



The Tiger Temple

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Why are photo sessions and close contact with the tigers a safety risk for tourists?

There are countless, well-documented and sometimes fatal, attacks on humans by 'trained' and apparently mild-mannered captive wild cats from around the world. These include attacks during photography sessions.

CWI repeatedly witnessed aggressive behaviour towards visitors, staff and volunteers at the Temple. On at least two separate occasions, visitors and volunteers were injured from attacks by a tiger. The resulting injuries required medical treatment at a hospital.

At the Temple each year thousands of visitors, some very young children, are actively encouraged to make close physical contact with the tigers. Tourists place their arm around tigers' head or neck; children are placed on their backs, stomachs or by their sides to name but a few. Staff do not prevent direct contact with the tigers when they are behaving aggressively. Staff are also ill-equipped and unprepared to deal with potential emergency situations.

The Temple's publicity material makes no reference to the dangers of exposing tigers and humans to close proximity or of any recorded attacks. However, the Temple explicitly renounces any responsibility for injuries or damage by asking visitors to sign a disclaimer at the entrance.

CWI is urging the government to take action before someone, perhaps a child, is seriously injured or killed.

If tourists stop paying for photos at the Tiger Temple, how will the monks obtain the funds needed to care for the tigers?

An entrance fee to the Temple is 300 baht (US\$9) per person. It has been reported that up to 900 tourists visit a day. In addition, the Temple also collects 'donations', and charges 1,000 baht (US\$30) for tourists wishing to have their photograph taken while holding a tiger's head in their lap. At least 45 such photos are taken every day.

Using conservative estimates, based on the number of visitors, entrance fees and the price for having a picture taken with a tiger's head on your lap - the Temple earns about 45 million baht to 50 million baht (US\$1.5m) per year.

It costs an average of 200,000 baht (US\$6,000) per tiger a year for feed and basic vet care. For 16 tigers, the total estimate will only be 3.2 million baht (US\$96,000).

Moreover, the Temple has been actively breeding the tigers, despite not having the legal permits to do so. If lack of funds is an issue, the Temple will have taken steps to prevent more cubs being born there. The abbot told one of CWI's investigators that he *"likes to have cubs at the Temple all the time for the tourists"*.

Lack of funds is also unlikely to be the cause of the poor care and ill treatment of the Temple's tigers.

EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE TIGER TEMPLE

The Tiger Temple is already making improvements to the enclosures so why should the tigers be relocated to a sanctuary?

It appears the Temple only started making improvements to the enclosures recently due to bad publicity and pressure from their donors and supporters. CWI does not accept that the tigers can live comfortably with perpetrators of wildlife crime and who already have a track record of animal cruelty.

Illegal wildlife trade and breeding is a serious crime. CWI is urging the Thai authorities to conduct a full investigation and take necessary action.

THE ROLE OF THE THAI AUTHORITIES

What can the Thai authorities do?

CWI is urging authorities to conduct a full investigation into the illegal trade and illegal breeding of the tigers at the Temple.

CWI feels that since serious wildlife crimes have been committed, the Thai authorities should make arrangements for the relocation of the tigers to a sanctuary facility with good welfare and husbandry standards, where they will not be abused or harassed by tourists daily.

The authorities have recommended a possible location. CWI has also identified a suitable facility in Thailand and is offering assistance in fundraising and support funding on condition that the authorities relocate the tigers to large suitable enclosures with pools, with a 'no-breeding' policy and physical contact with the public will not be allowed.



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Care for the Wild International (CWI) is a wildlife conservation and animal welfare organisation with offices and field projects in Asia, Africa, Oceania and Europe.

CWI is a member of the *International Tiger Coalition (ITC)*. The ITC is an alliance of 39 organisations representing more than a hundred groups and millions of members across the globe, united under the common aim of ending tiger trade and securing a future for wild tigers.

CWI received many complaints about the Tiger Temple in Kanchanaburi from visitors and volunteers who have worked there, more in fact than for any other tourist attraction using wildlife in Thailand. Complaints sent to other conservation and welfare organisations were also forwarded to CWI. Visitors familiar with wildlife rescue centers and conservation issues were unhappy with the tigers being abused for photo-taking sessions. Some visitors also suspect the Temple's claims on conservation to be fraudulent.

Following this, CWI sent a tiger expert to record the treatment and stresses imposed on the tigers during the daily photo-taking with tourists. CWI consulted with other big cat experts and wildlife vets who confirmed the tigers were stressed and abused during the photo-taking sessions. Consequentially, CWI made attempts at meeting with the abbot of the Temple, Pra Acharn Phusit (Chan) Khantitharo to offer assistance in improving the husbandry and welfare standards, and assist with the adoption of a genuine conservation program. Despite our humble approach however, and offer of assistance, the abbot showed no interest in reform.

CWI therefore undertook a two-year investigation to confirm whether allegations of abuse and mistreatment of tigers were true. CWI's report is also the result of information collected over a three year period.

CWI'S OBJECTIVES

What does CWI hope to achieve with the release of its report?

- CWI is calling for the immediate cessation of all illegal tiger trade, exchange and transfer activities, and requests the Thai Department of National Parks (DNP) to conduct a full investigation on the Temple.
- CWI is urging the DNP to confiscate the Temple's illegally held tigers and transfer them to a sanctuary facility, where the animals can be accommodated and cared for appropriately.
- CWI is urging the DNP to halt all tiger breeding activities with immediate effect.
- CWI is calling for all photo-taking and physical contact between tigers and visitors to be stopped immediately.

CWI is offering full cooperation and assistance to the Thai authorities for the above actions.

CWI'S INVESTIGATION

What are the main problems at the Tiger Temple?

The CWI report reveals evidence of illegal wildlife trade, animal cruelty, false conservation claims and visitor safety risks at the Temple.

- The Temple has been actively involved in illegally trading and exchanging of tigers across international borders in Lao PDR.
- Animal welfare problems at the Temple are severe and include poor accommodation, lack of appropriate environments, veterinary problems and deliberate physical abuse of the tigers to make them compliant.
- Despite its claims, the Temple makes no discernable contribution to tiger conservation nor will they ever be able to, due to the unknown species of their tigers.
- Visitors' safety is compromised with close proximity with the tigers.

RESCUE CENTRE OR NOT?

Is the Tiger Temple a rescue centre?

The Temple is not registered with the Thai government, and so has no permits to legally keep or breed tigers in captivity. The Department of National Parks (DNP) seized 7 tigers and almost 300 other animals seven years ago. However, since there were no government facilities to relocate the confiscated animals, the Temple was allowed to care for the animals on condition that neither breeding nor trade was to occur.

The Temple claims the first eight tigers to arrive were cubs rescued from poachers. However, CWI found that their first tigers were in fact bought through a wildlife trader. Since then, the Temple has been illegally breeding the tigers and trafficking them across Laos.

ILLEGAL TRADE

What evidence of illegal trade does CWI have?

CWI obtained evidence that, rather than rescue orphaned tiger cubs, the Temple operates as an illegal breeding facility and is involved in the clandestine exchange of tigers with the owner of a tiger farm in Laos. CWI uncovered that a minimum of seven tigers disappeared, while at least five individuals appeared without explanation, between 2005 and 2007. CWI also obtained a tiger exchange agreement, which was signed by the Temple's abbot, the foundation's manager and the owner of a tiger farm in Laos.

Some of the new tigers were given the same names as animals that had been exported to Laos to obscure the fact that tigers are being moved in and out, and to perpetuate the myth that the Temple provides rescued tigers with life-long care.

CWI also made contact with a wildlife trader who claims the Temple's first tiger cubs were bought through him. Contact was also made with other wildlife traders who confirmed the original tiger cubs were in fact bought, not rescued.

How does the 'tiger exchange agreement' obtained by CWI show illegal trade?

Exporting or importing tigers across international boundaries, including those between Thailand and Laos is illegal under CITES (Convention for the International Trade in Endangered Species), unless appropriate permits have been issued. CITES requires that such permits are only issued for non-commercial exchanges between recognised scientific institutions for conservation purposes.

No such permits have been issued to export tigers from the Temple - nor should there be, since the Temple is not registered with the Thai authorities as an appropriate institution. Under the Thai Wild Animals Reservation and Protection Act 1992, apart from a general prohibition of trade, it is illegal to possess or breed tigers without being registered with the government. The Act states that breeding, possession and trading of wild animals without such registration is an offence punishable by imprisonment not exceeding three years or fines not exceeding thirty thousand Baht (approx US \$1,000), or both.

What is wrong with the farming of tigers?

Tiger farms exist for the sole purpose of breeding tigers to cater to the demand for traditional Chinese medicines, exotic meats and other commercial exploits of tiger parts. Tiger farms do not contribute to tiger conservation nor do they help to offset pressure on wild tiger populations from poaching, but instead they expand the economy on trading tiger parts.

The tigers exchanged between the Laos tiger farm and the Temple could end up in traditional medicine or as exotic meat in China or elsewhere, contrary to the Temple's claims that they are helping with tiger conservation and providing lifelong care for the animals.

Where is the tiger farm in Laos?

Due to ongoing investigations, CWI cannot reveal this information

BREEDING TIGERS AND CONSERVATION

Is the Tiger Temple breeding tigers for conservation and reintroduction into the wild?

The manner in which the Temple conducts its activities has clearly shown that they have no interest in welfare or conservation science, only to function as a tourist attraction.

There is no information about the genetic background of any of the tigers - not even as to which tiger sub-species they belong to. Neither have the animals had their DNA tested. All these animals are likely to be hybrids, which disqualifies them from participating in any conservation programme. The captive breeding of tigers at the Temple serves no conservation purpose and only adds to the financial costs for keeping more tigers. There are already many captive tigers all over the world in zoos and other places. Tigers breed easily in captivity and it is estimated there are between 15,000 to 20,000 tigers in captivity around the world, compared to possibly fewer than 3,500 tigers in the wild scattered across 14 range states in increasingly isolated enclaves. There is still a chance for protecting and sustaining tiger populations in the wild. And that's what we should focus on-not tigers in captivity.

The protection of wild habitats and scientific surveys and studies on habitat suitability is of paramount importance in any wildlife reintroduction project. The Temple has not conducted any research into wild habitats for tigers, nor have they presented anything of conservation value.

Well-documented research and studies around the world have already shown that it is impractical to reintroduce captive-bred tigers into the wild, predominantly due to their specific behavioural repertoire. There is also consensus amongst conservationists that releasing captive-bred tigers is not a viable option and, in the case of animals that are used to human proximity, can be fatal to tigers, livestock and humans. Releasing captive-born animals into the wild can also weaken the existing wild populations due to outbreeding. This is where genes that are advantageous to the survival of the species are deleted from the DNA and this causes the weakening of the wild populations. Outbreeding can be as harmful to a wild population as inbreeding.

Captive populations may not have immunity to diseases that the wild population carries and their survival skills will be less developed. The survival rate for released tigers will be extremely low. The money put into raising and training tigers for reintroduction programs, which are already known to be impractical, will be better spent on protecting the already existing wild populations. Breeding in captivity is also expensive, inefficient, and mostly fails to successfully re-establish wild populations, particularly for carnivores. Furthermore, without effective protection of suitable wild habitat, captive breeding for conservation is a dead end.

Good rescue centers and sanctuaries for wildlife will also have a policy and practices in place to prevent breeding of animals in their care, unless there is a real chance of reintroducing them back to the wild. It is possible to keep tigers from breeding by neutering males or spaying females, or keeping males and females separate. The Temple has continuously bred tigers because cubs are a major tourist attraction. The abbot himself has said that he breeds the tigers because tourists like to see tiger cubs.

ANIMAL CRUELTY

Are the tigers at the Tiger Temple treated well?

Tourists and ex-volunteers have reported witnessing tigers being abused, such as being punched or hit in the head with rods if they refused to comply. Despite the close proximity of tourists, instances of forceful nose-twisting, pulling or dragging by the tail, kicking and kneeling are regularly seen.

Less obviously cruel, but equally distressing to the tigers, is the routine use of tiger urine sprayed in the tigers' faces. Urine sprayed in the face is likely to be perceived by a tiger as a highly aggressive display from a hyper-dominant animal, and so will induce a fear-based submissive response and stress.

CWI also found that the handlers, who use various abusive practices, achieve the tigers' docility through ruthlessly enforced dominance. To establish and maintain dominance over the tigers so that the animals can be controlled, temple staff regularly subjected the animals to different forms of violence and abuse. These included beating with wooden poles and squeezing the tiger's testicles.

A Canadian radio journalist recorded an interview with a tiger trainer who was distraught from witnessing staff beating up a tiger. This was independent from the CWI investigation.

Are the video footage and images of animal abuse exaggerated?

While video and photo evidence only portray examples of abuse, CWI investigators and volunteers at the temple have reported that the beatings and abuse were frequent and increased over the years. Information collected over three years has showed that the temple provided inadequate shelter and veterinary care for the animals, physically abused tigers in their care and put tourists at risk during photo sessions with the tigers.

Do the tigers roam free in the Tiger Temple?

None of the tigers roam free. Most of the tigers are confined to enclosures 3 by 8 meters, which are essentially simple concrete and steel boxes. While the new 'Tiger Falls' enclosure may look better than the cage enclosures, it is only 80 - 100m² - far less than recommended international standards (minimum of 500m² for two tigers) of World Association of Zoo and Aquaria (WAZA).

This creates psychological stress for a species that has a large territorial range in the wild.

Each day selected tigers are brought out for a few hours in the afternoon for non-stop photography sessions with hundreds of tourists. The tigers are tied or chained during the photo-taking. Having hundreds of tourists continually touching and taking photos with the tigers is stressful for the animals. Several ex-volunteers and tourists have reported that the tigers were hit with rods or sprayed with tigers' urine in the face if they 'misbehaved'.

BUDDHISM AND THE TIGER TEMPLE'S PHILOSOPHY

Do the monk's have the tigers best interest at heart?

If the Temple had an orphanage instead, but it was later found that the children were abused and traded for human trafficking, it will become a serious legal and human rights issue. Similarly, illegal wildlife trade is an organised crime and is detrimental to tiger conservation. Frequent abuse of tigers at the Temple is certainly not in the best interest of the animals regardless of whether the staff there state that they have their animal's interests at heart.

Is it insulting to Buddhism to criticise the monk's work with the tigers?

As a wildlife conservation and animal welfare organisation, CWI's concerns are the cruelty inflicted on the animals and the false conservation claims made by the Temple. CWI has no comments about Buddhism or the monks at the Temple.

CWI supports genuine efforts in wildlife conservation and rescue work. In this regard, in relation to Buddhism, CWI is already assisting a partner organisation in Thailand to help Buddhist Temples that have had wild animals surrendered at their place. CWI also works with the Office of His Excellency the Dalai Lama to reduce illegal wildlife trade in the Himalayan ranges.

VISITOR SAFETY

Why do the tigers at the Temple appear docile?

Tigers in the wild are generally lethargic in the afternoon. The Temple's tigers also appear tame and seem to trust the monks. However, the Temple tiger's apparent docility is achieved through ruthless dominance enforced by the handlers. To establish and maintain this dominance, Temple staff regularly subject the animals to different forms of violence and abuse. These include beating with wooden poles, squeezing the tiger's testicles, forceful nose-twisting, pulling or dragging by the tail, kicking and kneeling.