

## Exposing exploitation

[Beki Elmer](#) explores the dark practices behind the use of animals for tourist entertainment in Thailand

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Image: fightforrhinos.com

Scrolling through Instagram or Facebook this summer, it was almost impossible to avoid the predictable ‘#finding myself’ snaps of friends and family sharing out-of-this-world experiences in the booming tourist hotspots of South East Asia.

You may have spotted images of friends daring to take selfies with a tiger, posing with gibbons on their shoulders or riding elephants. This is because the infamous full-moon parties, exotic beaches and street food in Thailand aren’t the only lucrative components of the tourist industry.

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” Upon arriving in Bangkok, tour guides flood towards holiday-makers urging them to come to see elephant acrobatics, orangutan boxing matches or to visit Monkey Island. Just a three hour drive away from the capital, Tiger Temple in Kanchanaburi province sees around 1,000 tourists a day pass through its gates. Each visitor pays approximately US\$15 to get a picture with the tigers housed in a so-called “sanctuary” run by Buddhist monks.

But many are blissfully unaware of the truth behind what makes wild predators such as tigers, elephants and bears so friendly when you're getting up close. Tiger Temple, for example, is one of the only places in the world where tourists can get close enough to touch a tiger. Yet what fails to be acknowledged is that the animals are heavily sedated by their keepers. Tendons in their wrists are also clipped and they're chained so low to the ground they can barely move, as revealed in a Care for the Wild International (CWI) investigation.

Admittedly, I was ignorant of the severe maltreatment of wildlife in South East Asia until a visit to The Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand (WFFT), a conservation centre operating just outside of Hua Hin. The programme aims to rescue, rehabilitate and release local wildlife to their original habitat after maltreatment by humans. It also targets tourists to increase awareness of the exploitative trading markets these animals suffer within.

Housing around 350 rescued animals including elephants, bears, crocodiles and primates, WFFT has several ongoing projects to help prevent animal exploitation. For instance, the foundation pledges to aid the enforcement of laws preventing the exploitation of animals as well as running volunteer programmes to help with round-the-clock care of the rescued wildlife. Founder of WFFT, Edwin Wiek, aided the arrest of two Thai individuals illegally exploiting white-handed gibbons on a beach in Koh Phi Phi last month.

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Unfortunately, for every charitable act and success story of WFFT there also appears to be a horrifying back-story. We were told about elephants being used in the streets for tourist photographs, which resulted in one being hit by a truck in the streets of Bangkok. This has prevented the animal from being able to walk properly for the rest of its life, leaving a severe deformity on its side. This demonstrates that these animals are not meant to be integrated into the modern city.

It's estimated that around 3,000 elephants are kept in captivity in Thailand. As a result their numbers in the wild have dwindled to around 4,000. A lot of the elephants working in the tourist industry are poached from the wild and taken when their parents are killed. After the animals have been taken they're then prepared for the tourist industry.

Type 'breaking the spirit of an elephant' into YouTube and you'll be met with harrowing, graphic images of keepers nailing spikes into the animals heads and chaining them up in box-like conditions in order to tame them. This is all part of the process the wild animals go through before you can ride them safely.

As well as this, many of you will be aware of the story which hit the news recently of a group of Chinese tourists left shaken after an elephant keeper was gored to death by the animal who then raced off with the tourists on the back. It's cases like these which attest to the fact that wild animals are not meant to be kept in captivity. Animals are severely mistreated by their handlers as a result of the money that goes into animal tourism out of our pockets.



Image: kthypryn

Luckily there are now laws in place preventing elephant exploitation on the streets of Thailand, but they are rarely enforced. This is why social media must be used to spread awareness to prevent money getting into the hands of those who can not care for the animals properly.

So how can we put an end to animal exploitation in Thailand? Tanya Cameron, education officer at Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand has stressed the most effective ways for visitors to help put a stop to such a cruel trade. She commented, "Education in tourists is very important and in children to see a possible change for these animals and a drop in demand for such animal exploitation and cruelty. Also supporting foundations (like NGOs) so they can continue helping these animals is a must. We wouldn't be able to run without our volunteers and day visitors."

Equally exploitative is the pet industry in Thailand. Tanya emphasises, "education in the local people who buy wildlife as pets such as sun bears, gibbons, slow lorises and even green iguanas" is incredibly important. The animals are used as photography props and are bought illegally on the premise of being exotic, yet are treated extraordinarily badly, being fed the wrong foods and held captive in tiny spaces.

Tanya also highlighted how going to see animals in National Parks takes money away from the exploitative and harmful industries which need to be avoided and still allows people to see the animals in their natural and wild beauty.

For many, the hard-hitting truth lies thousands of miles away and is venerated by a memory of a fantastic holiday. It's important to realise that animals should not be kept in these conditions. Money should be going into preserving their habitats instead of feeding a burgeoning and corrupt element of the Thai tourist industry.

*To find out more about WFFT and their conservation programmes visit their website, <http://www.wfft.org/>*



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