feeding devices, each of which is filled with one fifth of the cat's daily ration of dry cat food. The feeding devices are disposed throughout the cat's environment in the home, and preferably are hidden, so that the cat will "hunt" for them, thereby providing the cat with natural stimulation. Owing to the shape of the feeding device, i.e., it is configured to roll about its longitudinal axis, and its appearance, i.e., simulating a prey animal, when the feeding device is found and the cat plays with it, a portion of the dry cat food within the feeding device will be automatically dispensed out of it gradually, thereby enabling the cat to eat the dispensed food. This action provides further stimulation for the cat, in addition to feeding it.

[0020] As can be seen in Fig. 1 the feeding device 20 basically comprises two components, namely, a hollow container 22 and a simulation covering or "skin" 24. The hollow container is formed of any suitable hard and rugged material, such as a plastic, and has the shape of an ovoid, ellipsoid, sphere or other three dimensional shape having a longitudinal axis 26 (Fig. 2) and an arcuate outer surface 28. The arcuate outer surface of the container enables it to be rolled around the axis 26 when the cat plays with the feeding device, as will be described later. Being hollow, the container 22 includes an internal cavity 30 (Fig. 2) which is arranged to hold a portion of a typical indoor cat's daily ration of dry cat food 32. That daily ration of dry cat food is approximately 1.25 cups (296ml) for the average indoor cat. Thus, if the system makes use of five feeding devices, that 1.25 cups (296ml) of dry cat food will be divided equally among the five feeding

devices. The hollow container may have a length of approximately 3.5 inches (89mm) and a height of approximately 2.5 inches (64mm).

[0021] The filling of the internal cavity 30 of the container 22 is achieved by means of an inlet port that is in communication with the interior of the internal cavity. To that end, in the exemplary embodiment shown the hollow container includes a main section 22A and a lid section 22B. The top edge of the main section is in the form of a mouth or opening 34 (Fig. 2), which serves as the inlet port to the container 22. The lid section 22B is connected to the main section 22C by a hinge 36. This enables the lid section 22B to be pivoted from a closed position, like shown in Fig. 1, to an open position, like shown in Fig. 2.

[0022] In the open position the lid section is pivoted up from the opening 34, thereby exposing the internal cavity 30 so that it can be filled with the portion of dry cat food 32. Once filled, the lid section can be pivoted down to the closed position to thereby close the mouth of the main section to hold the food within the container.

[0023] Not only does the use of the hinged lid section 22B provide a means for readily filling the hollow container via a large opening, i.e., the mouth of the main section, the large opening also enables one to readily clean the internal cavity, when necessary. While not shown the lid section and the main section may include some releasable connector, e.g., a snap-fit connector, to hold the lid section in the closed position so that it does not accidentally open when the cat plays with the feeding device.

[0024] The lid section also includes at least one outlet port through which the dry cat food within the container can pass when the cat plays with the feeding device. In the exemplary embodiment shown, the at least one outlet port is in the form of five openings or ports 38A, 38B, 38C, 38D and 38E, with the port 38A being centrally located in the lid section and with the other ports disposed about the central port 36A. Each port is of a sufficient size, e.g., 0.375 in. x 0.625 in. (9.5mm x 15.9mm), to enable the dry cat food within the container to gradually exit through one or more of the ports as the cat plays with the feeding device.

[0025] The simulation covering or skin 24 is formed of a soft, flexible fabric or other material that provides the appearance of an animal or creature, e.g., rodent, bird, fish, etc., that constitutes the prey of a feral cat. In the exemplary embodiment shown the simulation covering provides the appearance of a mouse. To that end, the simulation covering may be a furry fabric that includes a projection 40 located at one end of the simulation covering and which is in the shape of the head of a mouse and another projection 42 at the other end of the simulation covering and which is in the shape of the tail of the mouse. The projection 40 includes graphics representing the eyes, nose and mouth of the mouse. The central portion of the simulation covering is in the form of a hollow pocket 44 (Fig. 1) shaped and sized to accommodate at least a portion of the hollow container 22 therein and which when the container is located therein makes up the body of the mouse. Graphics representing the mouse's legs are provided on the outer surface of the central portion of the simulation covering. The fact that the head and tail of the mouse are located on opposite ends of the longitudinal axis 26 when the hollow container is disposed within the pocket 44 of the simulation covering enables the resulting feeding device to be able to roll about that axis when played with by the cat. Moreover, since the legs of the mouse are merely graphics on the body, as opposed to members projecting outward from the body, they will not interfere with the rolling action of the feeding device.

[0026] It should be pointed out at this juncture, that the head and tail of the mouse may not be in the form of projections, but rather may be in the form of graphics on the outer surface of the simulation covering. Moreover, the simulation covering need not provide the appearance of a mouse, but can provide the appearance of any other rodent, bird, fish or other creature upon which constitutes the prey of a feral cat. Thus, in the case of a bird the simulation covering 22 can include one projection which is in the form of a bird's head and beak, and another projection which is in the form of the bird's tail. Alternatively the head, beak and tail may merely be in the form of graphics on the outer surface of the simulation covering. So too, if the simulation covering is in the form of a fish, it may include a projection which is in the form of a fish's head and mouth, and a projection which is in the form of the fish's tail.

[0027] In order to ensure that the hollow container doesn't shift within the pocket and to hold it securely in place within the pocket the entryway to the pocket is in the form of an elasticized edge 46. That elasticized edge is arranged to be received within an annular peripheral groove 48 in the outer surface of the lid section adjacent the free edge of the lid section. Thus, when the hollow container 22 is disposed within the pocket 44 of the simulation covering 24 the elasticized edge 46 of the pocket will tightly engage the peripheral groove 48 to hold the hollow container in place. Such action will prevent the simulation covering from blocking any of the outlet ports 38A - 38E when the cat plays with the feeding device.

[0028] As mentioned above, the system may make use of five feeding devices 20 which are filled with the cat's regular dry food and which are disposed, e.g., hidden, at various locations in the cat's normal environment. Some cats may need a refresher course on how to "hunt" and hence feed themselves with the system. To that end, one can train the cat to use the system. In particular, such training can be accomplished by putting one half of the cat's regular meal in its bowl and one half into a feeding device and which is placed near the cat's bowl. That feeding device may be in the form of the feeding device 20 as described earlier or a "trainer" device having more exit ports to allow the food to fall out more easily. In any case, the training method should entail allowing the cat to experiment with getting the food out of the feeding device. Day after day as the cat gets the hang of it, one can

gradually put more of the cat's food in the feeding device and less into the cat's bowl. Once the cat has the learned how to use the feeding device, one can then start hiding plural feeding devices in the cat's environment for it to find. Preferably that is done in the beginning by hiding the feeding devices in obvious places, e.g., a few feet away from the cat's regular dining spot. Gradually over the next few weeks, one can make the hiding spots more difficult to find. To enhance the training of the cat, one should attempt avoiding placing the feeding devices near things which produce mechanical noises, such as refrigerators, washing machines, dryers, furnaces, etc.

[0029] As should be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the fact that the feeding devices of the subject invention automatically dispense only a portion of the dry cat food therein as the cat plays with the device ensures that the release of the cat food is accomplished in a gradual manner. This action is important in.as much as it forces the cat to slow down its eating process so that it doesn't gobble its food, which action could encourage vomiting.

[0030] It should be pointed out at this juncture that while the system as described above makes use of five feeding devices, the system may make use of any number of feeding devices, including only a single such device.

[0031] An exemplary embodiment of a container 52 constructed in accordance with this invention is shown in Fig. 4. The container 52 is configured to be used with, i.e., disposed within, a simulation covering or "skin" 64, that is similar in construction to the skin 24 described above to result in a feeding device 50, like shown in Fig. 9. The feeding device 50 is used in the same manner as described above with reference to the feeding device 20 and is played with by the cat to feed itself in the same manner as described above. Thus in the interest of brevity the manner of use of the feeding device 50 will not be reiterated.

[0032] As best seen in Figs. 4 and 5, the container 52 is of an ovoid shape having a rear end portion 52A and a front end portion 52B. A central longitudinal axis 26 (Fig. 4) extends between the front end portion 52B and the rear end portion 52A. As best seen in Fig 5A the rear end portion is has a lesser degree of curvature than the front end portion and the container 52 is of a generally circular cross-section as best seen in Fig. 5B. The container 52 is formed of a similar material to that of container 22. Unlike the container 22, the container 52 does not include a hinged lid. Instead the container 52 includes according to the invention a pair of relative large openings or ports 54A and 54B located on the top portion of the container. Each port is of an oval-like shape and has a dimension of approximately 0.625 in. (15.9mm) wide by approximately 0.81 in. (20.6mm) long. The ports 54A and 54B serve as the means for filling the container with the requisite ration of the cat's dry food and also serve as the means through which the dry food exits when the cat plays with the feeding device 50.

[0033] According to the invention, the ports 54A and 54B are separated by a bridging wall 56 whose outer peripheral surface constitutes a continuation of the circular periphery of the container 52. Thus, the bridging wall doesn't impede the rolling action of the feeding device 50 when the cat plays with it. In the exemplary embodiment shown, the width of the bridging wall, i.e., the spacing between the ports 54A and 54B is approximately 0.31 in. (7.9mm).

[0034] According to the invention, a rounded ridge 58 projects outward from the outer surface of the container 52 and surrounds the area encompassed by the ports 54A and 54B and the intermediate bridging wall 56. An annular groove 60 is located immediately below the ridge 58 and serves to cooperate with an elasticized portion of the skin 64 to hold the container within the pocket of the skin and to ensure that it doesn't shift within the pocket. In particular, as can be seen in Fig. 6, the skin 64 is similar in construction to the skin 24. In the interest of brevity the common features of the skin 64 with the skin 24 will be given the same reference numbers and the details of their construction and operation will not be reiterated. The skin 64 includes a top opening having an elasticized edge 46 which is configured to be received within the annular groove 60. Thus, when the hollow container 52 is disposed within the pocket 44 of the simulation covering 64 the elasticized edge 46 of the pocket will tightly engage the groove 60 to hold the hollow container 52 in place. Such action will prevent the simulation covering 64 from blocking either of the ports 54A or 54B when the cat plays with the feeding device 50.

[0035] The skin 64, is somewhat different than the skin 24, in one respect, namely, it includes a back opening 66 which exposes a rear portion 52A of the container 52. That rear portion includes a small aperture 68 (Fig. 5) that is in communication with the interior of the container. The aperture 68 is configured to releasably mount an item which simulates a portion of the prey animal that the skin represents. Thus, in the example shown the aperture 68 is shown mounting a flexible tail 70 to the container, i.e., the proximal end of the tail 70 is releasably mounted within the aperture 68. Other shaped tails could be mounted onto the container via the aperture to change the appearance of the prey animal. Moreover, if the skin provides the appearance of a fish, the aperture 58 can be used to mount a fish tail to the container. Similarly, if the skin provides the appearance of a bird, the aperture 58 can be used to mount a bird tail to the container. In fact, it is contemplated that the container will have an opening 58 in its front end portion 52B and that the skin 64 will have an opening in its forward end such that the container can be placed in the pocket whereupon an aperture 58 in the front end portion 52B of the container is exposed by the open forward end of the skin. In that case, an item simulating the head of the prey animal simulated by the skin 64 can be releasably mounted onto the container. Further still the container may include apertures 68 in its forward and rearward ends for use with skins having opening in their forward and rearward ends for mounting head and tail simulating items to the forward

and rearward ends, respectively, of the container 52. Whether the aperture(s) 68 serve to mount a tail-simulating item or a head-simulating item, is not relevant. What is relevant is that the head or tail simulating item that the aperture 68 mounts on the container 52 is done in such a way that it can be readily removed by the cat owner. That factor and the factor that the container can be readily removed from the pocket of the skin itself, enable the cat owner to disassembly the feeding device when necessary to clean its various components. Once cleaned the feeding device can be reassembled and refilled for reuse by the cat.

[0036] It should be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the construction of each feeding device may be different than the exemplary embodiments shown in Figs. 1 - 6. For example, but not according to the invention, the hollow container may be constructed like the embodiment of Fig. 4 so that it doesn't include a hinged lid, but unlike that embodiment only make use of a single large opening or hole through which the hollow container is filled. In such an embodiment, the opening or hole through which the food is introduced has to be large enough to facilitate filling and to enable the interior of the hollow container to be cleaned when necessary. In such a case, the simulation covering and/or the hollow container should be constructed or configured so that the large opening is blocked by a portion of the simulation covering when the container is in the pocket of the covering to prevent the egress of the dry cat food therethrough, while enabling the dry cat food from gradually passing through one or more of the device's outlet ports.

[0037] The system of this invention is in the form of a kit of plural hollow containers and plural simulation coverings or skins forming plural feeding devices according to the invention. The skins are preferably interchangeable and can provide the appearance of the same animal or of different animals. Moreover, the skins may all be of the same color or may be of different colors. In addition, different skins may be sold separately to be substituted for the skins of the kit to provide additional stimulation for the cat.

[0038] Referring now to Fig. 7, there is shown one exemplary embodiment of a package system 120 which does not form part of the invention. That system basically comprises a package 122 holding plural feeding devices 124. The package 122 can be of any suitable construction, e.g., a typical paper, paperboard, cardboard or plastic carton. As pointed out above, in nature the average feral cat hunts and eats five times a day. Accordingly, the package system 120 includes at least five feeding devices 124, each of which is filled with one fifth of a cat's daily ration of dry cat food. In the exemplary embodiment shown in Fig. 7, the package 122 includes twenty-five feeding devices 124, each of which contains one-fifth of the cat's daily ration of cat food. As such the package 122 provides sufficient feeding devices 124 to feed a cat for five days.

[0039] It should be noted that the foregoing arrangement is merely exemplary, such that the package 122 can be constructed to contain as many feeding devices 124 as required to provide a cat with his/her daily ration of cat food. Thus, manufacturers of cat food can package their product in packaging systems like those one for use by cat owners, whereupon those cat owners can be assured that their cats can be fed their daily ration of cat food daily.

[0040] Each feeding device 124 is preferably in the form of a hollow container or body having a central longitudinal axis 126 about which an arcuate sidewall 128 extends. The hollow container can be of any suitable shape, be it an ovoid, sphere, cylinder, etc. In the exemplary embodiment the device 124 is in the form of a cylindrical container having an arcuate, e.g., circular, sidewall 128 extending about the central longitudinal axis and a pair of planar end walls 130 and 132. The sidewalls and the end walls together bound a hollow interior cavity within the container in which the dry cat food 134 is located as can be seen in Fig. 9.

[0041] The feeding device 124 can be formed of any suitable material, e.g., paper, cardboard, paperboard, plastic or any combination thereof. The sidewall 128 includes at least one, and preferably several, frangible areas 136. Each frangible area is arranged to be opened by the person feeding the cat to form an outlet port through which the dry cat food 134 can pass when the feeding device is used by the cat. Each frangible area can be formed in various ways. For example, as shown each area 136 is formed by a line of perforations 138 in the sidewall, with each line bounding a respective frangible area. Thus, as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art the application of pressure on each of those areas by a person will cause the perforations to break, thereby providing an opening at each of those areas. Those formed openings serve as the outlet ports for the feeding device 124 to enable the egress of the cat food 134 therethrough.

[0042] As can be seen in Figs. 7 and 8, each of the feeding devices 124 provides the visual appearance of an animal or creature, e.g., rodent, bird, fish, etc., that constitutes the prey of a feral cat. To that end, the outer surface of the device's sidewall 128 can be printed with graphics simulating the desired animal or creature. Alternatively, a printed sleeve or band bearing graphics simulating the desired animal or creature can be wrapped about the sidewall of the feeding device. In fact, any means can be used to provide the outer surface of the sidewall with the appearance of a desired animal or creature which constitutes prey of a feral cat. Moreover, the sidewall may be textured to enhance the appearance, e.g., the sidewall may include a sleeve of cover replicating fur.

[0043] In the exemplary embodiment shown the outer surface of the sidewall 128 of each feeding device 124 is printed with graphics 140 that provides the appearance of a mouse. Those graphics are is merely exemplary. Thus, each feeding device 124 may provide the appear-

ance of some different animal or creature. In fact, the plural feeding devices 124 held within the package 122 may provide the appearance of more than one animal or creature, e.g., some feeding devices 124 in the package 122 may provide the appearance of a rodent, while other feeding devices in that package may provide the appearance of a bird, while still other feeding devices in that package may provide the appearance of a fish, etc.

[0044] By virtue of the fact that the sidewall 128 of each feeding device is arcuate (e.g., circular in the exemplary device 124 shown), that configuration enables the feeding device to rolled on any surface engaged by the sidewall. Thus, when a feeding device 124 is placed on the floor of the home in which the cat is to be fed, with the device's sidewall 128 engaging the floor, when the cat starts to play with the device, it will begin to roll about its central axis 126. That action will eventually orient the feeding device such that the dry cat food within its internal cavity to fall out of the outlet ports 136 for the cat to eat. The number, size, shape and positioning of the outlet ports can be selected to facilitate the automatic dispensing of the desired portion of the cat's daily ration of dry cat food from the feeding device.

[0045] A typical daily ration of dry cat food is approximately 1.25 cups for the average indoor cat. Thus, if the system makes use of five feeding devices 124, that 1.25 cups of dry cat food will be divided equally among those five feeding devices. In accordance with one exemplary embodiment of this invention each feeding device 124 has a length of approximately 3.5 inches (89mm) and a diameter of approximately two inches (51mm).

[0046] In the embodiment of the feeding devices 124 shown in the drawing there are two frangible areas 136 in the sidewall 126 of each device. Each of those frangible areas is oval in shape and of a size of approximately 0.375 in. (9.5mm) by 0.625 in (15.9mm). Those shapes, sizes and their arrangement are merely exemplary. Thus, each feeding device can include on or more frangible areas of any shape and size. Moreover, each of those areas can be located at any desired position on the sidewall 128. If more than one outlet is provided, the outlets may be arranged in any type of array. In any case, each outlet port is preferably of a sufficient size and shape to enable the dry cat food within the feeding device to gradually exit through the outlet port(s) as the cat plays with the feeding device.

[0047] As mentioned above, an embodiment of the system makes use of five feeding devices 124 which are filled with the cat's regular dry food and which are disposed, e.g., hidden, at various locations in the cat's normal environment. Some cats may need a refresher course on how to "hunt" and hence feed themselves with the system. To that end, one can train the cat to use the system. In particular, such training can be accomplished by putting one half of the cat's regular meal in its bowl and one half into a feeding device constructed in accordance with this invention and which is placed near the cat's bowl. That feeding device may be in the form of the feeding device 124 as described earlier or a "trainer" device having more exit ports to allow the food to fall out more easily.

[0048] In any case, the training method should entail allowing the cat to experiment with getting the food out of the feeding device. Day after day as the cat gets the hang of it, one can gradually put more of the cat's food in the feeding device and less into the cat's bowl. Once the cat has the learned how to use the feeding device, one can then start hiding plural feeding devices in the cat's environment for it to find. Preferably that is done in the beginning by hiding the feeding devices in obvious places, e.g., a few feet away from the cat's regular dining spot. Gradually over the next few weeks, one can make the hiding spots more difficult to find. To enhance the training of the cat, one should attempt avoiding placing the feeding devices near things which produce mechanical noises, such as refrigerators, washing machines, dryers, furnaces, etc.

[0049] As should be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the fact that the feeding devices of the subject invention automatically dispense only a portion of the dry cat food therein as the cat plays with the device ensures that the release of the cat food is accomplished in a gradual manner. This action is important inasmuch as it forces the cat to slow down its eating process so that it doesn't gobble its food, which action could encourage vomiting.

[0050] While the system as described above makes use of five feeding devices per day, the system may make use of any number of feeding devices per day, including only a single such device. Moreover, the construction of each feeding device may be different than the exemplary embodiment shown in Figs. 7 and 8. For example, each feeding device may be constructed like the feeding device 20 shown in Figs. 1 - 3, or the feeding device 50 of Fig. 6, or variants of any of those feeding devices.

Claims

1. A feeding device (50) for use by a cat to dispense dry cat food (32) therefrom, said feeding device comprising:

   a) a hollow container (52) having an internal cavity (30) and a pair of outlet ports (54A-B) located on a top portion of the container (52) in communication with said internal cavity, the outlet ports (54A-B) being relatively large such that they are configured to serve as the means for filling the container (52) and as the means through which the dry food exits the container (52) in use, said feeding device having an arcuate external surface (28) providing the appearance of a creature that constitutes prey of a feral cat, said arcuate external surface being configured to roll on a surface when the cat plays with said feeding device, whereupon the action of the cat playing

with said feeding device results in the automatic gradual dispensing of a portion of the cat food out (32) of said outlet ports (54A-B); and

b) a simulation covering (64), said simulation covering comprising a soft material having a pocket (44) to receive at least a portion of said hollow container (52) whereupon said outlet ports (54A-B) is exposed, said simulation covering having an exterior surface providing the appearance of a creature that constitutes prey of a feral cat such that when the hollow container is disposed within said pocket the cat will play with said feeding device, whereupon the action of the cat playing with said feeding device results in the automatic gradual dispensing of a portion of the cat food out of the ports;

wherein said container (52) includes an annular groove (60) surrounding said outlet ports, and wherein said pocket of said simulation covering comprises an elasticized opening configured for releasable receipt within said annular groove (60) to hold said hollow container in place with respect to said simulation covering and to deter relative movement therebetween when said hollow container is disposed in said pocket;

wherein the outlet ports (54A-B) are separated by a bridging wall (56) having an outer peripheral surface constituting a continuation of a circular periphery of the container (52);

wherein a rounded ridge (58) projects outward from the outer surface of the container (52) and surrounds an area encompassed by the outlet ports (54A-B) and the intermediate bridging wall (56); and

wherein the annular groove (60) is located immediately below the ridge (58).

2. The feeding device of Claim 1 wherein said hollow container (52) comprises an ovoid, ellipsoid, sphere or other three dimensional shape having a longitudinal axis (26) and an arcuate outer surface enabling said device to be rolled around said longitudinal axis by the cat when said hollow container is disposed within said simulation covering; and optionally wherein said exterior surface of said simulation covering provides the appearance of a rodent, bird, fish or other creature that constitutes prey to a feral cat.

3. The feeding device of Claim 2 wherein said simulation (64) covering includes at least one of a first projection (40) located on said longitudinal axis (26) simulating the head of the rodent, bird, fish or other creature.

4. The feeding device of Claim 1 wherein said container (52) includes an aperture (68) for mounting a component that simulates a portion of a rodent, bird, fish or other creature.

5. A feeding system kit comprising plural feeding devices (50) according to claim 1, said system comprising plural hollow containers (52) and plural simulation coverings (64) for forming said plural feeding devices (50).

6. The system kit of Claim 5 wherein each of said plural simulation coverings (64) provides the appearance of the same creature, but of a different color.

7. The feeding device of Claim 1 wherein the container (52) is of an ovoid shape having a rear end portion (52A) and a front end portion (52B); and

wherein a central longitudinal axis (26) extends between the front end portion (52B) and the rear end portion (52A); and

wherein the rear end portion (52A) has a lesser degree of curvature than the front end portion (52B) and the container (52) is of a generally circular cross-section.

8. The feeding device of claim 1 or claim 7 wherein each outlet port (54A-B) is of an oval-like shape and has a dimension of approximately 15.875mm (0.625 in.) wide by approximately 20.574 (0.81 in.) long; and/or

wherein the width of the bridging wall (56) is approximately 7.874mm (0.31 in).

9. A method feeding a cat a predetermined portion of a daily ration of dry cat food (32) each day such that the cat eats its total daily ration of dry cat food each day, said method comprising:

a) providing a feeding device (20; 50) as claimed in claim 1; and

b) making said feeding device available to the cat so that the cat will play with said feeding device to cause said device to roll on the surface, whereupon the rolling of said device on the surface enables a portion of the dry cat food disposed within said internal cavity to gradually exit said outlet ports when the cat plays with said device.

10. The method of Claim 9 wherein said method comprises:

c) providing plural feeding devices (50), each of said plural feeding devices being filled with said predetermined portion of said daily ration of cat food (32), whereupon the total amount of dry cat food in all of said plural feeding devices (50) constitutes the daily ration of dry cat food for the cat; and

d) disposing said plural feeding devices (50) at various locations to which the cat has access,

such that the cat can find each of said feeding devices to play with each of them and thereby have access to the food contained therein.

11. The method of Claim 9 wherein said method additionally comprises training the cat to use said feeding device (50), said method comprising:

c) providing a portion of the daily ration of cat food (32) in a bowl from which the cat is used to feed and providing a feeding device with the remaining portion of the daily ration of cat food therein so that said feeding device is closely adjacent said bowl; and optionally

said method additionally comprises providing plural feeding devices (50) each with a respective portion of the remaining portion of the daily ration of cat food therein so that said plural feeding devices are closely adjacent said bowl.

Patentansprüche

1. Fütterungsvorrichtung (50) für die Benutzung durch eine Katze zur Ausgabe von Katzentrockenfutter (32), wobei die Fütterungseinrichtung Folgendes umfasst:

a einen hohlen Behälter (52) mit einem Innenhohlraum (30) und einem Paar von Auslassöffnungen (54A-B), welche an einem oberen Abschnitt des Behälters (52) in Verbindung mit dem Innenhohlraum stehend angeordnet sind, wobei die Auslassöffnungen (54A-B) relativ groß sind, so dass sie ausgelegt sind, als das Hilfsmittel zum Füllen des Behälters (52) zu dienen, und als das Hilfsmittel, durch welches das Trockenfutter den Behälter (52) bei Gebrauch verlässt, wobei die Fütterungsvorrichtung eine gebogene Außenfläche (28) aufweist, welche für das Aussehen eines Lebewesens sorgt, welches die Beute einer Wildkatze darstellt, wobei die gebogene Außenfläche so ausgelegt ist, dass sie auf einer Fläche rollt, sobald die Katze mit der Fütterungsvorrichtung spielt, woraufhin die Aktion des Spielens der Katze mit der Fütterungsvorrichtung die automatische sukzessive Ausgabe eines Teils des Katzenfutters (32) aus den Auslassöffnungen (54A-B) zum Ergebnis hat; und
b eine Simulations-Außenschicht (64), wobei die Simulations-Außenschicht bestehend aus einem weichen Material ein Fach (44) für die Aufnahme zumindest eines Abschnitts des hohlen Behälters (52) aufweist, woraufhin die Auslassöffnungen (54A-B) freiliegen, wobei die Simulation-Außenschicht eine Außenfläche aufweist, welche für das Aussehen eines Lebewesens sorgt, welches die Beute einer Wildkatze darstellt, so dass bei Anordnung des hohlen Behälters in dem Fach die Katze mit der Fütterungsvorrichtung spielt, woraufhin die Aktion des Spielens der Katze mit der Fütterungsvorrichtung zum Ergebnis hat, dass ein Teil des Katzenfutters automatisch sukzessiv aus den Auslassöffnungen austritt; **dadurch gekennzeichnet,**
dass der Behälter (52) eine Ringnut (60) aufweist, welche die Auslassöffnungen umgibt, und dass das Fach der Simulations-Außenschicht eine elastische Öffnung aufweist, welche für die lösbare Aufnahme in der Ringnut (60) ausgelegt ist, um den hohlen Behälter bezüglich der Simulations-Außenschicht zu fixieren, und um eine Relativbewegung zwischen diesen zu verhindern, sobald der hohle Behälter in dem Fach angeordnet wird;
dass die Auslassöffnungen (54A-B) durch eine Überbrückungswand (56) voneinander getrennt sind, wobei die Überbrückungswand eine äußere Umfangsfläche aufweist, welche eine Fortsetzung des kreisförmigen Umfangs des Behälters (52) bildet;
dass die abgerundete Wulst (58) über die Außenfläche des Behälters (52) nach außen hinausragt und einen Bereich umgibt, welcher von den Auslassöffnungen (54A-B) und der dazwischenliegenden Überbrückungswand (56) umfasst wird; und
dass die Ringnut (60) unmittelbar unterhalb der Wulst (58) angeordnet ist.

2. Fütterungsvorrichtung nach Anspruch 1, **dadurch gekennzeichnet, dass** der hohle Behälter (52) eine eiförmige, elliptische, kugelförmige oder andere dreidimensionale Form mit einer Längsachse (26) und einer gebogenen Außenfläche aufweist, welche es der Vorrichtung ermöglicht, von der Katze um die Längsachse gerollt zu werden, sobald der hohle Behälter in der Simulations-Außenschicht angeordnet wird; und optional, dass die Außenfläche der Simulations-Außenschicht das Aussehen eines Nagetiers, eines Vogels, eines Fisches oder eines anderen Lebewesens liefert, welches die Beute einer Wildkatze darstellt.

3. Fütterungsvorrichtung nach Anspruch 2, **dadurch gekennzeichnet, dass** die Simulations-Außenschicht (64) zumindest einen auf der Längsachse (26) angeordneten ersten Vorbau (40) einschließt, welcher den Kopf des Nagetiers, des Vogels, des Fisches oder des anderen Lebewesens simuliert.

4. Fütterungsvorrichtung nach Anspruch 1, **dadurch gekennzeichnet, dass** der Behälter (52) eine Öffnung (68) für die Anbringung eines Bauteils aufweist,

welches einen Körperabschnitt eines Nagetiers, eines Vogels, eines Fisches oder eines anderen Lebewesens simuliert.

5. Fütterungssystem-Bausatz mit mehreren Fütterungsvorrichtungen (50) nach Anspruch 1, wobei das System mehrere hohle Behälter (52) und mehrere Simulations-Außenschichten (64) für die Bildung dieser mehreren Fütterungsvorrichtungen (50) umfasst.

6. Systembausatz nach Anspruch 5, **dadurch gekennzeichnet, dass** jede der Mehrzahl von Simulations-Außenschichten (64) das Aussehen desselben Lebewesens, jedoch unterschiedliche Farbe, aufweist.

7. Fütterungsvorrichtung nach Anspruch 1, **dadurch gekennzeichnet, dass** der Behälter (52) eine eiförmige Form mit einem hinteren Endabschnitt (52A) und einem vorderen Endabschnitt (52B) aufweist; und
dass eine zentrale Längsachse (26) sich zwischen dem vorderen Endabschnitt (52B) und dem hinteren Endabschnitt (52A) erstreckt; und
dass der hintere Endabschnitt (52A) eine geringere Wölbung als der vordere Endabschnitt (52B) aufweist und der Behälter (52) in der Regel einen Kreisquerschnitt aufweist.

8. Fütterungsvorrichtung nach Anspruch 1 oder Anspruch 7, **dadurch gekennzeichnet,**

dass jede Auslassöffnung (54A-B) eiförmig ausgebildet ist und eine Abmessung von ungefähr 15,875mm (0,625 Zoll) in Breite und ungefähr 20,574mm (0,81 Zoll) in Länge aufweist; und/oder
dass die Breite der Überbrückungswand (56) ungefähr 7,874mm (0,31 Zoll) beträgt.

9. Verfahren zur Fütterung einer Katze mit einem vorbestimmten Anteil einer Tagesration an Katzentrockenfutter (32) täglich, so dass die Katze täglich ihre gesamte Tagesration an Trockenfutter frisst, wobei das Verfahren die folgenden Schritte umfasst:

a Bereitstellung einer Fütterungsvorrichtung (20; 50) nach Anspruch 1; und
b Zurverfügungstellung der Fütterungsvorrichtung für die Katze, so dass die Katze mit dieser Fütterungsvorrichtung spielt und damit bewirkt, dass die Vorrichtung auf dem Boden rollt, woraufhin das Rollen der Vorrichtung auf dem Boden den sukzessiven Austritt eines Teils des sich in dem Innenhohlraum befindlichen Katzentrockenfutters durch die Auslassöffnungen ermöglicht, sobald die Katze mit der Vorrichtung spielt.

10. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, **dadurch gekennzeichnet, dass** das Verfahren die folgenden Schritte umfasst:

c Bereitstellung einer Mehrzahl von Fütterungsvorrichtungen (50), wobei jede der Mehrzahl von Fütterungsvorrichtung mit dem vorbestimmten Anteil der Tagesration an Katzenfutter (32) gefüllt ist, woraufhin die Gesamtmenge an Katzentrockenfutter in allen der Mehrzahl von Fütterungsvorrichtungen (50) die Tagesration an Katzentrockenfutter für die Katze bildet; und
d Anordnung der Mehrzahl von Fütterungsvorrichtungen (50) an unterschiedlichen Orten, zu welchen die Katze Zugang hat, so dass die Katze jede der Fütterungsvorrichtungen zum Spielen mit jeder derselben finden kann und somit Zugang zu dem darin enthaltenen Futter hat.

11. Verfahren nach Anspruch 9, **dadurch gekennzeichnet, dass** das Verfahren zusätzlich den Schritt des Trainings der Katze zum Gebrauch der Fütterungsvorrichtung (50) aufweist, wobei das Verfahren den folgenden Schritt umfasst:

c Bereitstellung eines Anteils der Tagesration an Katzenfutter (32) in einer Schüssel, von welcher die Katze es gewohnt ist zu fressen, und Bereitstellung einer Fütterungsvorrichtung mit dem restlichen Anteil der Tagesration an Katzenfutter darin derart, dass die Fütterungsvorrichtung dicht neben der Schüssel steht; und optional

das Verfahren zusätzlich die Bereitstellung einer Mehrzahl von Fütterungsvorrichtungen (50) mit dem jeweiligen Anteil des Restanteils der Tagesration an Katzenfutter darin derart aufweist, dass die Mehrzahl von Fütterungsvorrichtungen dicht neben der Schüssel angeordnet ist.

Revendications

1. Dispositif d'alimentation (50) destiné à être utilisé par un chat pour distribuer un aliment sec pour chat (32) à partir de celui-ci, ledit dispositif d'alimentation comprenant :

a) un récipient creux (52) ayant une cavité interne (30) et une paire d'orifices de sortie (54A-B) situés sur une partie supérieure du récipient (52) en communication avec ladite cavité interne, les orifices de sortie (54A-B) étant relativement grands de sorte qu'ils soient configurés pour servir de moyen de remplissage du récipient (52) et de moyen à travers lequel l'aliment sec sort du récipient (52) en cours d'utilisation, ledit dis-

positif d'alimentation ayant une surface externe arquée (28) procurant l'apparence d'une créature qui constitue une proie d'un chat sauvage, ladite surface externe arquée étant configurée pour rouler sur une surface lorsque le chat joue avec ledit dispositif d'alimentation, après quoi l'action selon laquelle le chat joue avec ledit dispositif d'alimentation entraîne la distribution progressive automatique d'une partie de l'aliment pour chat (32) hors desdits orifices de sortie (54A-B) ; et

b) un revêtement de simulation (64), ledit revêtement de simulation comprenant un matériau souple ayant une poche (44) pour recevoir au moins une partie dudit récipient creux (52) après quoi lesdits orifices de sortie (54A-B) sont exposés, ledit revêtement de simulation ayant une surface extérieure procurant l'apparition d'une créature qui constitue une proie d'un chat sauvage de sorte que lorsque le récipient creux est disposé à l'intérieur de ladite poche, le chat jouera avec ledit dispositif d'alimentation, après quoi l'action selon laquelle le chat joue avec ledit dispositif d'alimentation entraîne la distribution progressive automatique d'une partie de l'aliment pour chat hors des orifices ;

dans lequel ledit récipient (52) comporte une rainure annulaire (60) entourant lesdits orifices de sortie, et dans lequel ladite poche dudit revêtement de simulation comprend une ouverture élastique configurée pour être reçue de manière amovible dans ladite rainure annulaire (60) pour maintenir ledit récipient creux en place par rapport audit revêtement de simulation et pour empêcher un mouvement relatif entre eux lorsque ledit récipient creux est disposé dans ladite poche ;

dans lequel les orifices de sortie (54A-B) sont séparés par une paroi en pont (56) ayant une surface périphérique externe constituant le prolongement d'une périphérie circulaire du récipient (52) ;

dans lequel une crête arrondie (58) fait saillie vers l'extérieur depuis la surface externe du récipient (52) et entoure une zone couverte par les orifices de sortie (54A-B) et la paroi en pont intermédiaire (56) ; et

dans lequel la rainure annulaire (60) est située immédiatement en dessous de la crête (58).

2. Dispositif d'alimentation de la revendication 1, dans lequel ledit récipient creux (52) comprend une forme ovoïde, ellipsoïde, sphérique ou une autre forme tridimensionnelle ayant un axe longitudinal (26) et une surface externe arquée permettant de faire rouler ledit dispositif autour dudit axe longitudinal par le chat lorsque ledit récipient creux est disposé dans ledit revêtement de simulation ; et éventuellement dans lequel ladite surface extérieure dudit revêtement de simulation procure l'apparence d'un rongeur, d'un oiseau, d'un poisson ou d'une autre créature qui constitue une proie pour un chat sauvage.

3. Dispositif d'alimentation de la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit revêtement de simulation (64) comporte au moins l'une d'une première saillie (40) située sur ledit axe longitudinal (26) simulant la tête du rongeur, de l'oiseau, du poisson ou d'une autre créature.

4. Dispositif d'alimentation de la revendication 1, dans lequel ledit récipient (52) comporte une ouverture (68) pour le montage d'un composant qui simule une partie d'un rongeur, d'un oiseau, d'un poisson ou d'une autre créature.

5. Kit de système d'alimentation comprenant plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation (50) selon la revendication 1, ledit système comprenant plusieurs récipients creux (82) et plusieurs revêtements de simulation (64) pour former lesdits plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation (50).

6. Kit de système de la revendication 5, dans lequel chacun desdits plusieurs revêtements de simulation (64) procure l'apparence de la même créature, mais d'une couleur différente.

7. Dispositif d'alimentation de la revendication 1, dans lequel le récipient (52) est de forme ovoïde ayant une partie d'extrémité arrière (52A) et une partie d'extrémité avant (52B) ; et

dans lequel un axe longitudinal central (26) s'étend entre la partie d'extrémité avant (52B) et la partie d'extrémité arrière (52A) ; et

dans lequel la partie d'extrémité arrière (52A) a un degré de courbure inférieur à celui de la partie d'extrémité avant (52B) et le récipient (52) a une section transversale globalement circulaire.

8. Dispositif d'alimentation de la revendication 1 ou la revendication 7, dans lequel chaque orifice de sortie (54A-B) est d'une forme ovale et a une dimension d'environ 15,875 mm (0,625 pouce) de largeur sur environ 20,574 (0,81 pouce) de longueur ; et/ou dans lequel la largeur de la paroi en pont (56) est d'environ 7,874 mm (0,31 pouce).

9. Procédé d'alimentation d'un chat avec une partie prédéterminée d'une ration quotidienne d'un aliment sec pour chat (32) chaque jour de sorte que le chat mange sa ration quotidienne totale de l'aliment sec pour chat chaque jour, ledit procédé comprenant les étapes consistant à :

a) fournir un dispositif d'alimentation (20 ; 50)

tel que revendiqué dans la revendication 1 ; et
b) mettre ledit dispositif d'alimentation à disposition du chat de sorte que le chat jouera avec ledit dispositif d'alimentation pour faire rouler ledit dispositif sur la surface, après quoi le roulement dudit dispositif sur la surface permet à une partie de l'aliment sec pour chat disposée à l'intérieur de ladite cavité interne de sortir progressivement desdits orifices de sortie lorsque le chat joue avec ledit dispositif.

10. Procédé de la revendication 9, où ledit procédé comprend les étapes consistant à :

c) fournir plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation (50), chacun desdits plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation étant rempli de ladite partie prédéterminée de ladite ration quotidienne de l'aliment pour chat (32), après quoi la quantité totale de l'aliment sec pour chat dans tous lesdits plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation (50) constitue la ration quotidienne de l'aliment sec pour chat ; et
d) disposer lesdits plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation (50) à divers emplacements auxquels le chat a accès, de sorte que le chat puisse trouver chacun desdits dispositifs d'alimentation pour jouer avec chacun d'eux et avoir ainsi l'accès à l'aliment contenu dedans.

11. Procédé de la revendication 9, où ledit procédé comprend en plus l'étape consistant à apprendre au chat à utiliser ledit dispositif d'alimentation (50), ledit procédé comprenant l'étape consistant à :

c) fournir une partie de la ration quotidienne de l'aliment pour chat (32) dans un bol que le chat utilise pour se nourrir et fournir un dispositif d'alimentation avec la partie restante de la ration quotidienne de l'aliment pour chat dans celui-ci de sorte que ledit dispositif d'alimentation soit étroitement adjacent audit bol ; et éventuellement

ledit procédé comprend en plus l'étape consistant à fournir plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation (50) chacun avec une partie respective de la partie restante de la ration quotidienne de l'aliment pour chat dans celui-ci de sorte que lesdits plusieurs dispositifs d'alimentation soient étroitement adjacents audit bol.

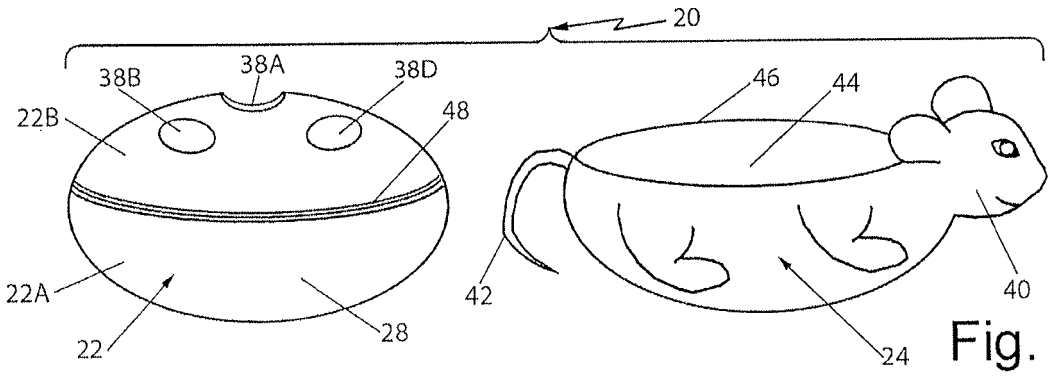


Fig. 1

Fig. 2

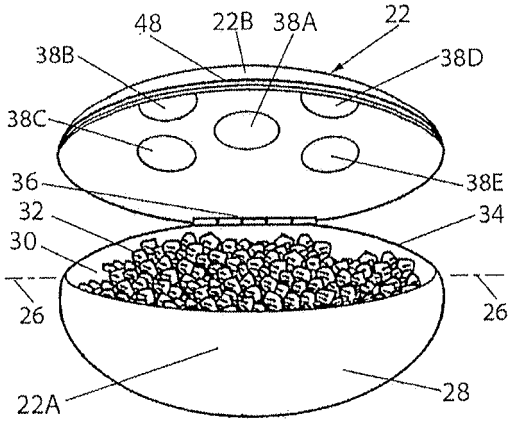
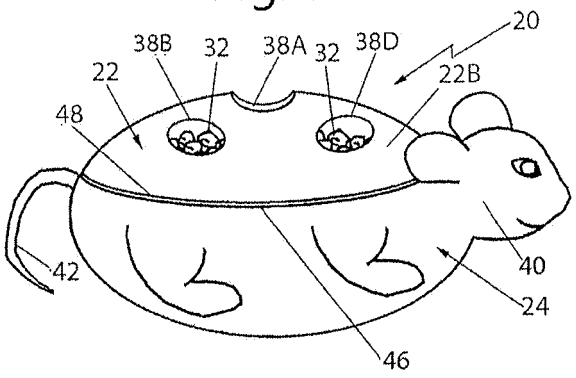


Fig. 3



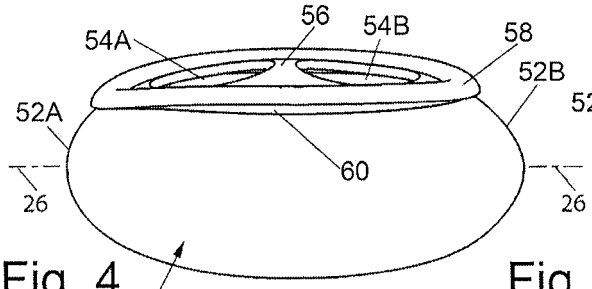


Fig. 4

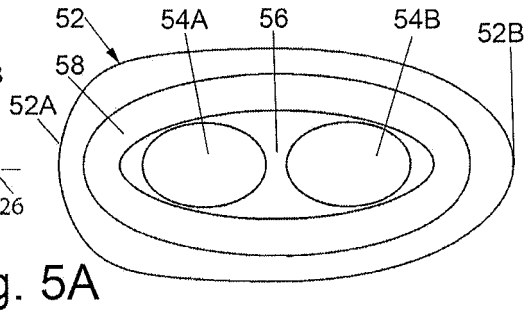


Fig. 5A

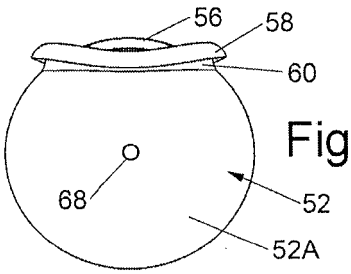


Fig. 5B

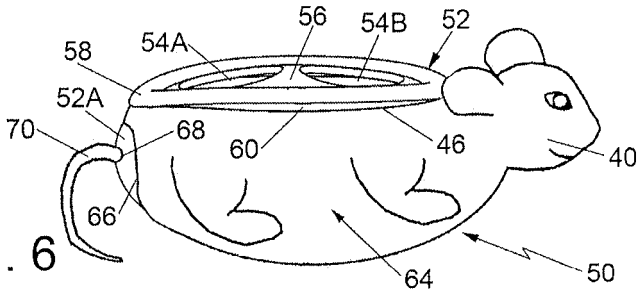


Fig. 6

Fig. 7

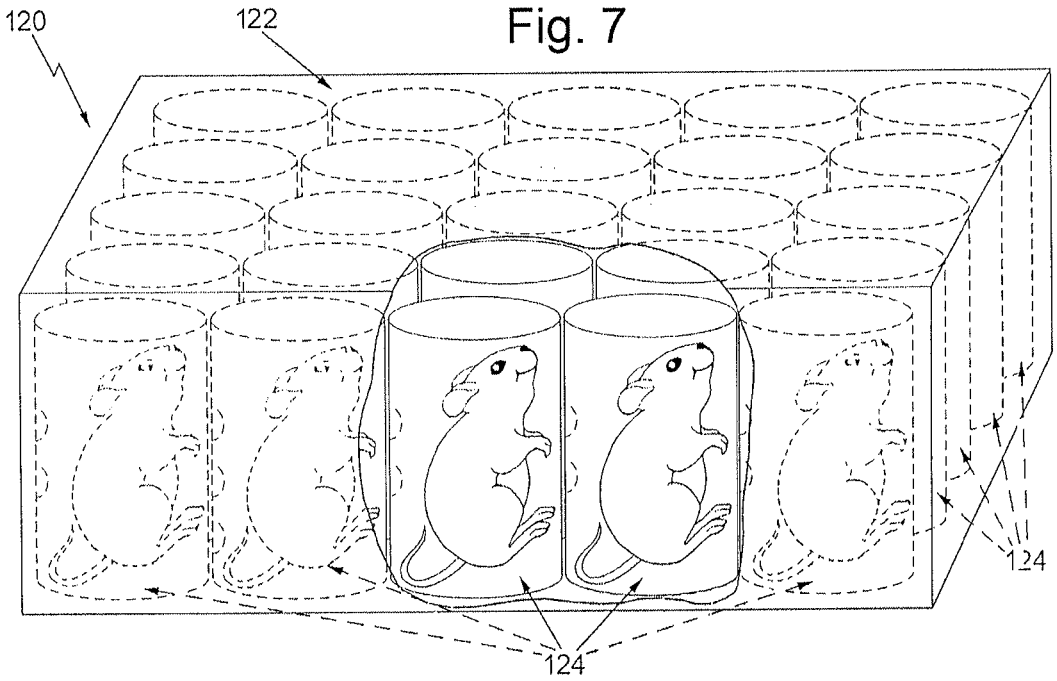


Fig. 8

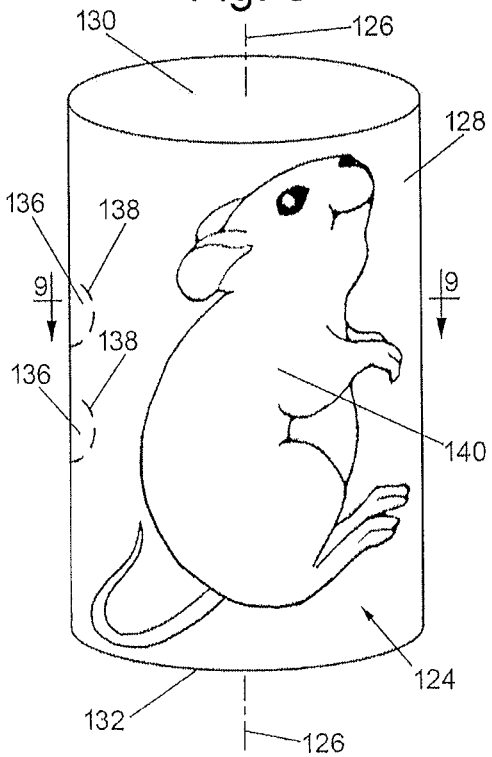
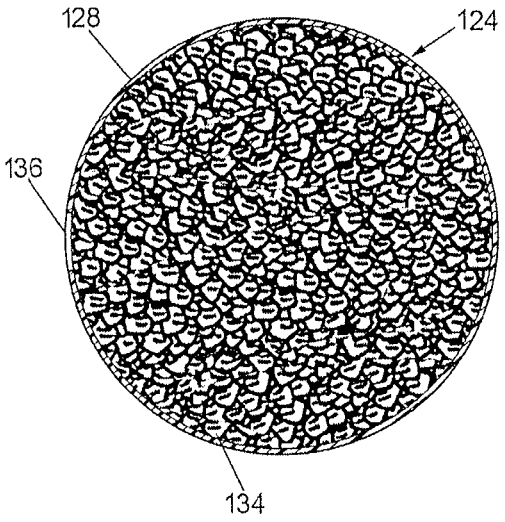


Fig. 9



REFERENCES CITED IN THE DESCRIPTION

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