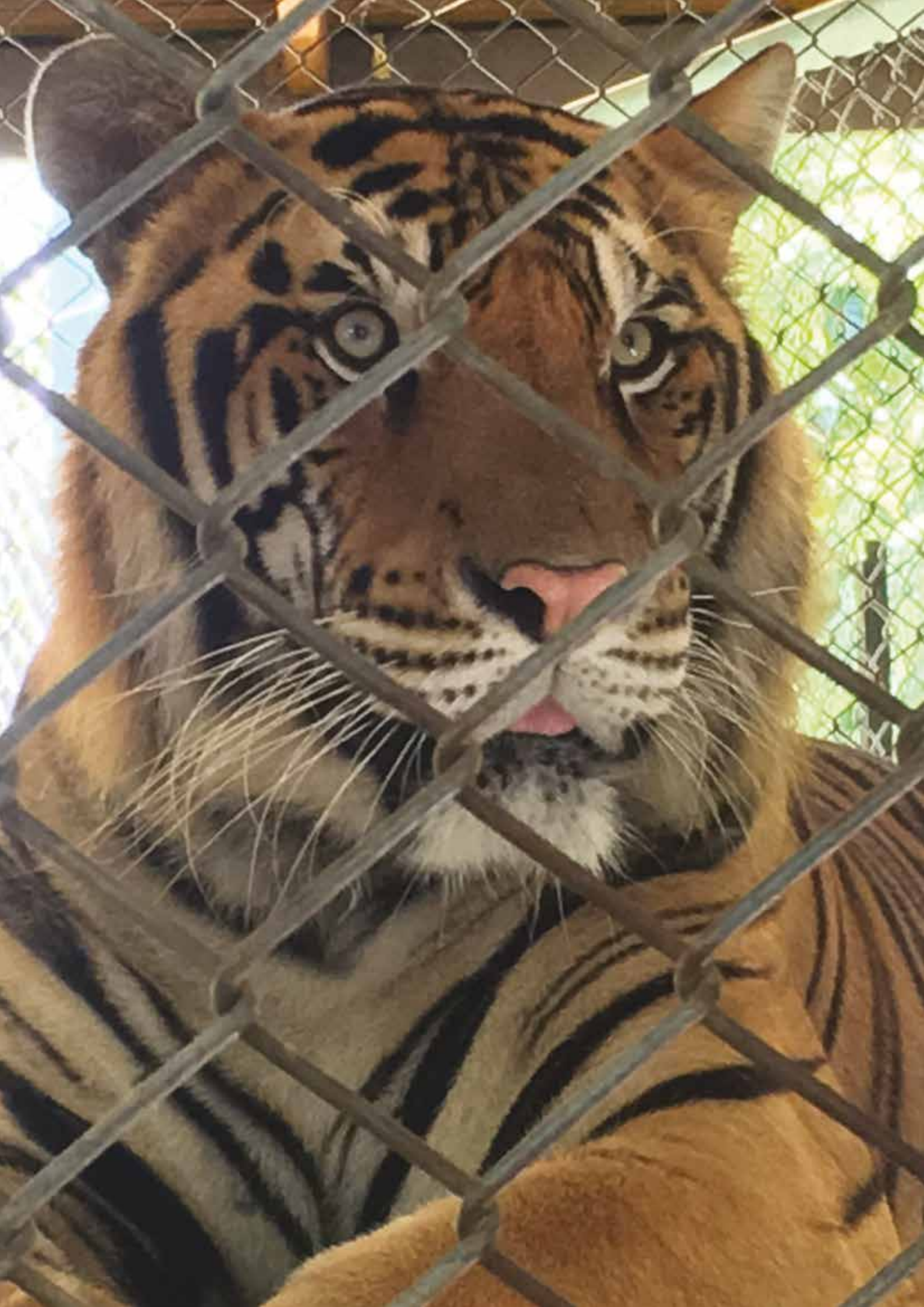




# Tiger selfies exposed



A portrait of Thailand's tiger entertainment industry



# Introduction

Wildlife tourism, worth up to \$250 billion (USD) annually<sup>1,2</sup> is big business. It is estimated that globally wildlife tourism attractions condemn around 550,000 wild animals<sup>3</sup> to appalling, mostly unseen suffering. Because the pain and distress is largely hidden, visitors are usually oblivious to the horrific abuse and conditions endured for tourist entertainment.

Captive tigers are particular victims of irresponsible tourism - their suffering fuelled by the demand for selfies and photo sharing on social media. These majestic and endangered predators are bred, used and abused to create entertainment for tourists and boost the profits of wildlife attractions, travel companies and sometimes illegal traders.

## Suffering for a lifetime

They endure a lifetime of suffering starting with early removal from their mothers followed by unrelenting handling and stressful interactions with visitors. As they grow they are often confined to small, barren cages, chained, and subjected to harsh training regimes to prepare them for distressing, unnatural performances and behaviours.

Thailand is a hotspot for tiger tourism with many attractions and activities being widely promoted by travel companies and travel websites like TripAdvisor.

Investigations by several organisations into the Tiger Temple in Kanchanaburi province have been a particular media focus<sup>4</sup>. The cruel treatment of animals in its care and illegal practices were initially exposed in 2009 and in June 2016 all of its 147 tigers were seized by Thai authorities. At the time of this report's publication the Temple is accused of being linked with the illegal trade in tiger body parts<sup>5</sup>.

There is no evidence so far that any of the other venues referred to in this report are involved in the unlawful trade of tigers or their body parts. However, our research shows that at some venues there are significant discrepancies in reported and observed tiger numbers that raises serious questions. Particularly, regarding the seemingly common practice of 'speed-breeding' captive tigers without any conservation benefits.

## Expanding a cruel industry

Despite international outcry against tiger farming for the trade in body parts and for entertainment, this practice remains on-going cross Asia. Following our 2010 research into the welfare of wild animals in Thailand's wildlife tourism entertainment venues, we revisited the same venues in 2015 and 2016. We also visited new venues established since 2010.

Our researchers uncovered an expanding industry with up to 830 tigers kept in captivity at venues using tigers for entertainment in Thailand in 2016. This is compared with up to 623 kept in the 10 major tiger entertainment venues in the country during our first wave of research in 2010<sup>6</sup>.

This report presents the first comprehensive analysis of the tiger entertainment industry in Thailand and highlights the role of governments, the travel industry and tourists globally in protecting them.

# Exposing suffering in numbers

Between March 2015 and June 2016 we visited 17 major tiger entertainment venues anonymously. We focussed on venues in Thailand where direct visitor-tiger interaction or circus like shows (which use tigers in a demeaning, stressful or harmful ways) are provided as a main source of entertainment for visiting tourists.

During each visit, our researchers recorded the numbers of adult tigers and cubs as well as the numbers reported by the venue to our researchers.

The ways the animals were used for entertainment and the general husbandry conditions - the ways they were kept - were also recorded and scientifically assessed.

Our 2015-2016 research observed direct evidence of 535 tigers in tiger entertainment venues, with the Tiger Temple (147) and Sriracha Tiger Zoo (130) recording the highest numbers. However, the figures reported by the tiger entertainment venues themselves suggested as many as 830 tigers at these venues - 207 more than in our 2010 research. The total number of captive tigers in Thailand is even higher, with government comments suggesting up to 1,500 tigers in zoos, private venues and other facilities<sup>7</sup>.

## Concealing an illegal trade

The 2016 Tiger Temple case revelations highlight how captive tigers may be not only legally bred for tourism, but also bred for the illegal trade in body parts. Government officials found 70 tiger cubs in glass jars and in freezers. They also found tiger skins and large numbers of amulets made from tiger bones, teeth and fur. The Temple also failed to account for three missing government registered tigers.<sup>5</sup>

The Tiger Temple and its suspected breeding practices for tiger body parts may not be an isolated case.

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**Total number of tigers reported in  
entertainment venues in 2010**

**623**

**Total number of tigers reported in  
entertainment venues in 2015/16**

**830**

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## Breaking down the breeding numbers

Even though our data suggests a steady increase in captive tigers in Thailand it may be questioned whether this increase is accounting for every tiger bred.

To estimate the theoretical breeding capacity of Thailand's captive tigers, the following calculations can provide some indication.

- Assuming that 50% of the 830 reported tigers are female, and that of these females about 30% would be in reproductive age, this suggests that about 125 female tigers could be used for breeding.
- The heavy interest of venues in breeding tigers would suggest a strong motivation to maximise breeding output to produce cubs for tourist interactions.
- Common practice in many of Thailand's tiger entertainment venues is to remove the tiger cubs from the mother within the first weeks. This allows the female to start breeding again sooner, likely leading to roughly one litter per year. With these figures in mind it could be estimated that 250-375 tigers could be bred every year in Thailand, just from tigers at entertainment venues.
- On average a tigress will produce two to three cubs per litter<sup>8</sup>. Under normal circumstances it will take two to three years before the female will produce another litter. However, in cases of the cubs dying or disappearing, a tigress is capable of mating again within several weeks<sup>9</sup>.

These calculations are based on some assumptions, but raise the importance of strict monitoring of tiger venues and more transparency on what actually occurs there.

# Selling close-up cruelty

All 17 tiger tourism sites that we visited offered cruel and unnatural activities and performances.

These included tourists being able to get up close and take selfies with adult tigers at 13 venues. And at 12 venues tourists were also encouraged to take a selfie with tiger cubs separated from their mothers at an early age.

We found three tiger entertainment venues allowing tourists to feed adult tigers. Two - Sriracha Tiger Zoo and Samui Aquarium and Tiger Zoo - offered circus-style tiger performances for visitors.

These performances typically required the tigers to perform unnaturally - including jumping through burning hoops. Such forced behaviours can cause tigers extreme distress.



## Uncovering shocking conditions

Our research confirmed that most tigers in Thailand's entertainment venues are being kept in severely inadequate conditions. This was also the case during our 2010 research when we found 90% of venues keeping tigers in appalling conditions that did not meet even their most basic needs<sup>6</sup>.

In 2015-2016 we saw tigers housed typically in concrete cages or barren enclosures, with limited access to fresh water. They were also exposed to frequent visitors and other stressors, including overcrowding or loud noise levels.

Only six of the 17 venues provided some form of basic environmental enrichment such as wooden logs in an enclosure or staff encouraging the young tigers to play. But these were still not enough to keep the tigers sufficiently physically and psychologically active. In the wild female tigers roam from 16 to 32 kilometres in a single night<sup>10</sup>.

Twelve percent of the tigers we observed had behavioural problems. These included stereotypic or overly aggressive behaviour such as repetitive pacing or biting their tails. These behaviours most commonly occur when animals feel they cannot cope with stressful environments or situations. Such behaviours have also never been documented in wild animals living in the wild and highlight the inadequacy of captive environments.

Our observations were made during a relatively short period and usually during the day. Consequently, they cannot be considered a completely accurate picture of the behavioural problems suffered. But because tigers are most active at night, their behavioural problems are likely to increase and worsen after dark.

A total of 400 (75%) of the 535 observed tigers were kept in cages below 20sqm space per animal for most of the day and night. Another 10% were kept in small enclosures between 21 to 130sqm and usually shared the space with several other animals. Often these cages were concrete-ground cages or barren enclosures. The animals had limited access to fresh water and adequate veterinary treatment.

Based on the welfare scores for each venue, up to 674 tigers (82% of the reported tigers) were kept at venues with animal welfare scores of below 5, suggesting a lifetime of misery for these tigers. The remaining 18% of tigers were kept at venues with scores of 5 or 6. Although this indicates slightly better conditions it is still a far cry from meeting the tigers' needs.

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1 Further information about our methodology can be found in World Animal Protection. 2014. Wildlife on a Tightrope: An overview of wild animals in entertainment in Thailand. [Online] Available at: [http://www.worldanimalprotection.org/sites/default/files/int\\_files/wildlife-on-a-tightrope-thailand.pdf](http://www.worldanimalprotection.org/sites/default/files/int_files/wildlife-on-a-tightrope-thailand.pdf)





## Separating cubs and mothers

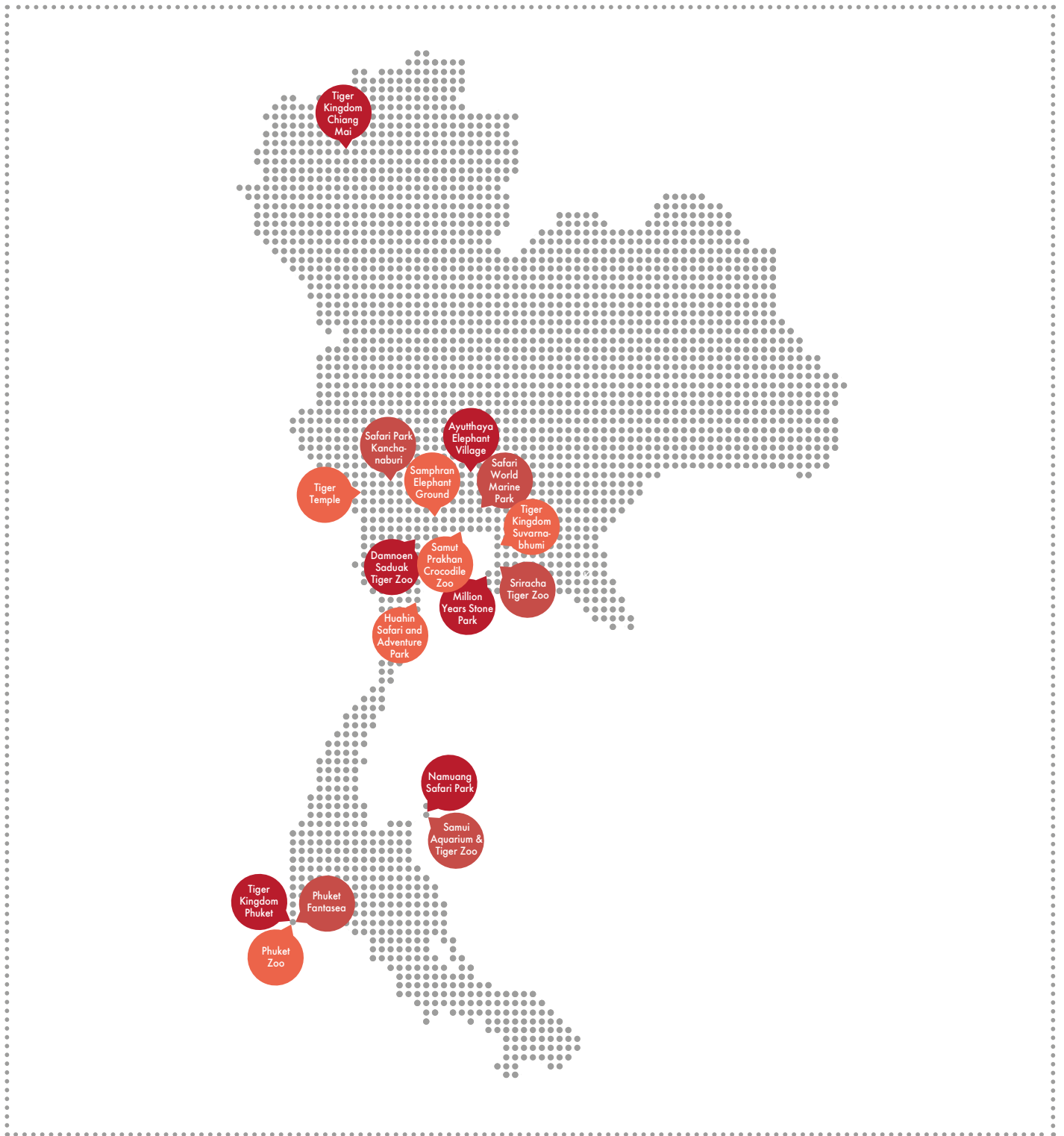
Venues typically separate new-born tiger cubs from their mothers within two to three weeks of birth. They then hand-raise them artificially and allow tourists to bottle feed the cubs from only a few weeks of age.

The venues claim separation is necessary to stop tiger mothers killing their own cubs. While these incidences have been reported at other facilities keeping captive tigers, they are often related to stressful environments, such as in unsuitable captive conditions<sup>11</sup>.

It must be assumed that the early removal of tiger cubs serves also a second purpose: to enable the venues to breed from tiger mothers more frequently. For example, in 2010 we documented statements by Sriracha Tiger Zoo claiming birth rates up to 6-9 times higher than in the wild. The separation causes both cubs and mothers great stress. In the wild they would stay together until the young tigers are about two years old<sup>9</sup>.



## Venue locations in Thailand



Tiger-Entertainment Venue	Adult Tigers Selfies	Tiger Cub Selfies	Tiger Shows	Tiger Feeding	2015/16		2010	
					Tigers Reported	Tigers Observed	Tigers Reported	Tigers Observed
Tiger Kingdom Chiang Mai	X	X	–	–	49	49	33	33
Ayutthaya Elephant Village	X	–	–	–	1	1	3	3
Chang Siam	X	–	–	–	3	3	–	–
Million Years Stone Park	X	X	–	–	90	42	40	35
Sriracha Tiger Zoo	X	X	X	X	350	130	400	110
Samut Prakhon Crocodile Zoo	X	X	–	–	3	3	6	6
Samphran Elephant Ground	X	–	–	–	2	2	3	3
Safari World Marine Park	–	X	–	–	7	7	10	10
Damnoen Saduak Tiger Zoo	–	X	–	X	24	24	–	–
Huahin Safari and Adventure Park	X	X	–	–	30	30	–	–
Tiger Temple	X	X	–	–	148	148	70	45
Safari Park Kanchanaburi	X	X	–	X	13	13	–	–
Phuket Zoo	X	–	–	–	1	1	–	–
Samui Aquarium & Tiger Zoo	X	–	X	–	45	18	–	–
Tiger Kingdom Phuket	X	X	–	–	57	57	–	–
Tiger Kingdom Suvarnabhumi*	–	X	–	–	–	–	55	25
Phuket Fantasea**	–	X	–	–	3	3	3	3
Namuang Safari Park**	–	X	–	–	4	4	–	–
<b>Total Number of Tigers</b>					<b>830</b>	<b>535</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>273</b>

X Activity is present  
 – Activity is not present or data regarding the number of tigers reported was not available.

\* This venue did not exist anymore at the time of the 2015/16 research

\*\* Welfare assessments could not be carried out for these venues

The number of tigers and types of tourist activities provided at the 17 different tiger entertainment venues assessed during World Animal Protection's survey in 2015 and 2016. Tigers 'observed' refers to tigers directly seen by researchers during visits to tiger venues or numbers reported in official government reports. Tigers 'reported' refers to figures provided by tiger venues themselves.



# Focus on...

## Sriracha Tiger Zoo

Sriracha Tiger Zoo near Pattaya had reported the most tigers in their possession. The tigers also appeared in the poorest condition of all those observed in our research. At least one observed tiger was so thin, the hips and ribs were visible. Scarring could also be seen on at least one animal.



## Forcing performances

Some of Sriracha's tigers are expected to perform stunts: jump through burning hoops, balance on a tight wire, and walk across small raised steel platforms. None of these activities would be possible without training involving suffering being inflicted upon the animals, making them compliant enough to perform.

Throughout the shows, the animals are also made to roll over on command, jump up and assume unnatural sitting positions. Trainers use pieces of food for rewards, but also have a sturdy whip to direct and control the behaviour of the tigers.

Short bamboo sticks are also used to control the behaviour of adult tigers and point their faces in the right direction so visitors can take photos.

## Punishing treatment

A staff member told our researchers starvation or excessive limiting of food is used to punish the tigers when they make a 'mistake'. He said staff limit "their food when they are naughty...we can punish them by letting tiger starve [sic]"<sup>12</sup>.

A number of times during performances, the tigers appeared stressed and fearful of their handler.

## Famished tigers

Tiger feeding is also promoted at Sriracha for an extra fee. This activity involves shooting small boxes with pellet guns to release pieces of meat. The boxes are on a wire above an enclosure, housing at least 15 adult tigers. When the bullseye on the box is hit, food drops down into the enclosure and the tigers run for it.

We repeatedly saw the stronger, healthier tigers successfully scrambling for the pieces of meat dropping down. This competition for food was likely to be responsible for a number of tigers appearing underweight.

## Keeping unnaturally

Other activities – often bizarre and completely unlinked with tigers’ natural habitats and behaviours – were enthusiastically watched and photographed by tourists.

In one pen, tiger cubs were kept together with piglets suckling on a sow confined to a sow-stall. And another enclosure housed a piglet and a large adult tiger – normally prey and predator.

One of the main attractions at Sriracha is tiger cub feeding where between 10 and 20 tiger cubs are kept all day in small cages in a room. Hundreds of visitors daily approach the cages or pay for selfies with the cubs or feed them with milk bottles. In another area two tiger cubs, several weeks old, were lying passively in a corner of a concrete pen. Beside them – a staff member waiting for visitors to step in to feed the cubs with a milk bottle.



The zoo's false claims about the educational value of its entertainments are further exposed by an attraction wrongly implying tigers are native to Africa. Here, visitors are encouraged to photograph a tiger in an 'African' landscape. The tiger is pushed and prodded with a bamboo stick wielded by a Tarzan-style trainer until the animal sits on a stool.

## Funding cruelty

Sriracha's website says it has welcomed "more than 10 millions [sic] visitors" who have flocked from around the world to see its cubs and tigers since 1997<sup>13</sup>.

Tragically these visitors, through the payment of their entrance and ticket fees, are unwittingly funding cruelty and ignorance.

Research by the University of Oxford's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU) shows that around 80% of people who leave a review on TripAdvisor are typically unaware of the welfare problems associated with irresponsible wildlife entertainment venues<sup>3</sup>.

Of 3,904 reviews of tiger interaction attractions - including Sriracha Tiger Zoo - 3,205 (82%) rated the attraction as 'Excellent' or 'Very Good'. Only 18% rated the attractions negatively because of animal welfare or conservation concerns<sup>3</sup>.



## Conservation Concern

The tiger is one of the most iconic animal species on earth, but the largest of the 'big cats' is on the brink of extinction. A hundred years ago, as many as 100,000 wild tigers roamed across Asia.

Today, there are only about 3,890 tigers left in the wild, occupying a mere 4% of their former range<sup>14</sup>.

This catastrophic decline is driven by a range of threats, including poaching for the illegal wildlife trade, overhunting of prey species by local people, habitat loss, and conflict with people.

As a result, tigers are globally considered endangered with two subspecies (the Malayan and Sumatran) further classified as critically endangered.

All photographs in this section were taken at Sriracha Tiger Zoo in 2015

# Moving the world for wildlife

The findings of our research shows that each of us has a role to play in protecting tigers from the cruel regime that comes with being forced to entertain tourists.

We want wild animals to stay in the wild, where they belong. But tigers in tiger entertainment venues across Thailand cannot be released back into the wild. Their poor genetics due to inbreeding, and altered behaviour because of their lives in captivity limit their chances of survival in the wild. Therefore, the questions must be asked about the purpose of such massive tiger breeding operations that are of no use for species conservation – especially while these venues clearly have a negative welfare impact on the animals.

The tigers at the tiger entertainment venues need our protection from ill treatment in captivity now, while ensuring that this industry is phased out. For this we call upon:

**Governments worldwide to investigate tiger entertainment venues** and close down those that show evidence of illegal trade, cruelty or neglect as described in this report. Captive breeding of tigers should be limited to projects with internationally acknowledged conservation benefit. Thai authorities took action against illegal activities by confiscating 147 tigers from the Tiger Temple in June 2016. We call on them to continue investigating other Thai tiger venues, and close down those that are exploiting and abusing tigers.

**Travel companies to end their sales and promotion of cruel wildlife entertainment attractions** and to educate their customers about how to be a responsible traveller.

One of the world's largest online travel websites, TripAdvisor, is promoting and selling tickets to the cruellest tiger venues uncovered in this report, including Sriracha Tiger Zoo.

Instead of profiting from this kind of cruel wildlife attractions TripAdvisor should lead the way in protecting wildlife. It has the potential to educate millions of tourists and impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of wild animals.

**You can take action for tigers by joining the over 400 thousand people worldwide who have already signed our petition demanding TripAdvisor end its sale and promotion of cruel wildlife tourist attractions.**

[wildlifentertainers.org](http://wildlifentertainers.org)



**Travellers should stay away from any irresponsible entertainments involving wild animals.**

Our message is simple: If you can ride hug or have a selfie with a wild animal, please don't and don't support these activities either. Tigers and other wild animals at tourist entertainment venues with direct human-animal interactions are routinely abused.

By not visiting a cruel tiger entertainment venue, you will help end the profitability of this industry and close down all cruel tiger entertainment venues for good.

To have a genuine tiger experience, book a responsible organised excursion where you may get the chance to see these magnificent animals in the wild, where they belong.

**Wildlife. Not Entertainers**

With our **Wildlife - Not Entertainers** campaign, we are building a global movement to protect wild animals. Working with tourists, travel companies, wildlife venues and governments around the world, we are stopping both the demand for, and supply of, cruel wildlife entertainment.

Hundreds of thousands of people have already joined our movement for wild animals. More than 100 travel companies have also committed to end all sales and promotion of venues with elephant rides and shows. This is just the beginning. You can join too.

Join the movement to protect wildlife at **[wildlifenotentertainers.org](http://wildlifenotentertainers.org)**

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All images taken by World Animal Protection staff at various locations where tiger entertainment is advertised / open to the public

▶ [worldanimalprotection.org/wildlife-not-entertainers](https://worldanimalprotection.org/wildlife-not-entertainers)

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