

Ten of the world's cruellest attractions

WildCRU researchers analysed 24 different types of wildlife entertainment attractions across the world. They rated them based on welfare and conservation criteria.

Welfare scores were allocated according to how wildlife tourist attractions fulfil the 'Five Freedoms'. These are routinely used by scientists and animal experts to assess the welfare of animals. The Freedoms relate to: freedom from hunger and thirst; from discomfort; from pain, injury and disease; to behave normally; from fear and distress.

A maximum score of +3 was given to a wildlife tourist attraction if it fulfilled all Five Freedoms. A minimum score of -3 was given to a wildlife tourist attraction if it failed to fulfil any of the Five Freedoms³.

Conservation levels were allocated partly according to their IUCN Red List status (Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable, Least Concern and Near Threatened). This status is routinely used (by scientists and animal experts) to determine the extent to which a species is at risk of extinction.

A minimum score of -3 was given to a wildlife tourist attraction if deemed to be placing the survival of wild populations at high risk of extinction. A score of +3 was deemed to be greatly aiding existing efforts to save wild populations from extinction⁵.

We have used these WildCRU ratings with our own evidence from research and investigations in Asia and Africa^{5,7,8}. This has resulted in the following list of the 10 cruellest wildlife entertainment activities across the world.



1. Riding elephants

To make elephants submit to giving rides, they are taken from their mothers when babies and forced through a horrific training process known as 'the crush'.

This typically involves restraining them in a small cage, or tying them in ropes or chains so that they can only move when commanded. Severe pain is often inflicted with pointed metal 'bull hooks' or wooden battens to quickly establish dominance⁷. This process can take between a few days and a week⁵.

This process 'breaks' the young elephant's spirit so they will accept people riding on their back or other direct contact between tourists and elephants⁷.

The great trauma elephants endure during the breaking process can stay with them throughout their lives. It can also leave them suffering from post-traumatic stress^{9,10}.

Their suffering continues once broken⁷. In elephant parks they are prevented from forming natural social relationships

with each other⁵. This is hugely damaging to their physical and psychological wellbeing, as is the size of their captive world. They are often kept on chains or in small enclosures and never allowed to roam freely as they would in the wild⁶.

Contrary to public perception, elephants are one of the most dangerous animals to handle⁵. Consequently, handlers use bull hooks to maintain control of them. These can cause serious injuries including infected sores and cuts⁵.

The elephants kept in these situations are typically given little veterinary care⁶. A relatively minor illness can quickly become a big problem, causing unnecessary long-term suffering.

The global tourist hotspot for elephant rides is Thailand, although it is prevalent in other Asian countries⁵. It has also emerged in Southern Africa over the past ten years⁷.



2. Taking tiger selfies

Tiger cubs are separated from their mothers at an early age so they can be used as photo props for hours on end⁵. They are handled and hugged by tourists and typically kept chained or in small cages with concrete floors⁶.

In Thailand we found 10 venues housing around 614 tigers⁵. Although Thailand is a hub of cruel tiger tourism it is also prevalent in other parts of Asia, Australia¹¹, Mexico^{12,13} and Argentina¹⁴.

3. Walking with lions

Lion cubs are bred and taken from their mothers typically within a month of birth to supply the growing lion tourism industry, mostly located in Southern Africa⁸. Tourists handle the cubs for hours and pose with them for photos. They are also often told to hit the cubs if they display aggressive or unwelcome behaviour⁸.

When the cubs grow too big for tourists to pick up and hug – but are still young enough to control – some are used for the relatively new walking with lions tourist experience. The lions are trained to ‘safely’ walk with tourists, sometimes on leads.

These lions face a lifetime in captivity as they cannot be released into the wild⁸.



4. Visiting bear parks

Bears are kept in sterile barren 'pits' with minimal – if any – behavioural enrichment¹⁵. These pits are severely overcrowded. Bears are mainly solitary in the wild so this overcrowding can also lead to infighting and nasty injuries¹⁵.

The stress associated with these captive conditions can increase the susceptibility of wild animals to diseases caused by bacterial infections¹⁶. Sometimes these bears are also forced to dress as clowns and perform circus tricks such as riding a bike or balancing on a ball¹⁵.

5. Holding sea turtles

The world's last remaining sea turtle farm that acts as a tourist attraction is in the Cayman Islands. Here, tourists can hold turtles and even eat them during their visit¹⁶.

Holding a sea turtle causes it to suffer a great deal of stress which can weaken its immune system and increase its susceptibility to disease¹⁶. Almost 1,300 turtles were recently killed at the farm following an outbreak of Clostridium infections¹⁷.

Sea turtles are naturally timid creatures¹⁸. When handled by tourists, they often panic and intensively flap their flippers which can cause fractures and detached claws¹⁹. It has also been known for tourists to accidentally drop struggling sea turtles¹⁶. This can cause significant injury, like a broken shell, which can kill the turtle¹⁶.

6. Performing dolphins

Millions of tourists visit dolphinarium²⁰, but they are unaware of the cruelty and abuses the dolphins endure to perform in shows.

The United States is one of several countries²¹ to ban dolphins being taken from the wild for dolphinarium because of the suffering involved. Dolphins are often chased by high-speed boats before being hauled on board or caught in nets²². For many, the stress is too much to take and they die during transportation to their intended destinations²³.

Those kept in dolphinarium, whether wild caught or captive bred, face a lifetime of suffering. They spend their entire lives in a space not much bigger than a swimming pool – completely unnatural and restrictive compared to their natural open sea environment. The pools are often treated with chlorine which can cause painful skin and eye irritations²².

Pool-bound dolphins often suffer from sunburn because they can't escape to the ocean depths. Their highly tuned echolocation – used for navigating – is interfered with by the level-sided tanks which are so unlike the rocks and corals which form their natural ocean landmarks²⁴. Many dolphins also face stress-related illnesses and can suffer from heart attacks and gastric ulcers²⁵.

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7. Dancing monkeys

Many species of primates are used for street entertainment but we have also uncovered the systematic abuse of 290 macaques housed in venues offering macaque shows in Thailand⁵.

Young macaques are trained aggressively and painfully, to make them walk, behave and appear more human⁵. They are often dressed up to look like geishas and repeatedly forced to dance and perform tricks for groups of tourists⁵.

When they're not performing, the macaques are often kept chained in small barren cages or outside on short chains²⁶. As the macaque grows, the chain can become embedded in the skin leading to painful infections and disease²⁶.





8. Touring civet coffee plantations

A single cup of civet coffee or Kopi Luwak, fetches up to \$100²⁷. Civets love to eat coffee cherries and Kopi Luwak coffee is made from the beans within the cherries that the civets excrete in pellets.

When the pellets are collected from civets in the wild, no cruelty is involved. But in an attempt to produce more civet coffee, farmers have started catching the civets and keeping them in small, crowded barren cages²⁷. Caged civets are encouraged to gorge on an unbalanced diet of coffee cherries.

This unnatural captivity and forced feeding results in injuries, disease and poor nutrition²⁷. Many show signs of great stress, including pacing and self-mutilation²⁷.

There is now a growing civet coffee plantation tourism industry in Indonesia where tourists visit caged civet cats and sample the coffee²⁹. This is causing more and more civets to be caged and abused²⁹.

9. Charming snakes and kissing cobras

Snake charming has been a street entertainment activity for hundreds of years³⁰, and the latest twist on this includes kissing a cobra in Thailand.

Cobras are commonly used for performing even though they are venomous and their bites can be fatal to humans³⁰. The cobras are usually captured from the wild, then they are defanged with metal pliers and their venom ducts are either blocked or removed – often with un-sanitised equipment. This often results in painful infections, and can kill the cobras^{30 31}.



10. Farming crocodiles

Crocodile farming involves large numbers of crocodiles being kept on farms and intensively bred – mainly to supply the fashion industry with their skins, but also for their meat³². These farms are also now a more common wildlife tourism experience. People come to see the crocodiles then eat them in on-site restaurants.

The conditions on the farms are often so appalling that they can actually kill the crocodiles³³. The animals are usually housed in concrete pits and conditions are often severely overcrowded and unhygienic³³.

Crocodiles are very sensitive to stress³³. And severely stressful situations – like the intense farm environment – can lead to septicaemia³³. If a crocodile remains in a stressful environment, it may not be able to fight the infection and fatal diseases can develop³³.

Because of competition for limited space in the pits, and also for food and water, the crocodiles will fight each other, sometimes to the death. They also rip off one another's legs – such serious injuries can eventually kill them too³².