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PRESS RELEASE

A photo with a slow loris or a tiger or a show with juggling macaques and boxing orangutans for a few dollars?

13 August, 2024 – **The Kukang Rescue Program team has documented the extent of use of slow lorises and other wildlife as attractions in Thailand's increasingly booming tourism industry. During a week of intensive research on the island of Phuket, in the capital Bangkok and their surroundings, the team uncovered various cases of keeping wild animals and offering them to tourists for entertainment for money. At the same time, the methods and sophistication are significantly different - from randomly offering slow lorises to take photos on the beaches to organizing visitors using numbers on a waiting list on the screens. Prices for a photo or a few-minute experience range from around 3 to 40 USD. However, the price that endangered wildlife species pay for this business is too high.**

By taking photographs with wild animals, people often become unwitting supporters of the illegal trade in often endangered species that are poached from the wild. Part of the Kukang Rescue Program team therefore went to Thailand to monitor the situation there with the use of wild animals for tourist entertainment. On the popular Kata Beach on the island of Phuket, one of Thailand's most frequented tourist destinations, a local man offers an adult slow loris (*Nycticebus coucang*) to photograph for 100 Thai Baht (i.e. USD 2.8), the same price you can pay for an experience with the same species on the nearby Naka Islands. "*Some people refused to take the photo, however within half an hour we saw 5 different groups taking pictures with the slow loris, including one child aged about 10. I then distributed our leaflets on responsible tourism to them. They mostly accepted it positively, often apologizing that if they had known about it, they would not have taken a photo with this animal. This only confirms to us that the efforts to educate and raise awareness are absolutely essential for the protection of slow lorises and other wild animals,*" explains Lucie Čižmářová, leader of the research expedition to Thailand, of her experience. "*However, the price for a selfie with a slow loris can be ten times higher (1000 baht/USD 28) than on the beach if you visit the Damnoen Saduak Floating Market - the largest and most famous floating market in Thailand, located approximately 70 km from Bangkok. There, a station for taking pictures with animals is located right at the beginning of the boat route, and although there is a large poster with pictures of snakes promoting the experience, there are also slow lorises on offer. For 500 baht, i.e. USD 14, a person can also take a picture with a grown-up young slow loris,*" adds Čižmářová.

A few hundred meters from the floating market, the team visited a large centre where, in addition to riding an elephant, it is possible to watch a monkey performance, where macaques in dresses sing into a microphone, fence with poles, jump through circles with knives inside, untie the tied hands of tourists or juggle with fire. All this for about USD 9. The level of organization of this business can be surprisingly high. In a facility called Tiger Kingdom, visitors have the opportunity to take pictures with tigers of various ages - from approximately 2-month-old cubs, which are artificially reared here with a bottle, to older individuals up to 15 years old, including a pair of cheetahs. Prices range from 1,000 baht (USD 28) for a cub to 1,300 baht (USD 37) for an older tiger or cheetah. Those interested in close contact with cats are organized here using numbers in a waiting list on the screens – the system can be compared to the system at the post office. The time spent with a tiger is 10 minutes, visitors must not touch

the head and front of the body and pull the tail. "*The keepers sometimes sprinkle the big tigers with cold water to make them look more active and photogenic. And even though on all the signs they refuse to give any narcotic substances to the animals before taking pictures and to pull out their claws, the tigers here are often kept in cages of two or more adults and bear visible signs of injury, probably after fights with each other. Animal welfare here is at least debatable*," thinks Lucie Čižmářová, who works as a veterinary care and welfare coordinator in the Kukang Rescue Program.

Another place offering various experiences with wild animal species is Safari World Bangkok. For an entrance fee of about USD 35, those interested can visit a show where several orangutans with boxing gloves wrestle with each other, ride bicycles and interact with visitors in a fun way. There is also an elephant show, where the elephants in the arena stand on their hind limbs, sit down or kick a ball into the goal, and then you can ride them. They also offer a sea lion show, a bird show or a western show. During the day, photos can be taken with dressed-up orangutans, who sit on people's laps, or with tiger cubs, birds of prey, elephants, baby camels, etc. "*One would think that such perverted entertainment is already a relic these days. The queues of people waiting to pet a tiger in a cage or to visit matches of boxing orangutans in bras are a frustrating reminder that we still have a long way to go in educating the public about the protection of wild animals*," thinks Petra Doleželová, a volunteer of the Kukang Rescue Program, who participated in the exploratory trip to Thailand.

Currently, tourism is experiencing a dramatic development and social networks have become a daily part of most people's lives. This is precisely why every responsible traveller should be aware of the negative effects their support for the entertainment wildlife business can have. Sharing content promoting wild animal species as pets or exotic attractions for tourists on social media has been shown to directly increase the level of poaching and the scale of the black market for these species, and as a result can lead to their extinction. In the case of slow lorises, the wild population has decreased by up to a third over the last 20 years, mainly due to poaching and illegal trade.

The Kukang Rescue Program and Responsible Tourism

The Kukang Rescue Program is primarily dedicated to protecting slow lorises from illegal trade on the island of Sumatra. However, many slow lorises, as well as other species of wild animals, are smuggled from Indonesia to neighbouring countries, among other things, for the purpose of selling them as pets or tourist attractions. That is why several years ago the Kukang Program launched the international campaign I Am Not Your Toy!, which aims against such use of slow lorises and other wild animals and their subsequent popularization on social networks and the Internet.

More can be found on the I Am Not Your Toy! – Responsible Tourism (a chapter of the campaign).

Photos may be freely used for press, internet and television news purposes. Author: Lucie Čižmářová.

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