



SELFISH SELFIES

The Exploitation of Captive Wild Animals for Souvenir Photos

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"The taking of selfie photos with captive live animals has been one of the least understood forms of animal abuse, until now. It seems such an innocent activity and yet, as our report shows, has a negative impact on the health and welfare of the animals involved. The people taking part risk injury, or the possibility of contracting disease and, without realising it, are perpetuating a brutal and cruel activity that causes immense trauma and suffering. It can no longer be ignored. I would urge everyone to read this report and pledge never to have their photo taken with a captive wild animal, however tempting it may be."

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INTRODUCTION

Our 'love' of animals, particularly our fascination with wild and exotic species, means that the chance to get as close as possible, perhaps even touch and hold them, is often a strong temptation.

This temptation is frequently exploited by those wanting to profit at the expense of the animals involved. Sadly, it has become common for captive wild animals to be used as 'living props' for souvenir photos and selfie opportunities at popular tourist destinations, attractions, zoos, and other facilities. Many thousands of captive animals are being exploited around the world for our amusement.

The desire for that souvenir photo with a cute or scary animal, perfect for the mantelpiece or as a social media selfie, often overrides our moral conscience. We act without a second thought for the individual animal's welfare, the impacts on its wild counterparts, or the potential dangers involved.

Put simply, the desire for a wild animal selfie is just plain selfish. Please pledge to never take a Selfish Selfie and spread the word with your family, friends and colleagues.



CAPTURE
Captured from the wild
& mothers killed



SEPARATION
Or infants separated from
their captive mothers



POOR HOUSING
Poor & restrictive living
conditions, small cages &
travelling crates



DISTRESS
Repeated handling, alien
environments, sun
exposure, noise, camera
flashes, crowds

**ANIMAL PHOTO PROPS:
WELFARE ISSUES INVOLVED**



POOR CARE
Poor diets, malnutrition,
lack of water & little
medical treatment



MANIPULATION
Training, chaining,
tethering, restraint,
drugging, dressed up



MUTILATION
Claws & teeth may be
painfully removed. Wings
may be cut or pinioned



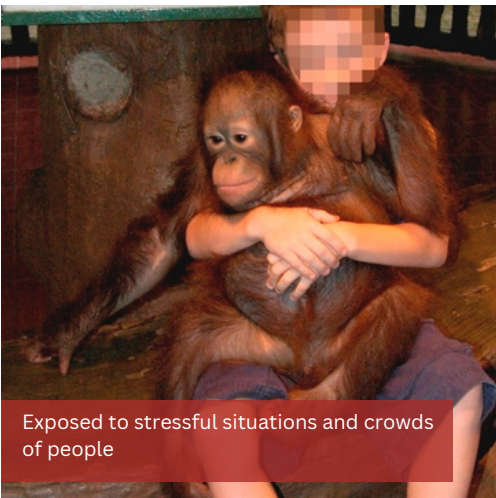
UNCERTAIN FUTURES
When no longer useful, sold
to captive facilities, to
circuses, or even killed



ANIMAL WELFARE

People might question what real harm that one quick 'must have' photo could cause, but it should be remembered that there are many other people, hundreds in some situations, handling or posing with the same animal, every single day, with serious welfare implications for the animals involved.

At zoos, animals commonly exploited as photo props include big cats, orangutans, monkeys, snakes, crocodiles, parrots and birds of prey. Certain zoos may also feature popular native animals, such as koalas in Australia. Photo sessions and other interactive activities often involve large crowds of people and high levels of noise, with animals passed from person to person or tethered to the spot throughout the day, every day. For ease of access, these animals are often housed separately from other animals on display at zoos and may be held in small cages and in poor conditions when not being used as props for photos.



Many zoos market their use of animals for photo opportunities as educational or claim that it raises funds for conservation. Even some sanctuaries may offer the chance for visitors to hold rescued animals for a photo in return for a donation. But captive wild animals may also be exploited purely for financial profit, and even where the activity may be well-meaning, it should never be used to justify animal suffering.

Other captive wild animals, such as big cat cubs, monkeys, iguanas, snakes, parrots, and sloths are touted at busy tourist hot spots, on beaches and even in cafes, restaurants and nightclubs. Animals are frequently transported over long distances, kept in poor conditions, and confined to restrictive cages or even bags and sacks. They may be subjected to extreme temperatures and paraded in the full sun with no access to shade, shelter or drinking water.

Animals used as photo props are typically subjected to low standards of care. Animal owners often have limited knowledge about the individual animal's needs, such as diet and nutrition. Animals may not receive appropriate medical treatment when injured or ill.

Effects of Stress & Poor Living Conditions

The close proximity to humans, repeated handling, exposure to alien environments, noise, flashing lights, extreme temperatures, and strange odours, alongside poor living conditions that deny animals the opportunity to express natural behaviours, are all highly stressful for animals used as props for photos and selfies, often resulting in compromised psychological and physical welfare.

Poor nutrition and diets lacking in essential vitamins and minerals can lead to the development of health problems and physical abnormalities. Animals handled throughout the day can suffer dehydration when given little or no access to shade and water.

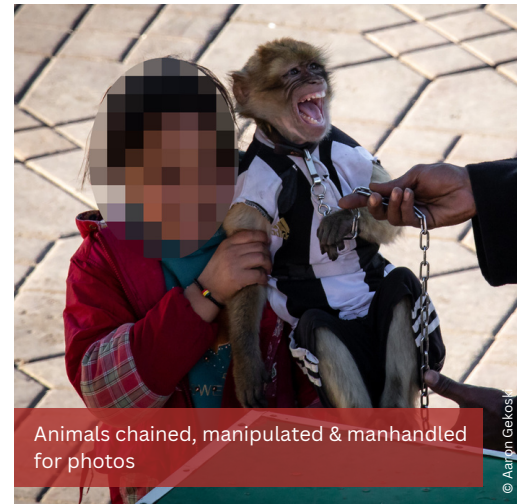
Stress and poor living conditions can also cause animals to develop unnatural, stereotypic behaviours, such as feather-plucking in birds or over-grooming in monkeys, and repetitive behaviours such as pacing and circling in big cats.



Manipulation

Animals may be roughly handled and manipulated to get them to pose for photos, such as lizards swung by their tails and monkeys dangled from chains and collars around their necks. Animals may be hit or beaten when they fail to cooperate. Some may be trained to perform 'comedic' tasks or behaviours, such as orangutans wearing sunglasses or touching people in seemingly cheeky ways. Primates are also often forced to wear human clothes.

Animals are often tethered or chained to reduce the chance of escape. Some, particularly reptiles, may have their mouths tied, wired, or taped shut to prevent them biting through fear or frustration. Others, such as big cat cubs, may be sedated with immobilising drugs to make them more docile and easier to handle. Sedatives may be added to the milk in feeding bottles that are frequently provided during photo opportunities.



Mutilation

To reduce the chance of bites and scratches, animals may also be subjected to physical mutilation. Big cats are often declawed, involving the amputation of toe joints, the only way of permanently removing the claw that grows from deep within the bone.¹

Others, particularly primates with long, sharp canine teeth, may have their teeth clipped or removed. Teeth-clipping is frequently inflicted on slow lorises, the world's only 'venomous' primate, commonly used as a tourist photo prop in Thailand, to prevent envenomation (transfer of venom by a bite).

Bird wings may be clipped (the trimming of primary flight feathers) or pinioned (the removal of the end joint of the wing) to prevent flight and escape. These are all painful, permanent mutilations and are often carried out by people with no professional skills or qualifications.



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Despite animals being restrained or mutilated to reduce the chance of escape or injury to people, close contact with captive wild animals carries many additional health and safety risks (see page 9).

Source of the Animals

Some wild animals used in tourism are obtained from captive sources, such as zoos or private breeders. Animals may be bred specifically for the purpose of supplying the photo prop industry or may be surplus animals resulting from unregulated breeding.

Young animals are typically deliberately and prematurely separated from maternal care and hand-reared to habituate them to human contact and handling. This enforced separation is likely to cause significant stress to both mother and offspring.

In big cats, the removal of cubs at just a few days or weeks old will bring their mothers back into oestrus, so she can be quickly bred again to produce another litter. In mammals, such as big cats and primates, the deprivation of their mother's nutritious milk can also lead to mineral deficiencies that can seriously affect the young animals' growth and development.

Some photo prop animals are taken from the wild. Capture frequently involves cruel practices and trapping methods, which can result in the injury or death of parents and other family members, who aren't willing to simply hand over their precious babies. As well as causing intense individual suffering, such offtake can seriously disrupt the integrity of wild populations (see page 7).



Prematurely separated from their mother to be hand-reared for photos

Fate of the Animals



Many animals become too dangerous to handle & face uncertain futures

Once young photo prop animals mature and become more difficult or dangerous to handle, their future becomes uncertain.

When they are no longer able to make money for their owners, these animals can end up living in terrible conditions, being sold off to zoos, circuses, or as pets, or being abandoned or even killed.

For example, at around six months old, big cats typically become too dangerous and outgrow their use as a living prop. However, some zoos and other attractions continue to use adult big cats for visitor photos and other interactive activities.

Many captive facilities, including cub petting and walking-with-lion providers, claim they breed animals for conservation purposes and will, at some point in the future, release them to the wild. However, it is extremely unlikely that this will ever happen, not least because the animals now see humans as a source of food, would not have sufficient fear of humans, or have the knowledge of how to look after themselves if released.

The use of captive lions for lucrative petting and photo opportunities in South Africa is a particular issue of concern, with many of the animals involved eventually being sold into the 'canned' hunting industry where they are ultimately shot and killed by trophy hunters, or killed so their bones can be sold into lucrative markets in the Far East.²

Tigers are bred in their thousands in captive facilities in China, Thailand and some other Asian countries, where visitors often have the opportunity to bottle-feed cubs and pose for photos. Such facilities are often closely connected to the illegal trade in tigers and their body parts.



Farmed tigers used for petting & photos may end up being killed for their body parts

THREATS TO ANIMALS IN THE WILD

Globally, wildlife is facing many threats including loss of habitat, climate change, pollution, conflict with people, and trade – both legal and illegal. Many species are being driven towards extinction at an unprecedented rate.

Animals used for photo opportunities and selfies may have been acquired via the illegal wildlife trade, taken from the wild to be exploited for financial gain. Capture frequently involves cruel trapping methods and the separation of infant animals from their mothers and family groups, who may be injured or killed in the process of trying to defend their babies. Hunters may climb trees to reach hiding animals and, in some cases, trees may even be chopped down, contributing to deforestation, and impacting on the many other non-target species. Terrified captured animals are stuffed into sacks or cages and taken away to be sold into the pet trade or photo prop industry. Those animals that survive the ordeal are often held in terrible conditions.

Many of the species used as photo props around the world are classified as 'Endangered', 'Threatened', or 'Vulnerable' by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Their capture contributes to the pressure on wild populations, with many species not able to recover quickly, particularly slow breeding animals such as primates. Many species that are currently classified as 'Least Concern', deemed to be at a lower risk of extinction, are also experiencing declining numbers in the wild.

While national and international legislation may offer legal protection to species under threat, illegal wildlife trade is a massive and growing problem. In many countries, enforcement and controls are often lax, with many hunters, traders, and photo prop touts able to get away with illegal activities. Some countries or regions may try their best to tackle illegal wildlife trade and confiscate the animals involved, but all too often the authorities don't have the will or resources to intervene, or lack the dedicated staff or expertise to keep on top of this growing problem, allowing the blatant use of illegally acquired animals as photo props to continue.

While improved regulations and law enforcement are imperative to tackle illegal wildlife trade, it's also really important that the travelling public understands the problem. If people stop paying for souvenir animal photos and selfies, the traders' and traffickers' income will dry up, and the cruelty can end.

Typical life of a wild-caught animal for the photo prop industry



SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

This section takes a closer look at examples of species commonly taken from the wild for use in the photo prop industry.



© Aaron Gekoski

BARBARY MACAQUE

Natural geographic range: Morocco & Algeria

Species classification: Endangered

Population trend: Decreasing



The Barbary macaque is an endangered species found only in the Atlas Mountain forests of Morocco and Algeria. While the most serious threat they face is habitat loss, the illegal trade in live animals is also a significant contributor to their declining numbers in the wild.³ Captive macaques, many of whom have been captured from the wild as babies, are widely exploited as props for photos. They can be found in tourist hot spots such as at bustling market squares in Marrakesh, Morocco, many dressed up in human clothes and dragged around on chains.



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BROWN-THROATED SLOTH

Natural geographic range: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Venezuela

Species classification: Least Concern

Population trend: Decreasing



The brown-throated sloth is a slow-moving, tree-dwelling mammal found in the forests of South and Central America. While currently classified as 'Least Concern' in the wild, their populations are in decline. They are threatened by severe habitat loss and are also illegally hunted by local indigenous communities and sold into the pet trade.⁴ Of the six species of sloth, the brown-throated is believed to be the most commonly used as photo props with tourists,⁵ particularly in ports in Brazil and Peru where thousands of cruise ship passengers regularly disembark.



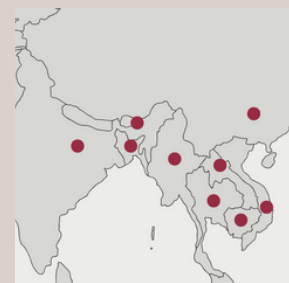
© Nicholas Dale from Getty Images

BENGAL SLOW LORIS

Natural geographic range: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam

Species classification: Endangered

Population trend: Decreasing



The Bengal slow loris is the largest species of slow loris. These tree-dwelling, nocturnal primates are found in parts of the Indian subcontinent and Indochina. Their wild population is highest in eastern Thailand, but their numbers are decreasing, and the species is classified as 'Endangered'. They are threatened by habitat loss, hunting and trade for food and traditional medicine, and capture for the photo prop industry, particularly in Thailand where they are used in busy tourist resorts and on beaches. Glands near the slow loris' armpits exude a toxic oil which they lick, combining it with saliva, and making their bite poisonous. Because of this, their captors will often cut out their teeth.

HEALTH & SAFETY RISKS

The risks posed to people from contact with captive wild animals must never be underestimated. Whether wild-caught, captive-born, juvenile, adult, male or female, wild animals are naturally unpredictable and dangerous, posing a real risk to anyone who comes into close contact with them, particularly when those animals are stressed.

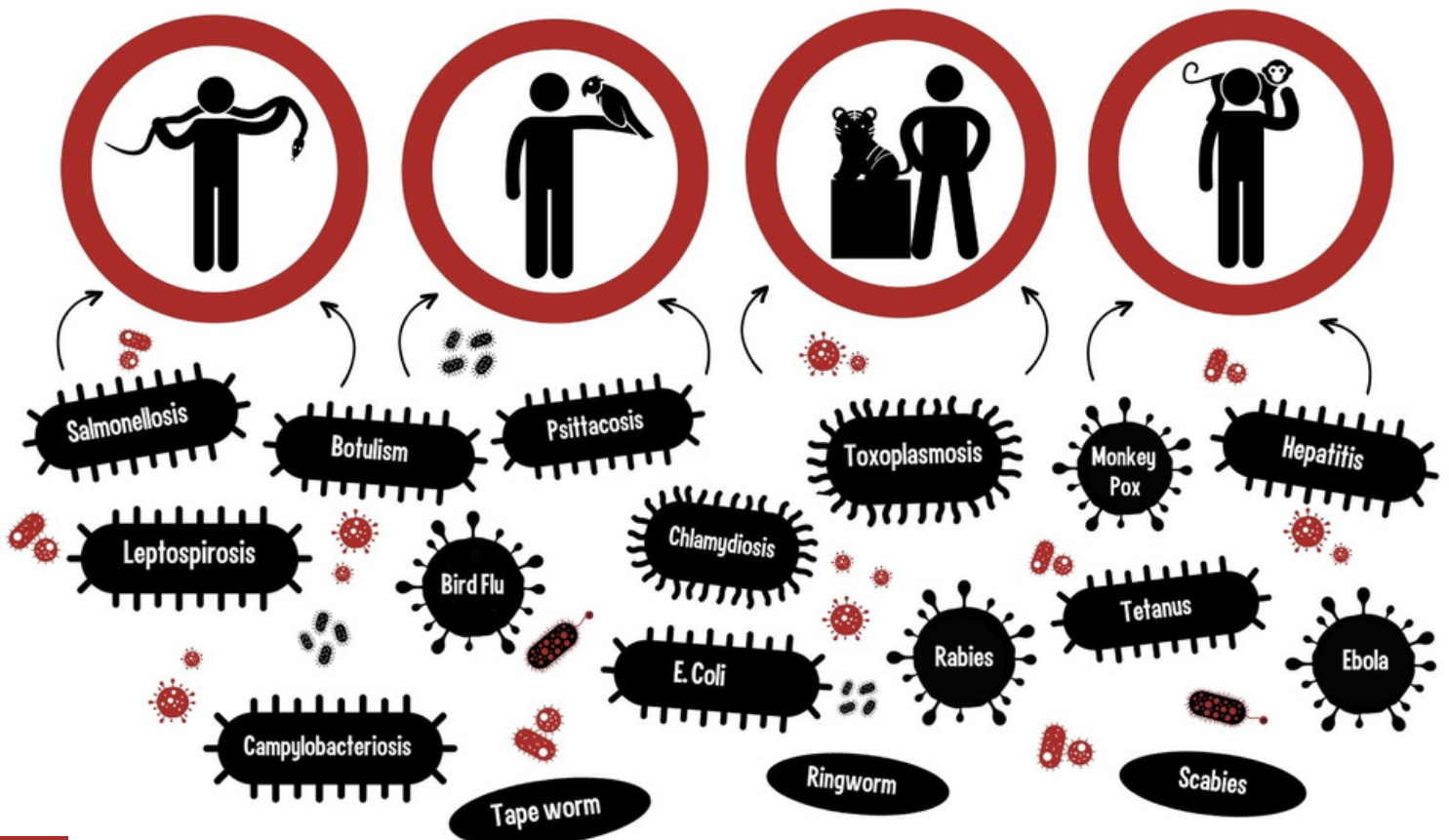
There have been numerous incidents where direct contact with a captive wild animal has resulted in human injury or death, including when posing with animals for photos and selfies.

People are usually not well informed of the potential risks when taking part in animal photo opportunities and other interactive activities, and when on holiday they may be less inclined to think through those risks. Importantly, travel insurance policies may not cover injuries sustained as a result of 'high-risk' close contact activities with captive wild animals.

Many animals are also carriers of zoonotic pathogens (disease-causing organisms that can spread from animals to people), and those pathogens are most likely to spread in situations where the animals are stressed and in close contact with people, such as during photo prop sessions. The coronavirus pandemic should have brought home the risks that commercial wildlife trade and close contact poses, yet animal photo prop activities continue.

Anyone can become sick from a zoonotic disease, including healthy people, but the most vulnerable are typically young children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with compromised immunity. There are hundreds of recognised zoonotic diseases and infections caused by zoonotic pathogens including viruses, bacteria, parasites, and fungi, and many more yet to be recognised. These pathogens can cause many different types of illnesses in both animals and people. Animals do not have to be sick to pass an infection to humans and it may not be obvious that it was contact with an animal that caused you to become ill.

Examples of zoonotic diseases & conditions spread by animals commonly used as photo props



How are zoonotic infections spread?

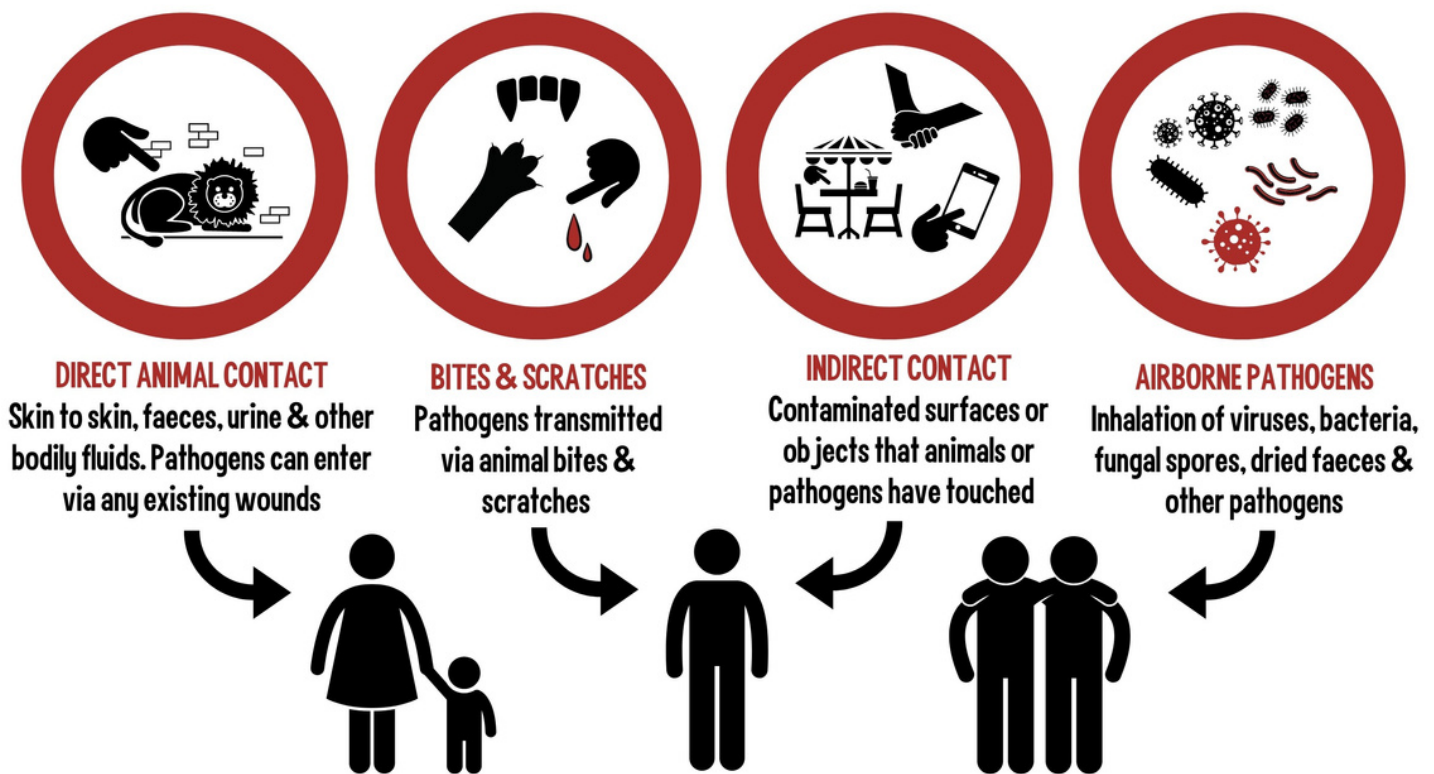
While most emerging infectious diseases in people originate in wildlife, it's when we disrupt, exploit and stress wild animals that their potentially zoonotic pathogens are likely to proliferate, spill-over to other species, mutate, and potentially infect people. The stress of being removed from the wild, kept in unnatural conditions, and handled for photos, are all contributing factors.

There are various ways in which zoonotic infections and diseases can be passed from animals to the people posing with them for photos. Touching or holding animals can result in direct contact with pathogens passed via the skin, faeces, urine, saliva, and other bodily fluids, which can be unwittingly ingested via unwashed hands. Skin wounds can also provide an entry point for many pathogens.

Rabies is probably one of the better-known diseases that can be transmitted to humans via an animal bite. In many countries where the use of animals as photo props is particularly common, such as Thailand, Morocco, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, the risk of rabies is high.⁸

Infections can occur even without direct contact with an animal, via the inhalation of airborne pathogens including fungal spores, viruses, and bacteria, or from contact with contaminated surfaces and objects that an animal has been in contact with.

Spread of zoonotic infection & disease



TAKE ACTION

Our behaviour and actions can have a significant impact on the welfare of captive animals and species in the wild. These impacts are often negative; however, everyone can use their power as a concerned citizen, tourist, or consumer to demand positive change for animals.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

X Don't

- Don't have your photo taken with or pose for selfies with captive wild animals.
- Don't book excursions that include close contact or photo opportunities with captive wild animals.
- Don't like or share social media posts showing your friends or celebrities posing with captive wild animals for photos.

✓ Do

- Do your research on your holiday destination country, region or excursion and check Born Free's 'Raise the Red Flag' interactive map for any reports about the use of animals as photo props at bornfree.org.uk/raise-the-red-flag.
- If you witness animals being used as photo props during an organised tour or excursion, do express your disapproval directly to your tour guide or rep. If a hotel, restaurant or other business is involved, complain to the management.
- Do make a note of the location where photo prop animals were seen. If possible, take a quick photo or video of the scene without drawing too much attention to yourself. Submit a report via Born Free's 'Raise the Red Flag' online form at bornfree.org.uk/red-flag-report.
- Do speak out further for the captive animals you have seen. Raise your concerns in writing to the tour operator or travel agent you booked an excursion with, to any zoo or facility involved, and to the relevant tourism authorities in the country you are visiting. For more information and advice, visit Born Free's 'Speak Out' page at bornfree.org.uk/raise-the-red-flag-speak-out.
- Do report animal cruelty content you have seen posted online to the social media platform involved.

RAISE THE RED FLAG

Born Free's 'Raise the Red Flag' campaign aims to stop captive wild animal suffering and exploitation. Our online platform highlights animal welfare problems, shares information with other travellers and provides guidance on how you can take action to help.



Your eyewitness reports about wild animals in captivity provide us with vital evidence, which is recorded on our global database and interactive Red Flag map. Reports help raise awareness, warn other people to stay away from exploitative locations and activities, and assist in identifying hot spot animal welfare issues.

While we can't respond directly to every complaint we are sent, all the information we receive is crucial to support our advocacy efforts to secure policy change and effective legislation; our work to improve animal welfare; and to help individual captive animals, including those used for photos and selfies.

Find out more at bornfree.org.uk/raise-the-red-flag



Previously used as a photo prop cub in Spain, *Raffi* was one of the first lions rescued by Born Free thanks to tourists speaking out and reporting his plight held in a filthy cage on the rooftop of a derelict bar.

He was rehomed to our sanctuary in South Africa, along with his companion *Anthea*, where they lived in a large, natural bush enclosure and received loving care for the rest of their lives.



CONCLUSION

The information in this report highlights the serious animal welfare issues, threats to species in the wild, and the public health and safety risks associated with the use of captive wild animals as living props for souvenir photos and selfies. This animal suffering and exploitation must end, wildlife and habitats must be protected, and the spread of infectious zoonotic diseases must be curbed.

National governments need to address animal welfare issues and protect their precious wildlife and biodiversity through effective and well-enforced legislation. There needs to be better regulation of the global travel industry to prohibit the advertising and sale of activities that negatively impact on animal welfare.

Individual travel companies and tour operators also need to do more to ensure that they don't promote or sell excursions that feature animal photo props and close contact activities with captive wild animals.

Most importantly, people must stop posing with animals for their Selfish Selfies and speak out to bring this damaging exploitation to an end. You can take action today by pledging never to take a Selfish Selfie.



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