



Care for the Wild International

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Illegal Tiger Trade, Cruelty and Human Health Hazards at Famous Tourist Destination

A report released today by British conservation group Care for the Wild International (CWI) reveals disturbing evidence of animal abuse and illegal tiger trafficking at one of Thailand's premier tourist destinations.

The report follows a two year investigation into the conduct of staff at Thailand's Tiger Temple in Kanchanaburi. Up to 300 international tourists visit this facility each day, but boosted by the worldwide broadcast of a documentary on Animal Planet, numbers reach almost 900 on busy days.

CWI's Chief Executive Dr Barbara Maas says, "The Temple's popularity is based around claims that its tigers were rescued from poachers and move freely and peacefully amongst the temple's monks, who are actively engaged in conservation work. But this utopian façade hides a sinister reality of unbridled violence and illegal trafficking of tigers between Thailand and Laos."

Approximately 15 tigers live at Temple at any one time. Poor housing, husbandry and cruel handling are systemic throughout the facility. Far from being allowed to roam free, tigers are confined for 20 hours a day away from public view in small, barren concrete cages, measuring 31.5 m² to 37.3 m². This falls short of the published minimum of 500m² for a pair or a mother and her cubs. Staff also routinely beat adult tigers and cubs with poles and metal rods.

As a result, the tigers suffer a catalogue of behavioural and physical problems, including lameness, skeletal deformities and stereotypic behaviour, such as pacing and self-mutilation. These complaints are further exacerbated by malnutrition and poor veterinary care.

CWI's Southeast Asia Director, Guna Subramaniam says, "Interacting closely with live tigers is the chief attraction that draws tourists to the Temple. Each day between 1pm and 4pm some ten tigers are chained up in the Temple's 'Tiger Canyon', where paying visitors, including young children, can touch, sit or lie on the animals' front or back. For a further fee they can also have their photograph taken. Staff prop up the tigers with heavy concrete bowls to oblige them to adopt and maintain appealing poses. Tigers are also pulled into position by their tail and sometimes punched, kicked or beaten to make them compliant. Temple staff tower over the animals and control them by squirting urine into their faces from a bottle. In the wild, tigers use urine as a territorial or aggressive signal. Sprayed by staff at close quarters is extremely aggressive."

A Thai wildlife trader claims to have sold the Temple its first tigers. CWI also 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. Tiger Temple sources told CWI that a minimum of seven tigers listed in the Temple's 2005 and 2007 brochures disappeared, while at least five individuals appeared without explanation. "It is mostly older animals that were sent to Laos in exchange for young cubs," says Dr Maas. "No one knows what happened to them there. These actions contravene both local and international laws under CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species).

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

The Temple claims to breed tigers for conservation. It does not have a breeding license, but at least ten cubs were born there. With no information about the tigers' subspecies, most if not all offspring are likely to be hybrids. For this reason alone the Temple's tigers are unsuitable for inclusion in a recognised conservation breeding programmes. Another concern is that the release of tigers that are used to human proximity is dangerous and potentially fatal for humans, livestock and the tigers, and so is almost never viable.

CWI's report also raises concerns about visitor safety. There are numerous well-documented and even fatal attacks on humans by 'trained' and apparently mild-mannered captive wild cats, including during photo sessions. However, Temple staff fail to prevent direct contact even when the tigers are aggressive.

When asked why tourists don't get bitten, the Abbot replied: "They want to bite. One day they will bite." The Temple explicitly renounces any responsibility for injuries and asks visitors to sign a disclaimer at the entrance.

"There is no doubt that the tourists who visit the Tiger Temple from Britain, Europe and the US do so because they are fond of tigers," says Dr Maas. "But unlike these visitors who part with their cash under the misconception that it will benefit the Temple's animals and help protect wild tigers, the tigers can't leave.

"CWI is alarmed about the animal welfare problems, false conservation claims, furtive cross-border movements of tigers, and acute risks to visitor safety at the Kanchanaburi Tiger Temple, which is nothing but a sordid theme park that betrays one of the most imperilled species on earth."

"CWI met with the Temple's Abbot to discuss these problems and work towards a solution. However, the Abbot was reluctant to negotiate and showed no interest in reform," said CWI's Guna Subramaniam.

CWI recommends that Thailand's Department of National Parks confiscates the Temple's illegally held tigers and transfers them to a sanctuary facility, where the animals can be accommodated and cared for appropriately. CWI has identified a suitable facility in Thailand and is offering its full support for this operation. ENDS

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Notes to editors:

1. Care for the Wild International (CWI)
CWI is a conservation and animal welfare charity that funds practical projects around the world. We make areas safe from poachers, rehabilitate sick or injured animals and provide sanctuary for those who cannot return to the wild. We also act as a global voice for wildlife through research, education and advocacy, and expose animal cruelty and wildlife crime. - www.careforthewild.com
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