

The real cost of exploitative tourism

By [James Hall](#), Travel Editor (2016/17)

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Many travellers will have experienced the moral dilemma of whether to tick a selfie with a docile tiger off the bucket list, or to refrain from such close encounters and view wild animals as they truly are, *wild*.



Image: Sophie Raffan

It is an issue that has received more attention since TripAdvisor, the largest travel website in the world, banned the sale of tickets on its platform to attractions that include the exploitation of wild animals, with a “no touching of wild animals policy.” The new regulation includes such tourist mainstays as elephant riding and swimming with dolphins. TripAdvisor’s decision followed an industry trend with both STA Travel and Intrepid introducing similar policies in 2014. These are positive steps to reduce the promotion of such practices, yet it is ultimately tourists themselves who hold the key to reducing the demand for, and profitability of, the use of wild animals.

The discovery last year of frequent and extensive animal abuse at a Buddhist temple in Thailand, popular with foreign tourists, is sadly unsurprising. According to the BBC, forty dead tiger cubs were discovered in a freezer within the temple premises potentially intended for use in Chinese medicine. The “Tiger Temple,” located in Kanchanaburi Province, was famous for being the perfect place to capture an Instagram photo whilst lying next to a sedated tiger. The resulting images had no more accuracy, in being a genuine encounter with a tiger, than a photoshopped snap of the tourists riding them (minus the actual need for a tormented big cat). Unfortunately, this is just one example of a much wider problem of animal abuse in the tourist industry.



Image: xiquinhosilva

One of the most popular forms of interaction with wild animals, particularly in Southeast Asia, is with elephants. Elephant riding is a common practice in the region, and something that I am guilty of. It is understandable that humans seek to interact with such an incredible beast, but there are only so many times that an intelligent animal wants to be “bathed” before the intervention of a mahout (an elephant handler) and a spiked pole is required. Having experienced both, observing an elephant from a distance, either in the wild or at a reputable rehabilitation centre, is a far superior experience to the manipulation of an animal to carry overweight tourists.

There are, however, ways to protect wildlife whilst minimising the detrimental impact to the local economy that closing such attractions would have. The Elephant Nature Park, located in Chang Mai, Thailand, the heart of elephant tourism in Southeast Asia, provides a mass market alternative to the normal morally questionable experiences on offer. It was founded as a centre to rehabilitate elephants that have been physically and psychologically damaged by work in areas such as logging, circuses and tourism. The park has grown in popularity and allows for close contact with elephants, provided that they are interested in you, and unlike at other establishments, coercion is never used. Although not the cheapest attraction by Thai standards at over £50 per person, it is definitely worth considering the actual impact of that perfect bucket list photo.

Although there have been many positive steps at improving industry standards, in the majority of cases, a lack of government regulation or the ability to enforce such regulation leaves the responsibility of reducing the exploitation of animals to tourists themselves. Fundamentally, if you are concerned that an activity may encourage the mistreatment of wildlife for financial gain, don't do it.



One comment

Siam Will

4 Oct '17 at 5:23 am

Tripadvisor made a lot of publicity about their “declaration” re exploitation of animals in Thailand and elsewhere, but the reality is a long way from the ideal.

far from “banning” tour companies advertising exploitative activities they actively ban and censor members of the public who point out or report such companies. In the end Tripadvisor makes money from tours and other animal related exploitative businesses and does not tolerate criticism by members of the public.

the fact is it is easy to tell the public they disapprove and they know that it is difficult then for others to show that in reality Tripadvisor is doing nothing except benefit from the public's misconception that everything they have on their web site is “kosher”.

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