

FOR TIGERS



October 2020

SCRATCH THAT!

DEBUNKING TOURIST TIGER MYTHS



**A SHORT GUIDE TO THE MYTHS SURROUNDING TIGER
SELFIES AND TOURIST-TIGER INTERACTIONS IN
THAILAND**





INTRODUCTION

CONFUSION SURROUNDING TIGER TOURISM

There are approximately 2000 captive tigers in facilities in Thailand [1]. Many of these tigers are kept at tourist venues, where they are exploited for tourist interactions such as cub feeding, tiger photo opportunities and tiger shows [2,3,4]. Significant numbers of tourists from around the world visit Thailand every year and many want to participate in these activities in order to experience a close interaction with a tiger. However, we have found that there are many public misconceptions regarding tigers held in captivity and human-tiger interactions. Some of these beliefs are relatively harmless, but many can affect tiger welfare.

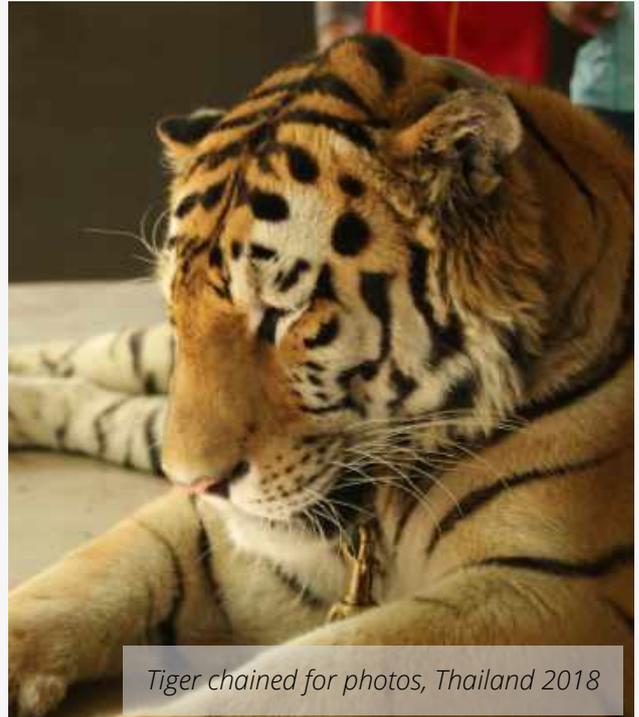
Throughout this report we will focus on exposing the main tiger myths found in Thailand, by addressing incorrect public assumptions, which, in many cases, are perpetuated by the captive tiger facilities themselves.

Our objective in discussing these misconceptions is to educate the public, to encourage them to question whether they wish to visit such facilities or participate in human-tiger interactions. We hope that this information can serve as a tool to facilitate decision-making on which venues to visit, in an attempt to highlight both the ethical and welfare concerns pertaining to captive tiger tourism.

To achieve this aim, this report looks at 12 common myths, and examines each myth, how each probably grew and then discusses the truth to these beliefs. In addition to this, we outline some of the main welfare implications found alongside these myths, as well as provide questions that visitors can ask when visiting a facility with tigers.

MYTH 1: Tigers are drugged for photos

One of the most common misconceptions is that tigers involved in photo opportunities are drugged. Considering the safety of tourists as a starting point, this can be a very dangerous assumption. Some tourists may be more willing to pay for interactions if they believe that the tiger is sedated in some way, thus feeling safer in the interaction. This myth has, on many occasions, led to incidents where the tourist has been attacked [5,6]. Potentially more harmful, is the way this myth diverts focus from the real welfare issues that occur within these facilities. Credibility of NGOs can be lost when this myth is propagated by welfare organisations. Subsequent efforts to improve other aspects of welfare are more likely to be ignored by such facilities as they may perceive these NGOs to lack proper welfare knowledge.



Tiger chained for photos, Thailand 2018



Tiger chained for photos, Thailand 2018

HOW THE MYTH GREW

Unfortunately, this is one of the few myths that is not perpetuated by the facilities themselves but rather by non-profit organisations, and, as such, is one of the most damaging. It has developed because wild tigers are known to be wary of humans, avoiding interactions where possible [7,8]. Captive tigers used in tourist interactions often appear to be asleep, lethargic or completely uninterested in their surroundings, despite a large number of people touching them day after day. This unresponsiveness is often questioned as it is contrary to the more wary wild tiger behaviour. Some NGOs and media outlets state that unresponsiveness is due to drugging [9] and because this information comes from a source considered to be reputable, the public believe it, thus the myth perpetuates. While it is possible that some tigers have been drugged in the past, it is certainly not the norm.



Tiger sedated for a medical procedure, Thailand 2014

THE TRUTH

Since 2016, we have regularly visited 38 facilities in Thailand (10,11). We have found no evidence of drugging in the tigers used in interactions. Sedating or drugging a tiger is something that needs to be done carefully as tigers, like house cats, have weak kidneys [12]. Daily sedation would be detrimental to the tiger and could result in major health issues or even death. What's more, tigers awakening from sedation are known to often be angry,

confused and nauseous, making them highly unpredictable, aggressive and dangerous [13].

There are several other reasons why tigers can act, or appear to be, drowsy or sleepy when in the presence of humans. Firstly, tigers engage in passive or resting behaviours 80% of the time [14,15] and are also more active between dusk and dawn, rather than the daytime hours when tourists are present. Second, many tigers are hand-raised from a young age, habituating them to human contact and the presence of unfamiliar people. Some facilities also attempt to choose tigers with calmer, friendlier personalities for tourist interactions. Males, although larger, are also more commonly used as they are less active and unpredictable than females. Tourist tigers are also usually younger, being cubs or subadults, who are more playful and adaptable when faced with stressful situations.

However, tigers can often appear lethargic and unresponsive because of serious welfare problems that need to be addressed. These tigers are often trained using punishment [16], leading to learned helplessness, which manifests itself as reduced competitiveness/aggression, depression and passivity [17]. Such behaviours are then wrongly construed as the side effects from drugging. Poor nutrition, through an incorrect diet lacking vital nutrients, or over-feeding resulting in obesity, can also both result in increased lethargy. Finally, to perpetuate desirable, passive personality traits, many tigers are heavily inbred.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- **Suffer from poor nutrition**
- **Obesity**
- **Endure training by punishment**
- **Learned helplessness**
- **Inbreeding**

QUESTION TO ASK: WHY ARE THESE TIGERS CALM/RELAXED IN THE PRESENCE OF UNFAMILIAR PEOPLE?

MYTH 2: White tigers are a different species

Orange tigers are most commonly found in the wild because this coat colour provides the best camouflage. However, wild tigers have been observed with a number of other coat colours, including white, golden and even melanistic colourations [18]. These different coat colourations have led the public to incorrectly assume that colour variants, such as white tigers, are a separate subspecies and need to be preserved. Many dubious facilities utilise this belief. While technically these coat colours are found within the genes of a tiger, to get these colours to occur on a regular basis necessitates inbreeding [19].



White tiger displaying hip issues, Thailand 2017



White tigers with strabismus or cross eyes, Thailand 2017

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This myth exploits the fact that humans put value on rarity. Tiger facilities capitalise on this, and the lack of knowledge from the public. Many facilities inform visitors that they breed tigers with different colour variations as part of a conservation programme. In addition, some cultures also put value on white animals, considering them lucky, so many reputable zoos will often have white or golden tigers simply because of their appeal to the public, which can exacerbate the problem.



White tiger used for photos, Thailand 2019

THE TRUTH

While some facilities promote the various tiger colour morphs as separate subspecies, they are not. These colour variations all stem from the Bengal tiger through recessive genes [19]. White, golden and melanistic variants do occur naturally. However, in the wild, golden or white tigers are evidence of a shrinking gene pool, which is a cause for concern and indicates the need to provide more wildlife corridors [20]. In captivity, facilities will intentionally inbreed tigers in order to get these rare colour morphs to manifest.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- **Crossed eyes/strabismus**
- **Discarded or surplus cubs**
- **Health problems e.g. hip dysplasia, liver problems**
- **Physical deformities**
- **Premature death**
- **Stillborn cubs**

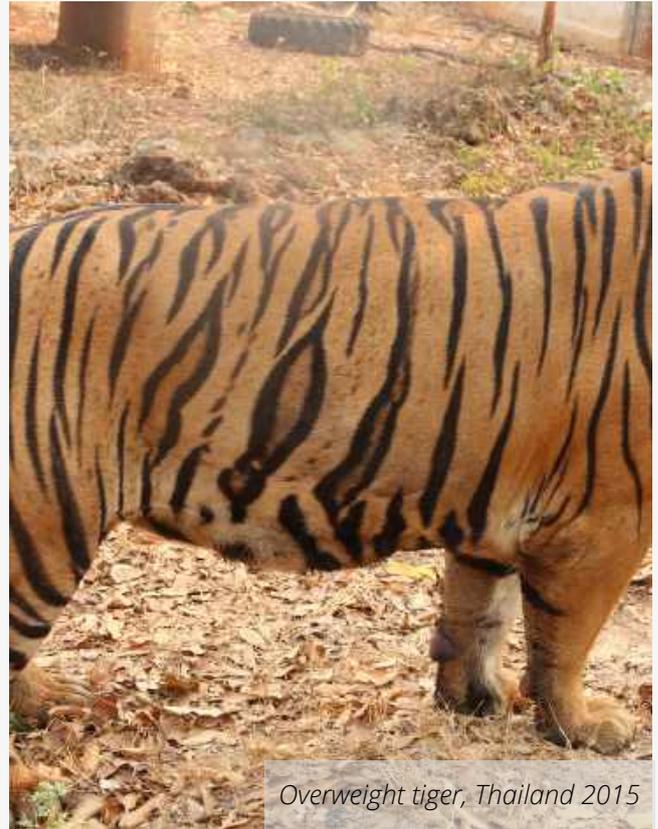
White tigers are a result of a recessive pigmentation gene that affects the production of red and yellow colours. This is why the orange colour disappears but the black or sepia stripes remain. In order for the colour to manifest, the tiger must be homozygous (have two copies of the gene, one from each parent [19]) Golden tigers occur from a different recessive gene. In their case this is from a wide-band gene that causes a reduction in the black pigment within the stripes. Golden tigers must also be homozygous for this genotype. However, snow tigers must have one of each recessive gene pair in order to show the snow or ghost stripe colouration [21].

While not a separate subspecies, these colour variants have all occurred naturally in the wild [18]. This has led some scientists to consider that these colour mutations should be considered part of tiger genetic diversity and therefore worth conserving [19,21]. However, this must be done with a basis in science and through a carefully monitored genetic breeding programme.

QUESTION TO ASK: WHY DO YOU HAVE COLOURED TIGERS?

MYTH 3: Tigers are fat because they store fat for winter

Captive tigers are often fatter than they should be, compared to their wild counterparts. Many facilities around the world display tigers that are overweight. The general public are often unaware that these overweight tigers are obese because they have little or no reference point, often relying on information provided by the facility. In fact, since it is more common to see tigers who are overweight, tourists who see tigers who are the optimal weight, may believe that they are too thin and make complaints about their welfare. Unfortunately, many facilities provide misinformation to visitors, claiming that tigers store fat for the winter [22], similar to hibernating bears. The public are often informed that the tigers will lose the weight once the hotter months come around.



Overweight tiger, Thailand 2015



Overweight tiger, Thailand 2014

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This myth may have grown because many people think that fat animals are cute and cuddly [23]. This means that much of the public does not even question the size of the captive tiger. Thus, this welfare issue is frequently overlooked, unless a tiger is severely obese and unable to move properly. This problem is also highly evident in pets, where pet obesity is considered a major welfare problem in many parts of the world [23].



THE TRUTH

In short, fat tigers are not healthy tigers. Wild tigers do not increase their weight in preparation for the winter months. Though some facilities compare the fatness to wild tigers, tigers in the wild are very good at regulating their body weight simply because obesity is an inconvenience and would hinder hunting. In the wild, tigers do not feed everyday, and though they will gorge when they do make a kill, this is not going to make them overweight [7,8]. It is also unlikely that food would be so plentiful over a long period that obesity would even be possible.

Captive tigers are not as active as their wild counterparts and are less likely, or indeed able (depending on the environment they live in), to exercise and use up excess energy from over feeding. Therefore, it is important for facilities to understand how much food each tiger needs. It is generally considered that tigers need 140kcal per kilo of body weight per day, and should be mainly fat and protein, with specific amino acids required in addition to the calorie requirement [8,24]. Newer research suggests sufficient fibre is also important.

In order to understand whether a tiger is healthy, observation of specific areas of the body such as the tailbone and hips; waist and abdomen; spine and ribs; and neck and shoulders, is needed. Overweight tigers will have large fatty deposits on all of these areas with no visible, round stomach and abdominal fat pads with no definition between these areas. Very thin tigers on the other hand, will have easily visible ribs, protruding vertebrae, a high abdominal tuck, no muscle mass or fat and a gaunt face. A healthy tiger will be lean and muscular, with a waist observed behind the ribs, ribs covered with a slight layer of fat and with a minimal fat pad [25].

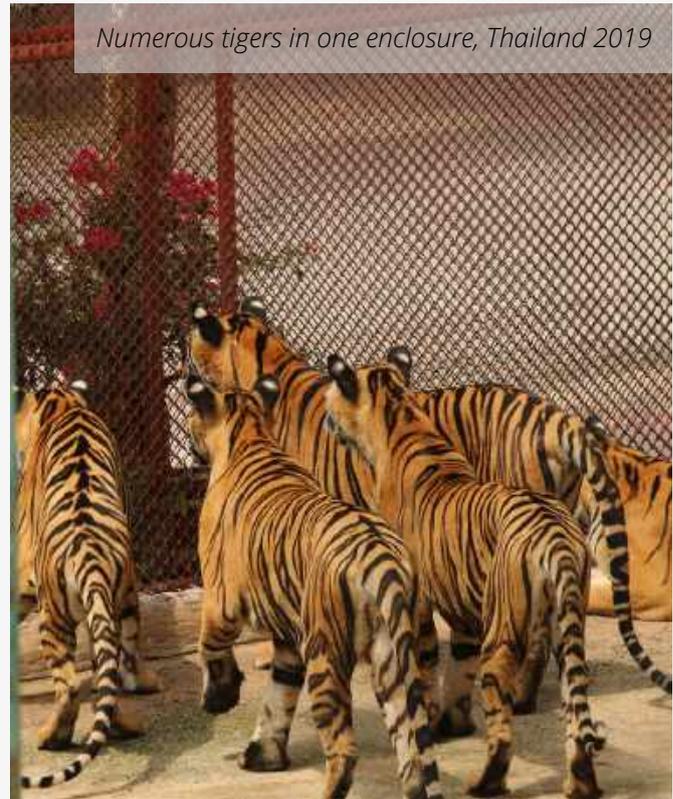
QUESTION TO ASK: WHAT DIET ARE THE TIGERS FED ON? WHY ARE THEY FAT?

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- **Cardiovascular issues**
- **Joint issues**
- **Impeded physical movement**

MYTH 4: Tigers do not breed if they are stressed

The high numbers of facilities with large numbers of cubs sometimes raises questions with the public. However, we have found that a common belief is that captive tigers will not breed if they are stressed. This belief reportedly stems from a comparison with other captive animals, such as pangolins, where stress is known to impact fecundity [26]. By default, assumptions such as these lead visitors to believe that the facility is providing the tigers with a good level of welfare if there are so many cubs. In short, the tigers are breeding, so they must be happy.



Numerous tigers in one enclosure, Thailand 2019

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This myth has an element of truth to it as there are a number of wild animals that do not breed well in captivity. Pandas, for example, are well-known for seldom breeding in captivity due to their very low libido [27]. Cheetahs are also quite hard to breed in captivity simply because the females have a hidden oestrus (on heat) [27]. Tiger facilities encourage the belief that tigers will not breed unless they are kept in optimal breeding conditions. This helps facilities to justify why they keep large number of tigers. It also aims to reassure visitors of the facility's high welfare standards, taking advantage of visitors' assumptions that animals need to be happy and healthy in order to breed.



Litter of five cubs born into captivity, Thailand 2015

Ten cubs from three litters in a captive tiger facility, Thailand 2011



THE TRUTH

Unfortunately, the truth is that tigers tend to breed well in captivity regardless of the level of welfare they experience. This enables both tiger-tourism facilities and tiger farms to profit from the relative ease with which captive tigers breed. Tigers can continue breeding as long as the female is kept fairly healthy and well-fed.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- Over-breeding
- Over-crowding
- Speed breeding

However, not all tigresses will breed well. There are often a few tiger pairs who breed well, which may mean that a few females will be over-bred and have several litters each year, a process dubbed 'speed breeding' [16]. There are reasons why a tiger might not breed and this includes behavioural problems, stress (see Myth #5) or that the right mate is not available – animals are selective in who they wish to mate with. However, one of the reasons why large-scale tiger farms are able to produce constant litters is that there are so many females available. This means there is no need to provide breeding breaks to conserve the health of regularly producing females. Facilities will have other breeding females that are able to take her place, thus either automatically providing breaks or taking over if she's no longer able to breed. As, there are so many tigers, breeding pairs can be formed easily.

QUESTION TO ASK: WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CUBS? HOW OFTEN DO YOU HAVE A LITTER OF CUBS? WHY DO YOU NEED ALL THESE CUBS?

MYTH 5: Captive tigresses abandon their cubs

Maternal cub rejection is another common assumption made by visitors to facilities with a lot of cubs or tiger interaction opportunities. A common belief is that captive tigers who are not raised by their mothers will not learn, or have the skills, to raise cubs on their own. To the visitor, this myth helps explain why the facility is hand-rearing the cubs rather than letting them stay with the mother. It also enables the facility to promote their business as kind and caring as it appears they help abandoned cubs. This probably creates a more positive experience for visitors, in terms of feeling good about their own participation.



Captive tigress caring for her cubs, Thailand 2015



Captive tigress caring for her cubs, Thailand 2015

HOW THE MYTH GREW

Similar to the other myths in this report, this myth was perpetuated by cub breeding facilities. By telling visitors that the mother rejected, abandoned or simply was never taught how to care for the cubs makes the facility look better. Some tourists have heard stories of tigresses eating their own cubs, which allows the facilities to take the role of rescuer in the eyes of the public, who forget that the cubs are being bred for interactions in the first place.

The idea that the mother isn't looking after the cub, consequently necessitating hand-rearing, gives visitors peace of mind during their interaction. Furthermore, visitors are led to believe they are helping the tiger get used to people and the environment by participating in the interaction.

Due to these interactions, the public are, unwittingly, helping this process to continue, which encourages the facility to keep breeding to meet this demand.



Cubs removed from their mother after 2 days, Thailand 2015

THE TRUTH

There is partial truth to this myth as, in some cases, captive tigresses have been known to abandon their cubs, or even eat them [28]. However, it is important to examine the cause of this behaviour. Rather than this behaviour being a sign of poor motherhood, this behaviour usually stems from stress and the unnatural environment that the mother is kept in [29]. A tigress abandoning her cubs should raise red flags about the welfare levels provided to tigers at this facility. Rather than accepting it as a sad situation, visitors should question what made the mother reject the cubs in the first place and what the facility has done to rectify the situation. It is suggested that this behaviour can arise from the tigress adjusting her litter size as has been seen in wild situations [29].

However, while some facilities claim maternal rejection occurs in 80% of births [29], this is not true. The norm is for captive tigresses to be able to successfully raise their cubs, which is evidenced in reputable zoos around the world, where captive-bred tigresses generally raise healthy cubs [30]. Mothering instincts are usually strong and do not require maternal teaching, even in captive tigers that have been raised in poor conditions. In the wild, tigers will leave their mother before breeding age, learning only how to hunt and survive from their mother [7,8]. However, the reality in many facilities in Thailand is that cubs are removed from their capable mothers simply to make money by being bottle-fed by tourists. Separation usually takes place when the cubs are two weeks old, sometimes younger. Both cubs and mothers suffer by such practices, as the removal of cubs will trigger the tigress to go into heat very quickly, something that would only happen in the wild if she were to lose a litter. Losing cubs either in the wild or captivity, will always be a stressor.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- **Early removal can cause stress-related problems**
- **Forced to stay awake**
- **Exposure to bacteria causing diarrhoea etc**
- **Kept in substandard conditions when off-display**
- **Inexperienced feeding can cause pneumonia/drowning through milk aspiration**
- **Mineral deficiencies can cause cataracts and other eye issues.**

QUESTIONS TO ASK: WHY ARE CUBS NOT LEFT WITH THE MOTHER?

MYTH 6:

Breeding is for conservation and/or release into the wild

Similar to the issue with tiger colour variants, another common myth is that tigers in captive facilities are bred for conservation purposes. Some facilities insist that this is to keep tigers on the planet in any form, while others will insinuate that their tigers can be released into the wild to help with in-situ conservation efforts. Some tourists are also led to believe that engaging in photo opportunities helps fund conservation projects and thus helps wild tiger conservation.

Facility explaining their conservation link, Thailand 2018



Overcrowding of tigers, Thailand 2014

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This is another myth perpetuated by the facilities themselves, though it is less common in Thailand than other countries such as the United States. Facilities are often not shy about having large banners stating that breeding is for conservation, or that photos will help fund tiger conservation. This practice is usually for the public's benefit as it enables visitors to feel as if they are helping wild tigers. However, generally, in Thailand, facilities do not say that they will release the tiger into the wild.

THE TRUTH

The high levels of breeding that occur in tiger facilities in Thailand have nothing to do with conservation. For most of these tigers, there is no real family tree or stud book available. Tigers are often hybrids, i.e. a cross between subspecies, which at this time means they could not be released into the wild even if release were possible. To date, there has been no successful release into the wild of a captive-bred tiger.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- Speed breeding
- Over-breeding
- Inbreeding

QUESTIONS TO ASK: WHY DO YOU HAVE/NEED SO MANY TIGERS? WHERE WILL THE TIGERS GO WHEN THEY STOP INTERACTING WITH THE PUBLIC?

MYTH 7: Photo tigers are caught from the wild

Similar to the previous myth, there is an enduring belief among some tourists that tigers used for photos are from the wild. This is despite the fact that most facilities do not explicitly state this, instead being prouder of their ability to captive breed these animals in captivity.



Captive tiger, Thailand 2015



Snow and golden tigers, Thailand 2019

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This grew because a number of other animals in Thailand are captured from the wild to use as photo props. Gibbons, lorises, birds and other small animals are often caught when young and then raised for photo opportunities [9].

THE TRUTH

This myth may be true for some species in Thailand and may have some historical truth as, in the past, wild-caught tigers have possibly been presented in front of tourists. However, currently, Thailand's tigers used for interactions are born and bred in a captive facility. Adult tigers are much harder to handle and it is highly unlikely a wild-caught tiger could be taught to comply with daily interactions with the public.

If a tiger is to interact with unfamiliar humans on a daily basis, it is easier to raise them from a cub so that they are habituated to it. In Thailand, the wild tiger population is estimated at a mere 200 [31], making it difficult for even trained conservationists to locate small cubs. Tourist facilities lack the time, access and resources to search for wild tiger cubs. Even if they were willing to put forth such effort, they would be deterred by fines and jail time, as it is illegal to poach tigers from the wild [32]. It is therefore much more practical for such facilities to breed and raise their own tigers.

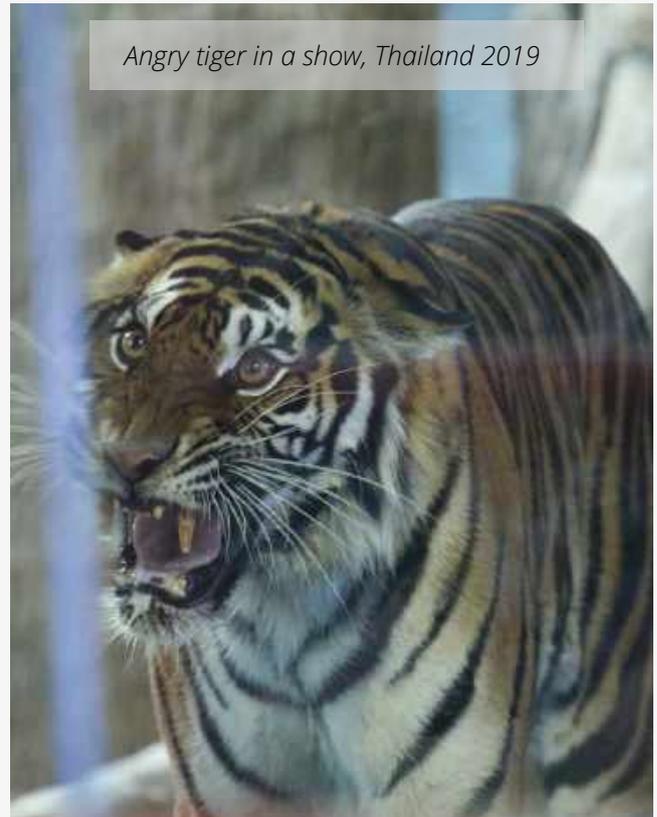
WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- Speed breeding
- Early removal from mothers
- Low standards of welfare

QUESTION TO ASK: WHERE DID THE TIGERS COME FROM?

MYTH 8: Training a tiger is bad

This is a slightly confusing myth as the belief that training tigers is bad, is not entirely wrong. This myth relates to whether or not captive tigers should be trained when living in a captive setting. For many visitors, training a wild animal is unnatural and may be seen as harmful rather than beneficial. The training of captive tigers also has negative connotations due to the link between trained tigers and circus-type performances.



HOW THE MYTH GREW

The idea of training captive tigers has a negative connotation mainly due to circuses and similar performances involving wildlife. To perform for human entertainment, tigers are often trained using punishment and aversive techniques [16]. Undercover videos and footage released by the facilities themselves have surfaced, highlighting the abusive practices used by some trainers for entertainment venues and film performances. This has led much of the public to view the training of big cats and other wildlife as abusive in general.



Tigers posing at the end of a tiger show, Thailand 2018

THE TRUTH

While some training is bad, certain types of training can be beneficial for tiger welfare. Where this myth is inaccurate is the assumption that training involves only unnatural behaviours. This is most definitely true when it comes to circuses or shows as tigers are forced to walk on their hind legs, balance on tightropes and jump through hoops of fire [16]. In Thailand, tigers are whipped, starved and then given food rewards within the ring in order to get the tigers to comply [16].

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

Positive training:

- Improves mental/physical welfare
- Reduces stress in tiger that have to be around people
- Builds positive tiger-keeper bonds

Negative training:

- Stress
- Injury through training/unnatural behaviour

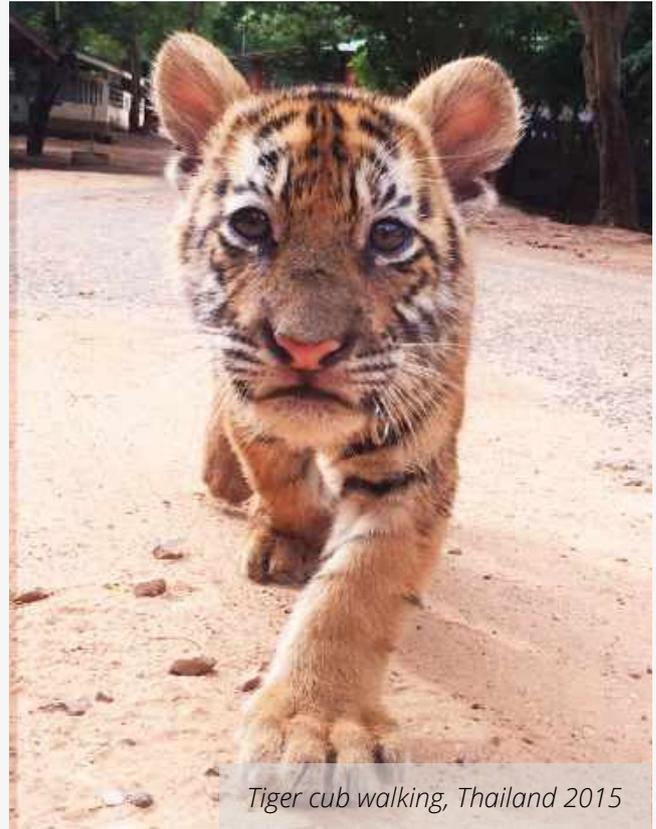
However, a growing number of welfare-orientated facilities use positive reinforcement training. This training does not focus on cultivating unnatural behaviours, but rather on fostering a stress-free environment for the tiger. Such training is used to encourage the tiger to perform behaviours that aid in health care and medical procedures. This can include training the tiger to stand on their hind legs for checkups, or to lie still and allow blood to be drawn from their tail, reducing the need for potentially harmful sedation [33]. While these behaviours are also not necessarily natural, they are trained using positive reinforcement (tigers are given rewards following a desired behaviour thus increasing the likelihood this behaviour will be performed again), ensuring the interaction is positive for the tiger as well. These training sessions are performed via protected contact and the tiger is free to participate or walk away from the session as they choose, allowing both choice and control within their environment [33].

Though some people may still disagree with training a captive tiger, tigers in captivity may experience better welfare if they are relaxed in the presence of humans. In addition, some training may provide a degree of cognitive stimulation as the tiger learns new things, which is enriching and positive for their mental health [7,34]. The cooperation of the tiger allows for improved medical procedures and promotes better health.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: HOW ARE THE TIGERS TRAINED? IS IT PROTECTED CONTACT OR HANDS ON INTERACTION? WHAT ARE THE TIGERS TRAINED TO DO?

MYTH 9: Keeping a pet tiger is okay

Keeping tigers as a pet is sadly surprisingly common, with an estimated 5000 tigers kept as pets in the USA alone [35], although this practice is much less common in Thailand. Many people believe that if keeping a pet tiger is legal and the tiger lives in good conditions, then it's perfectly acceptable. Indeed, some pet tigers might actually have better lives than those in many zoos. However, there are multiple issues with keeping a tiger as a pet.



Tiger cub walking, Thailand 2015

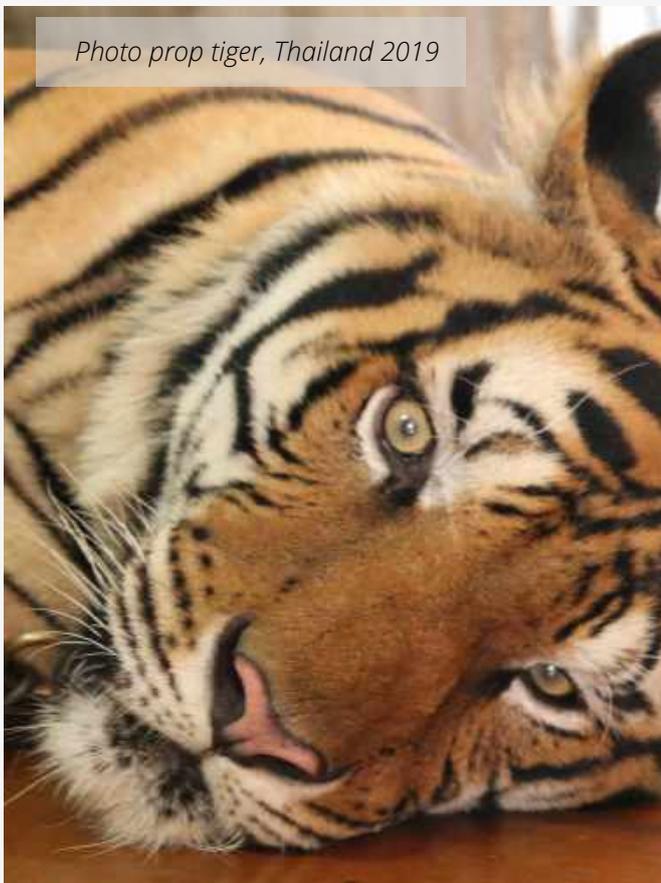


Photo prop tiger, Thailand 2019

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This belief is perpetuated by numerous sources throughout the world. In this age of social media, some of the biggest platforms have influencers that either own, or have been seen petting, captive tigers. These interactions are usually seen as cute, and the tigers - even large tigers - often behave like dogs or in a tame manner. These videos and photos give viewers reason to believe that tigers can be tamed and kept as pets. The consistent ability for visitors to interact, apparently safely, with tigers they do not know, has continued to promote this belief.



THE TRUTH

While a few private owners may be able to create and provide suitable habitats for tigers, the vast majority of owners cannot. In many countries the regulations for keeping tigers are minimal, resulting in tigers that are legally kept in inadequate and inappropriate conditions [35]. Many owners will initially keep the tiger in the house as they would a dog or cat, only to move it outside when it becomes too big and/or dangerous.

Tiger are dangerous animals, despite some owners believing that their tiger is tame. Tigers

maintain their natural instincts and have been known to attack when the opportunity arises. Even if the tiger is just playing, they are very large predators that can cause serious injuries. Most tiger related injuries in the US actually occur from privately owned tigers [36].

The main issue with keeping a tiger as a pet, is in the way that it is kept. Even well-funded zoos struggle to provide the proper environment to keep a tiger happy. Private owners who keep tigers as pets will often care for their tigers incorrectly, such as overfeeding them, keeping them with other species, providing them with too small a living space and keeping them in overcrowded conditions [36]. This creates poor welfare and more often than not, the tiger is given up to a sanctuary or zoo who will then have to take care of that tiger for the rest of its life.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- Inadequate nutrition
- Small living space
- Unsafe areas
- Inability to meet the physical and mental needs
- Incorrect breeding/inbreeding
- Over-crowding
- Multiple species living together

QUESTIONS TO ASK: CAN YOU ADEQUATELY CARE FOR THE TIGER? CAN YOU GIVE IT ENOUGH SPACE, PROVIDE A TIGER-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENT? HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE IT?

MYTH 10: Photo tigers are only cubs

Many facilities around the world only offer cub interaction experiences and no interactions with subadult or adult tigers. This has led to the belief that tigers involved in these types of interactions are only cubs. Visitors believe that the cubs will spend their early months interacting with tourists before being moved elsewhere, for example, released into the wild (see myth #6). However, unlike many facilities in other countries, facilities in Thailand also offer interactions with sub-adult and adult tigers.



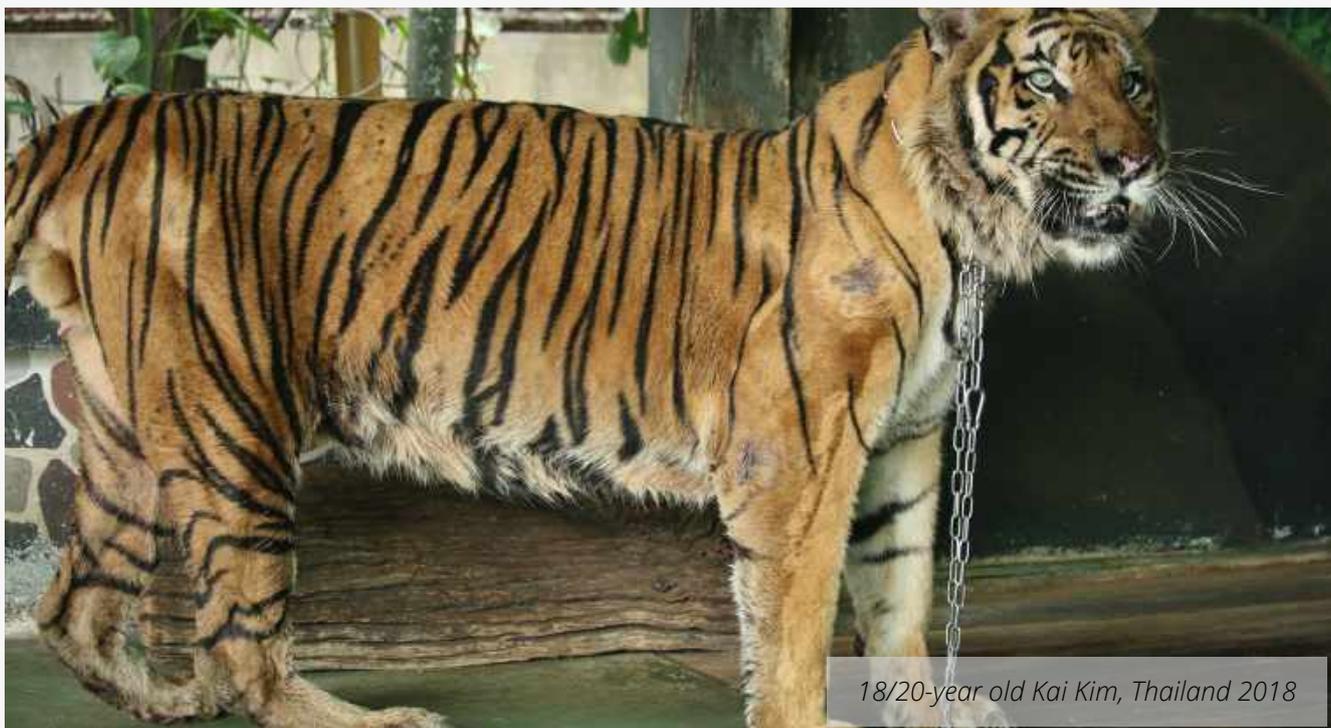
Ten-year old Toto, Thailand 2019



18-year old Lift, Thailand 2016

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This belief appears to come predominantly from the US, where the law states that tigers can only be handled between the ages of 8 to 12 weeks old [37]. After this, they are considered too dangerous. However, facilities in the US do not necessarily abide by these rules. The myth that only cubs are used has continued to grow, and this is furthered by the fact that most places offering tiger interactions have vast numbers of young cubs. Unfortunately, cubs constitute the main demand by tourists as they are small, cute and easy to manage.



THE TRUTH

While many people assume that only tiger cubs are used for interactions before they move on to retirement at an early age, in Thailand this is not the case. Cubs that tolerated interactions well at a young age will probably continue for many more years. In most facilities tigers can still be used for interactions at the age of four, with four to six usually being the “retirement” age. In some

venues tigers are still used for photos at much older ages, with some tigers known to be aged 10, 12 and even 18 years old. These tigers frequently work long hours everyday with no respite from tourists. Many tigers are kept chained or poked with sticks to provoke a reaction, such as a roar.

When a tiger does get retired, the public often assumes the tiger will either go to be part of a conservation programme or be released into the wild (See myth #6). However, it is also possible that the tiger will be sold into the illegal tiger trade or sold to a private owner. What many people do not realise is that there is another option. Some tigers will simply be kept in the tiger facility, but left essentially forgotten. These tigers will be put in substandard, often cramped living conditions and they will remain there for the rest of their lives. Thai culture does not generally allow euthanasia for sick or injured animals, with older, retired tigers not necessarily receiving medical care meaning they are left to suffer [38]. Additionally, it is unclear whether the removal from years of interactions with the public will cause the tigers to suffer even more, as they had been used to constant stimulation and attention and are now receiving none.

QUESTIONS TO ASK: HOW OLD IS THE TIGER? HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN DOING THE INTERACTIONS? WILL IT GET TO RETIRE?

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

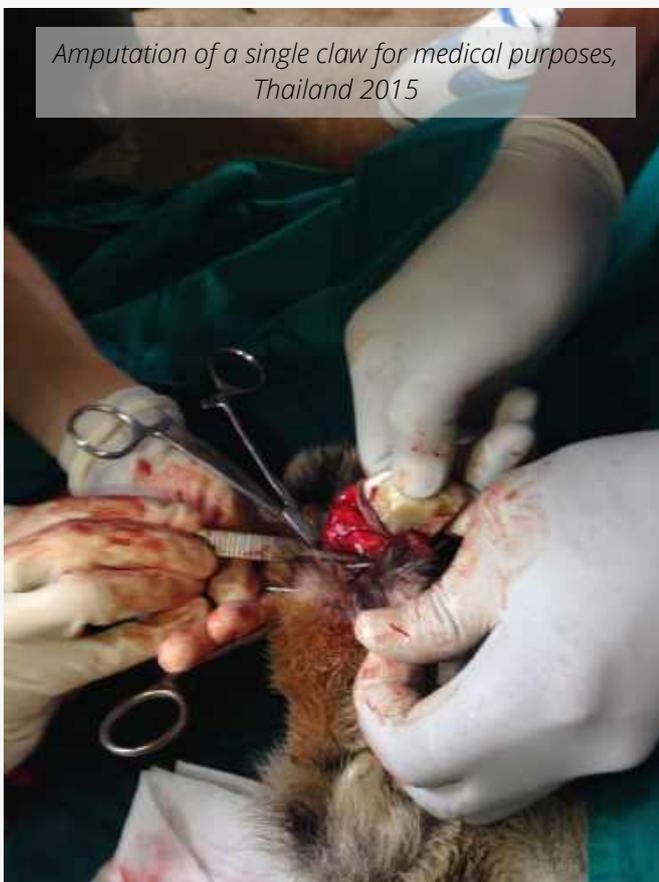
- Tigers spend years of their lives doing tiger interactions
- Retirement may not be an improvement to welfare

MYTH 11: Declawing doesn't harm the tiger

Declawing is another important myth to examine. This cruel practice is still legal in many parts of the world, including North America and Thailand, and is still widely regarded as an acceptable practice. The problem is that many people do not know that tigers are declawed in the first place, or understand what declawing actually entails. It is often assumed that is simply clipping the claws so that they are not sharp. Since, in many parts of the world, declawing is commonly still performed on house cats, a declawed tiger often does not raise any alarm bells for tourists.



Tiger scratching his claws, Thailand 2015



Amputation of a single claw for medical purposes, Thailand 2015

HOW THE MYTH GREW

The myth surrounding declawing relates back to the practice of some pet owners wishing to declaw their house cats to make their lives easier. Cats naturally enjoy scratching as this helps to keep their claws clean and sharp, but it often results in the destruction of furniture [39]. Vets who perform declawing surgery often do not succinctly explain the ramifications of such an amputation to their clients. This may result in the belief that declawing a cat is an easy and safe option. In addition, some people believe that declawing increases a cat's quality of life, though really it only benefits the owner.

Two declawed tigers displaying aggression, Thailand 2018



THE TRUTH

Declawing is actually a very painful procedure that has long lasting effects, even after the surgery is complete. Rather than simply clipping the claw tips, declawing involves amputation; the complete removal of the top end, or last phalanx, from each of the tiger's toes [40]. It is the same as if someone were to cut off the last joint of a finger (the part including the nail). The claw itself is not simply removed as this can grow back again and the point of declawing is to prevent any type of scratching from occurring.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- Chronic pain
- Small bone fragments can be left behind
- Puts strain on other parts of the body
- Natural drive to scratch is frustrated
- Can increase aggression

Contrary to popular belief, the healing process is neither fast nor easy. In Thailand, the procedure is usually performed when the tiger is a cub, making it easier to handle and then provide medicine and after-care. However, there is always going to be pain and bleeding as the blood vessels have been cut. Usually the feet of a declawed house cat are bandaged post-surgery, but this is harder to maintain in a tiger cub and is usually omitted.

Tigers carry a lot of their weight on their front legs and walk on their toes, so the heavier they are, the more pain they will experience [40]. Declawed tigers will also walk flat-footed causing pain on the joints [40]. This is why declawing adult tigers is possibly even more inhumane. It is also pertinent to point out that the only reason tigers are declawed is to make them safer to handle. Without tourist demand for tiger photos or interactions, such practices would not need to occur.

WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK: ARE THE TIGERS DECLAWED? WHY DO THEY NEED TO BE DECLAWED?

MYTH 12: The best way to help tigers in Thailand's tourism industry is to shut the facility down

The final myth to address concerns methods to improve the welfare of Thailand's captive tourist tigers. Around the world, it is commonly believed that in order to help exploited tigers, and indeed other captive wildlife, the best thing to do is to have the facility shut down. People believe that the tigers would then be able to go to a sanctuary and live their lives free from photo opportunities and harmful or aversive training practices.



Tigers chained for photos Thailand 2014



Paw of captive tiger, Thailand 2019

HOW THE MYTH GREW

This myth has grown around the world as closing the facility down is what a large number of NGOs call for when uncovering a facility with reported poor welfare practices. Because NGOs are believed to be trustworthy and reputable, the public believes that NGOs know best and that the best course of action in these situations is for the facility to be shut down, and the animals removed to better living conditions.

In certain situations, and countries, this is true, but it is not necessarily always the case, as there are not many sanctuaries equipped to accommodate the sometimes large number of animals that need relocating. However, due to the constant push by NGOs and large-scale petitions to shut poor welfare venues down, this myth has been perpetuated.



Tiger in a government facility after a confiscation, Thailand 2016

THE TRUTH

While some countries can offer animals better living conditions post-confiscation, in many countries, including Thailand, shutdowns often further reduce the animals' quality of life through the stress of relocation, and insufficient funding for proper facilities, medical care and nutrition. In Thailand, there are currently no sanctuaries that can take in large quantities of tigers. Although the government is responsible for caring for any confiscated tigers (and other wildlife), and have facilities in place to hold such animals, tigers moving to these facilities may not see improved welfare.

WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

- **Potential for worsened general welfare**
- **Stress from:**
 - relocation/transport
 - new diet
 - new environment
 - new handlers/carers
- **Substandard living conditions**

There is an amendment to the Thailand Wildlife Preservation Act [32] that would allow facilities and zoos around the country to take in confiscated animals as long as they meet government requirements. However, this amendment does not appear to be enacted at this time. This means that within Thailand, tigers from closed facilities may be moved to government facilities with even lower standards of welfare [10]. This is in contrast to western countries where, if new homes cannot be found that meet welfare standards, the tigers are often euthanised [41]. In some cases, this may be viewed as the better alternative for the tigers. As an NGO, we do not advocate for shutting down sub-standard or exploitative facilities as this tends to lead to more welfare issues for the tigers involved. Instead we choose to work alongside these facilities, providing welfare education with regards to enrichment, facility standards and tiger care, to promote behaviour change within the facility. Within Thailand, other avenues that need to be pursued and addressed by NGOs and the public alike, include improved welfare laws and proper enforcement.

WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF THESE TIGERS?



CONCLUSION

This report has discussed some of the many myths that have sprung up surrounding captive tiger interactions. The vast majority of these myths have been perpetuated by sub-standard facilities in an effort to justify their own actions and make them appealing to the public. Others are simply rooted in various misunderstandings, which, so far, little effort has made to rectify.

Finally, some myths have even been spread by well-meaning NGOs who provide incorrect information, unaware that this information is wrong. The public belief in these various myths can lead to an increase in poor tiger welfare, causing more tigers to suffer due to the continuation of tourist interactions.

Ultimately, there should be no tourist and hands-on tiger interactions and shows because these activities continue the often cruel and unethical practices that exist in tourist facilities that keep captive tigers in Thailand.

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