



A close up on cruelty:

The harmful impact of wildlife selfies
in the Amazon



We were known as **WSPA**
(World Society for the
Protection of Animals)



Wildlife not entertainers

Launched in 2015, Wildlife Not Entertainers¹ is moving the wildlife tourism industry away from cruel forms of entertainment, such as elephant rides and shows^{2,3} towards positive wildlife experiences where tourists can see wild animals in the wild or true sanctuaries. Our campaign gives a voice to the 550,000 wild animals that are currently in captivity and being abused for the sake of so-called tourist entertainment.

- We have mobilized over 800,000 people across the world to take action to end the cruelty inflicted on wild animals in entertainment
- As a result, TripAdvisor⁴, the world's largest online travel platform, stopped selling and promoting tickets to some of the cruellest wildlife tourist attractions, and launched an education portal to help inform travellers about animal welfare issues. This was followed by Expedia⁵ stepping back from cruel wildlife attractions
- Over 180 more travel companies across the world have committed to stop selling and promoting elephant rides and shows

Now, for the first time, we're focusing our campaign on the Amazon where wild animals are being taken from the wilderness of the rainforest – often illegally – and cruelly abused for commercial profit.

Photo left: Adult wild elephant briefly plays in the water and then continues on her way.

Photo right: Wildlife venue in Thailand where elephants are used to take tourists on rides.

World Animal Protection aims to make all unsuspecting tourists to the Amazon aware of this cruelty so they no longer pay to use wild animals as a photo prop. We know that most people love animals and will choose not to have a wildlife selfie once they know the truth about the cruelty behind the scenes.

We will also ensure that the travel industry know that this practice is often illegal, and where action is lacking, calling on the relevant governments to enforce their laws to protect these precious wild animals so they can remain in the wild.

We believe that everyone can play an important part in protecting wild animals from some of the cruelty of tourist entertainment by signing the Wildlife Selfie Code, a set of simple do's and don'ts designed to guide potential tourist behaviour and protect wildlife.

In particular, we will be urging Instagram to widen the lens, see the cruelty behind the photo and take action to protect animals. With over 700 million users and 92 million images uploaded to its site every day, Instagram has the power and influence to protect hundreds of thousands of wild animals.





Contents

Wildlife not entertainers	3
Executive summary	6
Introduction	16
Wildlife attractions in Latin America: a snapshot	21
Impact on animal welfare	22
Case study: Manaus, Brazil	25
i. Baiting	28
ii. Wildlife selfies	29
iii. Is this legal?	29
Case study: Puerto Alegria, Peru	30
i. Is this legal?	31
Spotlight on sloths	35
Conclusion	37
References	38

Photo left: Local animals, like this anaconda, are taken from the wild and used for harmful wildlife selfies with tourists, in Manaus, Brazil.

Front cover: Young sloths, like this one, are taken torn away from their mothers to be used as photo props for tourists.

Executive Summary

Wildlife tourism, when properly managed, can be good for the environment and wild animals: it can support the protection of natural areas, improve animal welfare and alleviate poverty.^{6,7} But sadly, some tour operators exploit wildlife for profit in ways that lead to great cruelty and suffering.⁸

One of the biggest culprits is the growing popularity of wildlife selfies where tourists, with the help of tour operators, capture and share images of themselves with wild animals - exploiting them as photo props.

Using a wild animal as a photo prop⁹ in a wildlife selfie can inflict stress and suffering on the animal, robbing them of their freedom and encouraging contact with humans that makes their

chances of survival back in the wild much harder. Behind the scenes these animals are often beaten into submission, taken from their mothers as babies and secretly kept in filthy, cramped conditions or repeatedly baited with food that can have a long term negative impact on their biology and behaviour.^{10, 11, 12, 13}

All too often, to the unsuspecting tourist, the cruelty that makes these animals submissive and available is entirely invisible.

This ground-breaking report charts the rapidly increasing trend of selfies with wild animals on Instagram. It also unveils concerns regarding the commercial exploitation and abuse of wild animals across the Latin America region - with an investigatory focus on the Amazon and its iconic wildlife.



With over 700 million users and 92 million images uploaded to its site every day, Instagram has the power to shift the debate on the use of wild animals as photo props.

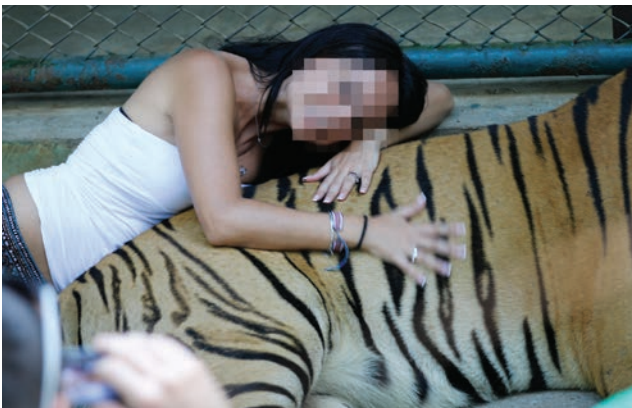
Wildlife and the selfie phenomenon

We commissioned cutting-edge 'social listening' research to gain stronger insights into the growing worldwide trend on social media for wildlife selfies. Using image recognition software, we analyzed the prevalence of both good and bad wildlife selfies across popular social media platforms - Facebook, Twitter and with an in-depth look into Instagram, one of the largest platforms for this social selfie phenomenon.

Through this social listening we discovered:

- **292% increase in the number of wildlife selfies posted** on Instagram between 2014 to present
- **Over 40% are 'bad' wildlife selfies** - someone hugging, holding or inappropriately interacting with a wild animal
- Users are more likely to upload 'good' wildlife selfies when they have been educated or exposed to information or campaign messages about the cruelty inflicted on animals in tourist entertainment

Instagram does not currently include any animal cruelty or welfare language in their community guidelines. We believe it's time for that to change.



'BAD' wildlife selfie



An image or post in which a wild animal is being held, touched, restrained or baited for the purpose of being a photo prop



'GOOD' wildlife selfie



An image or post of a wild animal in which there was no direct human contact and the animal was not being restrained or in captivity to be used as a photo prop

Wildlife tourism in Latin America

World Animal Protection has also conducted the first comprehensive review of wildlife tourist attractions offering close encounters with wild animals across Latin America. Our research raises concerns that many operators and facilities are cruelly exploiting and injuring wildlife, and breaking animal protection laws in the process, to provide harmful wild animal selfie opportunities for tourists.

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Our desktop research uncovered new information about the scale of the problem in Latin America:

- **54% of the 249 attractions** we found online offered direct contact, such as holding the wild animals for photos or selfies
 - **35% of the attractions** used food to attract the wild animals
 - **11% offered** the opportunity to swim with wild animals
-

In addition to our welfare concerns, 61% of the species that we identified during this desktop review are classified as needing international legal protection by the Convention on the Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), and 21% of them are classified as “Threatened” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). All this highlights that there are also concerning conservation implications for these types of wildlife tourist attractions in Latin America.

To fully understand the animal welfare implications associated with this type of wildlife tourism, our investigations focused in-depth in two cities¹⁴ of the Amazon: the gateway Manaus, Brazil and Puerto Alegria, Peru.

In Manaus – our detailed investigation of 18 different tour companies revealed that the opportunity to hold and touch wild animals as photo props was offered on 94% of excursions and actively encouraged during 77% of them. The Pink river dolphin was the most common species offered for this type of physical contact, followed by three-toed sloths, spectacled caimans, green anacondas and squirrel monkeys.

In Puerta Alegria – our detailed investigation revealed that the opportunity to hold and touch wild animals as photo props was also provided at three different locations. A total of 40 individual animals, representing 24 different species (7 birds, 12 mammals, 5 reptiles) were identified. Tourists were expected to pay US \$15 for the experience, with operators passing a bucket to collect payment.







In public view and behind the scenes, during these investigations we uncovered the following evidence of cruelty being inflicted on these wild animals:



Birds such as **Toucans** with severe abscesses on their feet



Sloths captured from the wild, tied to trees with rope



Green anacondas showing signs of dehydration and wounds



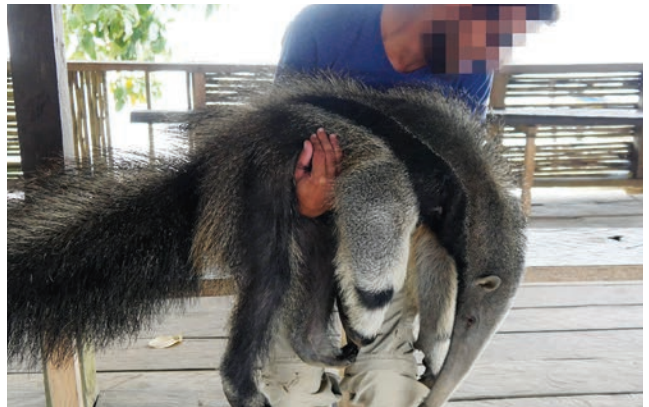
Caiman crocodiles restrained with rubber bands around their jaws



A **manatee** held in a tiny tank in the forecourt of a local hotel



An **ocelot** (a type of wild cat) kept in small barren cage



A **giant anteater**, manhandled and beaten by its owner



94%

of the excursions in
Manaus offered the
opportunity to hold
and touch wild animals
as photo props



77%

of the excursions
actively encouraged
the opportunity

Photo above: Tourists, unaware of the cruelty behind the scene, happily pose for photos with young sloths.

We are particularly concerned about the use of sloths as photo props for selfies and the extreme negative impact on their welfare caused by the wildlife tourism industry. Several aspects of their biology and behaviour make sloths particularly vulnerable to these types of human interactions¹⁵. There is good reason to believe that most sloths being used for tourist selfies don't survive even six months of this treatment.

The use of wild animals for commercial purposes is illegal in Manaus.¹⁶ However, despite these laws and active enforcement, other complementary actions such as reducing tourist demand, are required to end harmful wildlife tourism. This type of activity also appears to be illegal in Puerto Alegre but legal loopholes present ambiguity which may be partly responsible for a lack of law enforcement.



Take action across the Amazon

To start tackling this problem, we are calling on the relevant governments to enforce the law, and to ensure that travel companies and individuals who are exploiting these wild animals for commercial purposes in the Amazon abide by the existing laws.

World Animal Protection welcomes the opportunity to work with the enforcement agencies in Manaus and Puerto Alegria to rescue those animals currently being abused.

We work with local partners across the world to provide sanctuary and, where possible, rehabilitation for wild animals rescued from the perils of the cruel wildlife tourism industry.

In Latin America, we are supporting AIUNAU Rehabilitation Centre in Colombia to provide sanctuary for sloths and other animals caught up in the wildlife selfie tourism trade.

In conclusion, the use of animals as photo props for wildlife selfies are an increasingly alarming source of animal welfare concern, as evidenced by our two case studies in the Amazon. The prevalence of these images on social media is almost certainly driving up the interest in this activity, with much of the cruelty involved kept hidden behind the scenes.

We all have the power to positively change the future for these animals.

Photo left: La Negrita, a rescued two-toed sloth, safe now at the AIUNAU foundation.

Photo right: Local wildlife, like this squirrel monkey, are taken from the wild and used for harmful wildlife selfies with tourists.



Top tips for tourists

We want tourists to enjoy seeing wild animals in the wild or the next best place, a sanctuary or rescue centre that provides proper protection for animals that survive the cruelty of the tourism industry.

We ask all tourists to book their wildlife experiences with a responsible travel operator.

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Here are some very simple tips for anyone travelling and wanting to know that their wildlife encounter is good for the animals.

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Sign our Wildlife Selfie Code and commit to keeping wild animals in the wild



If you can hug, hold or have a selfie with a wild animal, the chances are that it's enduring ongoing cruelty. You may be approached to pay for your picture with a wild animal. Don't do it



Don't chase or capture wild animals for a selfie



Don't feed or lure wild animals with food or bait so they come closer to you for a photo



Ask your tour operator whether they allow direct contact with wild animals. If the answer is no, the chances are they are a responsible operator



Report any concerns you have about the welfare of wild animals in tourist attractions via online platforms such as TripAdvisor and your social media channels - this helps to make others aware of the cruelty so they also choose wildlife experiences that are good for the animals





Together we can ensure a better future for animals around the world, and help make sure wildlife tourism globally becomes, and remains, cruelty-free.





Introduction

Many of us, when we travel, look for ways to connect with the natural environment.

Wildlife tourism, when properly managed, can be good for the environment and wild animals: it can lead to and help fund the protection of natural areas, improve animal welfare and alleviate poverty.^{17,18} Many tour operators keep these values central to their business models.

Unfortunately, however, wildlife tourism can have an ugly side: there are many tour operators and facilities who exploit wildlife for profit in ways that lead to cruelty and suffering, habitat destruction, and species decline.

To make matters worse, the explosion in popularity of both mobile phones and social media may be driving the growth of this darker, more exploitative side of wildlife tourism.

With a wildlife selfie, tourists capture images of themselves holding or touching a wild animal.

Previous studies on elephants, tigers and lions show that captive wild animals used for harmful wildlife selfies can suffer enormous cruelty.^{19,20,21} However, the use of wild animals that have been temporarily 'borrowed' from nearby habitats, is a concerning phenomenon that, emerging research shows is also having a profound and destructive impact on individual animals and whole species.

All too often they are taken from their mothers as babies, beaten into submission and secretly kept in captivity for the rest of their lives to then be used as photo props. Hidden behind the scenes, they are frequently kept in filthy, cramped conditions leading to disease and death.

The animal cruelty equation here is frighteningly simple: many tourists actively seek out opportunities to share with their friends a picture of themselves with animals they find are unusual, exotic, rare, and emblematic of the place they are visiting. The sharing of these types of images unwittingly sends a message to hundreds even thousands of people that this activity is acceptable.



Our research shows clearly that many operators and facilities are cruelly exploiting and injuring wildlife, and breaking animal protection laws in the process, to provide harmful wild animal selfie opportunities for tourists.

Photo far left: Elephants performing tricks in front of a large crowd. After the show the elephants are mobbed by the crowd for selfie opportunities.

Photo left: Local sloths are taken from the wild and used for harmful wildlife selfies with tourists.

For the unsuspecting tourist, what is being done to make these animals submissive or keep them available for personal contact happens behind the scenes, invisible to the people that pay for this experience.

It's important to note that many tourists are seeking out these opportunities for their interest in, respect for, and love of animals, and we believe most would choose not to engage in this type of activity if they were aware of the cruelty it causes.

On the other side of the equation, some unscrupulous operators bend or break the law and deceive tourists because, for the Wildlife Tourist Attraction (WTA),²² offering close or direct physical contact with wild animals has the potential to dramatically increase the appeal of their business, and ultimately their revenues.

Our research shows clearly that many operators and facilities are cruelly exploiting and injuring wildlife, and breaking animal protection laws in the process, to provide harmful wild animal selfie opportunities for tourists.

This report on wildlife selfies explores a new and important angle for World Animal Protection's work on animals exploited for entertainment: most investigations in this area, by ourselves and others, have until now focused on the suffering of captive animals.^{23, 24, 25} At the wildlife tours visited for this study, however, the tourist thinks, and the WTA leads them to believe, that they will be experiencing contact with these animals in their natural habitats – while behind the scenes it is painfully clear there is absolutely nothing natural about these encounters.

Latin America is recognized for its iconic wildlife, and has already been identified for potential wildlife tourism expansion.²⁶ In comparison to other regions, however, animal exploitation for wildlife tourism in Latin America has not been widely explored. For these reasons, we have focused our attention on wildlife selfies in this region.

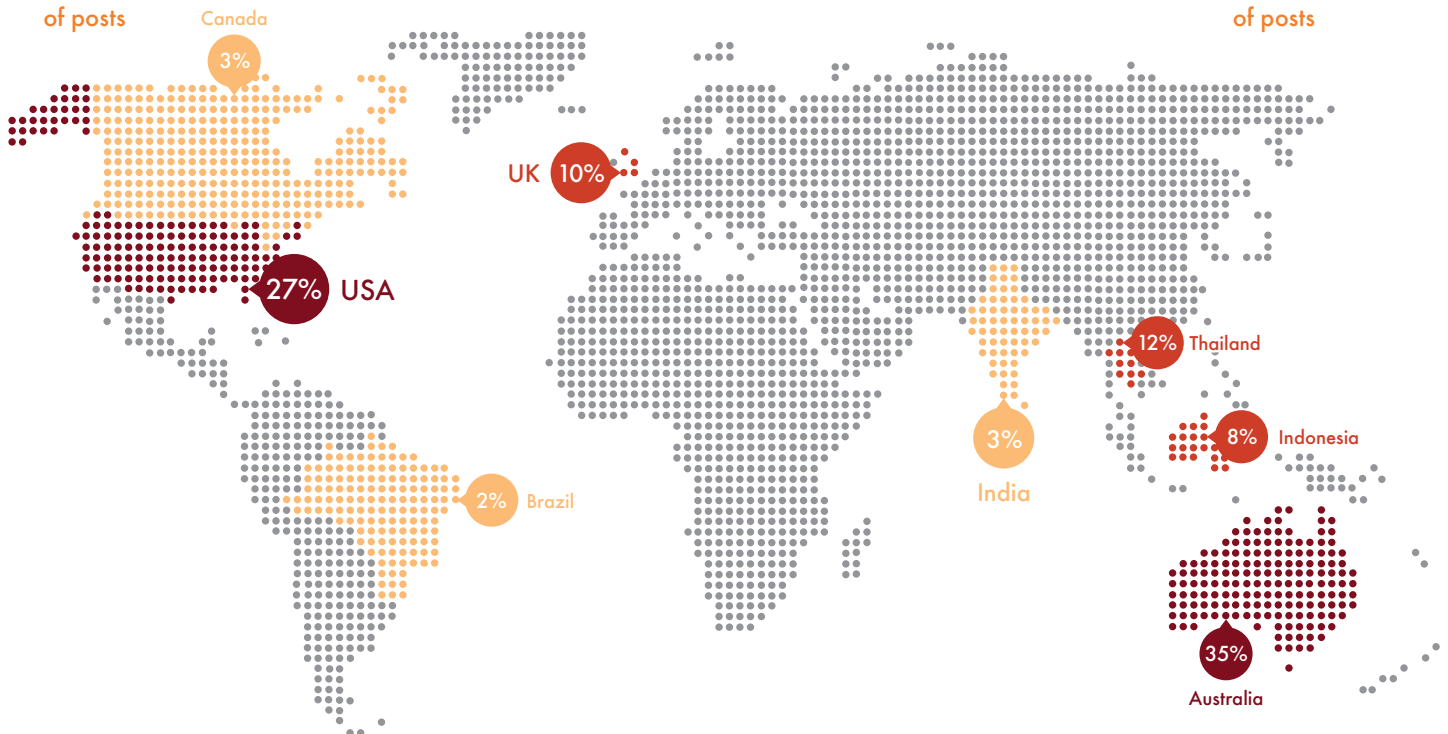
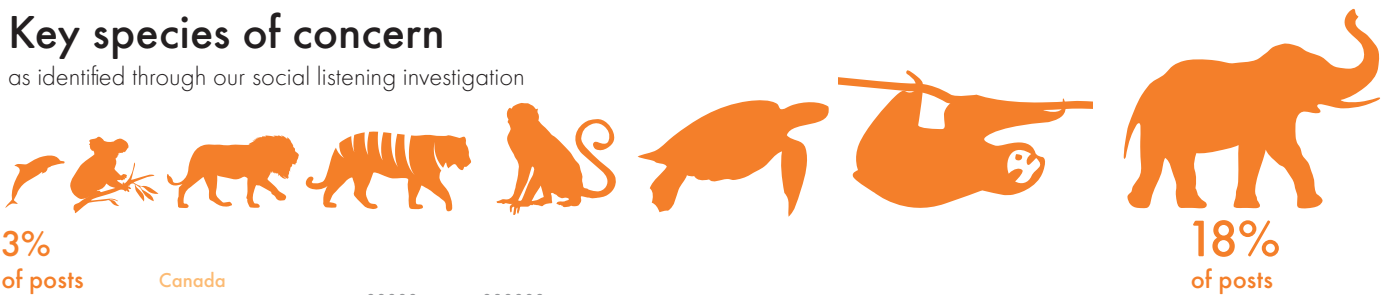
Snapshot of wildlife selfies across social media

The aim of this social listening study was to provide a snapshot of the prevalence, breadth, and trends around wildlife selfies online globally. Combining robust keyword search, image recognition, and machine learning, we trained social listening algorithms to successfully identify 'good selfies' and 'bad selfies' just like a human would, amongst hundreds of thousands of public social media posts around the world.

Timeframe: June 2014 - June 2017
Sources: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
Sample size: 133,344

Key species of concern

as identified through our social listening investigation



This map shows the top locations of the concentration of wildlife selfies - which can be the country that the photo is tagged with either being taken in or where the Instagram user is located.



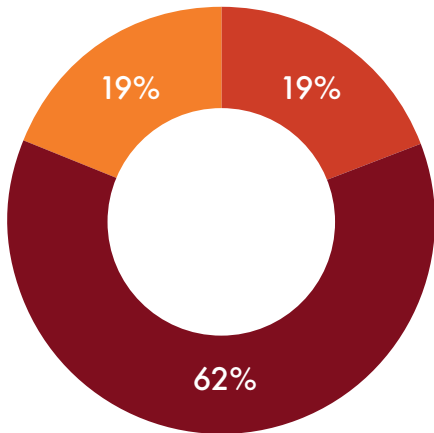


Figure 1.
Tiger wildlife selfies on Instagram

- Good selfie
- Bad selfie
- Advocacy



70%

of all sloths selfies on Instagram are of people hugging, holding or using them as photo props

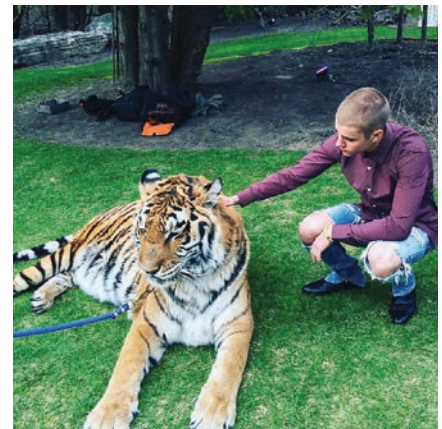


These wildlife selfie posts had the potential to generate 1 billion views, due to the reach of those celebrities who shared selfies. This normalizes behaviour that puts wildlife in jeopardy.

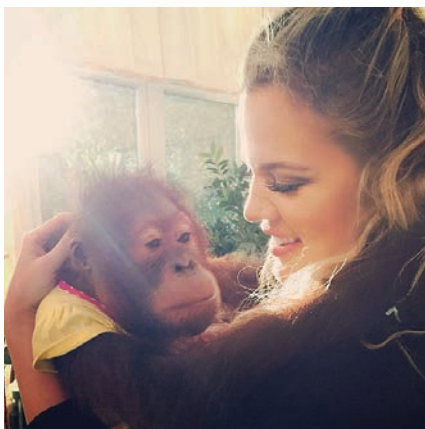
Photos: Instagram



@kimkardashian
103 million Instagram followers



@justinbieber
91.7 million Instagram followers



@khloekardashian
69 million Instagram followers



@kevinhart4real
54.5 million Instagram followers



@caradelevingne
40.7 million Instagram followers





Wildlife attractions in Latin America: a snapshot

A search on TripAdvisor, regarded to be the world's largest travel website, helps us gain insight into how widely common wildlife selfie attractions have become across mainland Central and South America.

Research in English in August and November of 2016, gives us a regional snapshot of Wildlife Tourist Attraction's (WTA) that offer close or direct contact with wild animals outside of formal obvious long-term captivity. We looked at attractions that offered both wildlife photos and the opportunity to touch, pet, hold, feed, or swim with wildlife.

Our results uncovered 249 WTA's located in 17 of the 21 countries that make up mainland Latin America.

Mammals were the most common animal attraction advertised (67%), followed by reptiles (51%), sharks and rays (27%), birds (16%), and amphibians (8%).

Overall, we found 72 different species being advertised by these operations.

Of these attractions, 54% offered direct contact with animals. Some 35% used food to attract the animals to the tourists, and 11% offered the opportunity to swim with animals.

An alarming 61% of the species identified are provided international legal protection by the Convention on the Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), and 21% of them are classified as "Threatened" with extinction by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). A further 19% are classified as Data Deficient - meaning that information is lacking to ascertain their conservation status - and could also be at risk of extinction.



Impact on animal welfare

Good welfare for animals exists when an animal's nutritional, environmental, health, behavioural and psychological needs are all being met.²⁷ Even the most well-intentioned operators will deprive an animal of one or all of these needs in the course of approaching, capturing, baiting, restraining, feeding, transporting, holding captive, using and/or disposing of these animals.⁸

Regular close or direct contact with tourists can negatively impact breeding and feeding.^{29, 30} Direct contact with non-captive wildlife can also lead to the unintentional deaths of individuals belonging to threatened species. For example, in 2016 media reported that a La Plata River Dolphin died after beachgoers in Argentina hauled it out of the water to pose with it for photos.³¹

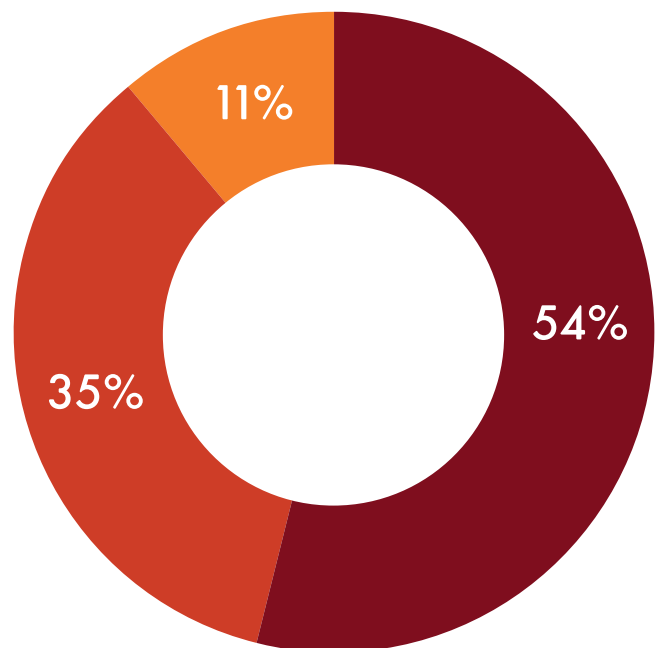
It's reasonable to assume that this snapshot is really just the tip of the iceberg and that many more attractions involving a wider variety of species and activities are currently being offered throughout the region.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how animals used for wildlife selfies can be handled and treated, we next took an in-depth look at WTA's in the Amazon region.



Figure 2. Wildlife attractions statistics

- offered direct contact with animals
- used food to attract the animals to the tourists
- offered the opportunity to swim with animals



Photos above: Local animals, like this monkey and infant caiman crocodile, are taken from the wild and used as photo props for tourist wildlife selfies.



Case study: Manaus, Brazil

The biological importance of The Amazon region is virtually unparalleled: 10% of the planet's biodiversity can be found here. It is home to over 18,000 species of plants, more than 400 species of mammals and over 200 species of reptiles, many of which are only found here. It is also home to the most primate and fish species on the planet.

So it's no wonder that the Amazon is an increasingly popular tourist destination. Its reputation and ability to draw tourists depends on the tourists' ability to see and connect with wildlife.^{32, 33}

Even though tourism only accounts for around 1% of the GDP of the Brazilian Amazon region,³⁴ experts predict continued growth of wildlife tourism.³⁵ This region has enormous potential to develop ecotourism opportunities not just centered around the region's wild animals, but also its natural landscapes and its indigenous heritage and culture, particularly in older cities such as Manaus and Belem.³⁶ These cities act as gateways to wildlife tourism activities such as river tours and stays at jungle lodges.³⁷

Manaus is the capital of the Amazonas state, the largest state in Brazil with a land mass of 1.6 million square kilometres.³⁸ Seventy-seven percent of the state's rainforest remains intact.³⁹ Manaus sits at the confluence of two main tributaries to the Amazon, where the Rio Negro meets the Rio Solimoes.⁴⁰ Manaus has an airport that can receive full size jet aircrafts and is connected to wildlife tourist destinations by both paved highways and large riverboats.⁴¹

For all these reasons, wildlife tourism in Manaus is substantial, and it's set to expand.

Tourists typically arrive by air, and are taken by boat to floating hotels or hotels on the river's edge.⁴² Wildlife excursions can be booked before and after arrival, through tour agents that operate online and at local branches.

To conduct our research, we used online search engines to identify companies operating from Manaus that explicitly advertised opportunities to observe and interact with live non-captive wild animals.

More than 400 species of mammals and over 200 species of reptiles call the Amazon home

We chose 18 different wildlife boat excursions each lasting between one to three days, which ranged in price from about US \$48 to US \$112 per day. The numbers of tourists participating in each tour varied from six to sixty-one.

Direct contact with wild animals for photo opportunities were offered on 94% of excursions, at six different locations. Official tour guides actively encouraged this type of activity during 77% of excursions. Pink river dolphins were the most common species offered for contact, followed by three-toed sloths, spectacled caimans, green anacondas and squirrel monkeys.

Photo left: Working with communities that live on the Amazon River to educate the younger generation on protecting wild animals.

Our welfare concerns



Three-toed sloths

Legal status: CITES Appendix II

At Manaus, Brazil, Puerto Alegre and Iquitos, Peru we have evidence that brown-throated three-toed sloths are being poached from the wild to be used as photo props for tourist wildlife selfies. During selfies, each sloth is held on average by five people within just a few minutes, likely causing the sloths psychological stress.

Both tourists and guides are poorly handling these wild animals. Sloths are arboreal; in their natural environment branches would provide the support they need. Researchers have observed sloths frequently being held by their claws or arms, with no support at all. We have also observed their heads and limbs being manipulated into certain positions for the 'selfies'.

Sloths have been observed to display behaviours, including high levels of vigilance, likely indicating stress and fear. When not being handled by tourists, sloths have been observed to be left on the floor and/or tied up, leaving them very vulnerable.



Spectacled caimans

Legal status: CITES Appendix II

Both tourists and guides are poorly handling these wild animals. Researchers have witnessed Caiman crocodiles with their jaws held shut with elastic bands - the muscles used to open crocodilian jaws are much weaker than those used to snap them shut. Behind the scenes these animals are kept in small dark polystyrene boxes and broken refrigerators.

World Animal Protection has particular concerns that repeated improper handling is resulting in chronic stress, injuries and disease for these reptiles.

We are also concerned that these crocodilians do not have the space needed to move and behave normally. These cold-blooded reptiles need sunlight to properly regulate their body temperature; water deep enough to be fully submerged; appropriate substrate and multiple hiding locations.

Green anacondas

Legal status: None

Both tourists and guides are poorly handling these wild animals. Researchers have witnessed Anacondas being tightly gripped by their throats and noted dehydrated anacondas with dull and wrinkled skin marked with cuts and abrasions along their bodies and snouts. Behind the scenes these animals are kept in small dark barren wooden crates.

World Animal Protection has particular concerns that repeated improper handling is resulting in chronic stress, injuries and disease for these snakes.

We are also concerned that these snakes do not have the space needed to move and behave normally. These cold-blooded reptiles need sunlight to properly regulate their body temperature, water deep enough to be fully submerged; appropriate substrate; and multiple hiding locations.



Pink river dolphin

Legal status: CITES Appendix I

In Manaus, Brazil, we have evidence that free-ranging Pink river dolphins are being baited (fed) with fish to be used as photo props for tourist wildlife selfies. Researchers have witnessed Pink river dolphin surrounded by large groups of noisy tourists. Sores have been observed under the chin and flippers of some dolphins, these are areas where tour guides typically grab these animals to lift them out of the water so that tourists can touch them.

World Animal Protection is particularly concerned that this type of tourism activity has the potential to stimulate aggressive behaviour in the Pink river dolphins involved. Constant competition and proximity to other dolphins can lead to an increase in biting and tooth raking which can damage fins, flukes and blowholes.



While these animals are often portrayed as free-ranging wildlife, in reality they are living a life of cruelty and captivity.

Photo right: She may look like she's smiling, but in reality, she's suffering for tourist entertainment.

Photo bottom: Tourists can pay for harmful close encounters and selfies with the Amazon river dolphins (boto).

Baiting

Baiting wildlife is the practice of luring an animal to a spot with access to food. It can create an unnatural dependency on humans, and can have negative impacts on the animal's behaviour and their health.^{43, 44} All of this is in addition to the cruelty that exposing them to the lasting harmful impacts of the tourist activity into which they're being lured.

We observed four groups of free ranging Pink river dolphins that had been baited (repeatedly lured with food) to become conditioned to human contact. Tourists were able to feed, touch and swim with these animals via four floating structures. All dolphin interactions observed involved baiting so staff could position the animals out of the water for photo opportunities.

We also observed a troop of squirrel monkeys that were conditioned to endure constant human contact by the provision of bananas so tourists can feed, touch and have photo opportunities with these animals.



Wildlife selfies

As stated in the introduction, the use of wildlife as photo props almost always requires cruel treatment of the individual animals, and in the case of threatened and endangered wildlife, the potential for negative impact on the entire species.⁴⁵ Prior research already highlights how the use of wildlife as photo props can severely compromise the physiological and psychological wellbeing of wild animals throughout their lives as they are captured, restrained, and repeatedly brought out for show by WTA operators.⁴⁶

In Manaus, our field researchers found captive animals being made available for photo props during tours involving an area called the 'Januari Ecological Park.' Our behind the scenes look revealed the truth of how these animals are treated. We observed two captive Green anacondas in poor condition showing signs of dehydration and wounds. Handlers restrained these snakes by tightly gripping their necks while they were touched or held by tourists. The captive Spectacled caimans we observed were restrained with rubber bands around their jaws, and one was found kept in a small broken refrigerator when not being handled by tourists - left to suffer in shallow water, cut off from sunlight until the next tourist arrives. Sloths were seen tied to the trees from which they hang when not being handled.

In short, our field research here evidences existing concerns about the devastating impact of repeated handling, poor welfare conditions, continual exposure to flash photography and unnatural surroundings that could lead to stress, disease, injury and premature death for the animals caught up in this trade.

Given some of the biological characteristics that make them particularly vulnerable, the use of brown-throated three-toed sloths for this type of tourism is of particular concern, as detailed later in this paper. We know that even in the best rehabilitation centers, the survival and subsequent return to the wild for captive sloths is low.⁴⁷ The fact that we returned to Manaus several months later and do not see any of the same animals again, but a whole new set of sloths instead was alarming. Seeing this turn over of sloths several months later gives us cause for concern that the original set do not survive the ordeal.

Without a doubt, the most startling overarching observation made in Manaus has to be that while these animals are often portrayed as free-ranging wildlife, in reality they are living a life of cruelty and captivity: they are kept tied-up or in questionable containment, and out of sight, carefully concealed from the fee-paying tourist. The appearance is created that these animals are both temporarily and willingly available to be used for photo props, when this couldn't be further from the truth.



Is this legal?

The illegality of advertising and providing wildlife 'photo prop' tourism in Manaus is demonstrated by 'Operação Teia', an enforcement action taken during our study.⁴⁸

In November 2016, following complaints against tour operators and evidence obtained from social media platforms, intelligence agents from the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis (IBAMA) and police from the Environmental Battalion, issued six tourism companies fines totalling ≈ \$US 425,000 using Federal Law 9,605 and Federal Decree 6,514.^{49, 50}

As part of this operation, the authorities confiscated six captive wild animals from Januari Ecological Park, directly returning five of them to the wild (two Green anaconda, two Spectacled caiman and one Boa constrictor). A juvenile sloth was also forwarded to IBAMA's Centre for wild animals [(Centro de Triagem de Animais Silvestres (CETAS))] for rehabilitation (Acritica 2016, IBAMA 2017).⁵¹

Clearly the legal protection and enforcement is not enough to reverse the trend of wildlife selfies. A more comprehensive approach that includes education and initiatives aimed at local communities, operators and tourists is also required to ensure that ecotourism expansion in the Amazon is sustainable and cruelty-free.



Case study: Puerto Alegria, Peru

In contrast to Manaus, which is a relatively larger, more developed network of Wildlife Tourist Attraction's (WTA), Puerto Alegria in Peru has a more rudimentary and informal industry. Another key difference from Manaus is the relative lack of legal protections and enforcement in Peru, making the need for deception on how wild animals are sourced and kept in captivity less of a concern.

Tourists typically depart from Leticia, Colombia and cross the River Amazon to Puerto Alegria, the only way to access this community. Here, there are three locations where tourists have the opportunity to have close or direct physical contact with wild animals for photo opportunities.

To conduct our research here, we searched online for tour companies offering excursions operating out of Leticia that specifically advertised wildlife ecotourism. Our researchers then attempted to gain permission to access areas where wildlife was being held in captivity outside of public view.

We documented tourist encounters involving close or direct physical contact with captive wildlife, the geographic location and the number of species involved. We also recorded whether tour guides actively encouraged or discouraged the taking of photos.

At Hotel Irapay, we witnessed a juvenile Amazonian manatee being kept alone in a small shallow tank. Tourists paid US \$1.50 to view, pet and feed this animal. Operators claimed this animal was rescued from a fishing net after its mother was accidentally killed.

Two "social areas" provided a variety of captive wildlife for tourists to use as photo props. Tourists were expected to pay US \$15 for the experience, with operators passing a bucket to collect payment.

A total of 40 individual animals, representing 24 different species (7 birds, 12 mammals, 5 reptiles) were identified.



A total of 40 individual animals, representing 24 different species were offered as photo props.

Five of the species are considered to have “Threatened” status according to the IUCN and 75% are listed by CITES.

Photo left: Tourists in Puerto Alegria, Peru are given the opportunity to have close or direct physical contact with wild animals for photo opportunities.

Photo right: Local wildlife, like this anteater are taken from the wild and used for harmful wildlife selfies with tourists.

Five of the species are considered to have “Threatened” status according to the IUCN and 75% are listed by CITES.

We also discovered toucans forced to perch on hard floors - causing terrible abscesses and wounds on their feet, an Ocelot (a small wild jungle cat) held in a barren cage showing signs of stress and parasite infestation and a Giant Anteater being punched in the head by its owner when it refused to perform.

All of these animals were kept in dilapidated cages and makeshift environments in the homes of the operators.

The animal welfare concerns observed by our researchers included barren enclosures, poor diet, physical restraint and repeated handling by inexperienced tourists.

In conclusion, our research shows clearly and without a doubt that wildlife selfie tourism in Puerto Alegria involves the repeated long-term removal and suffering of individual animals from wild populations of dozens of different species.

Is this legal?

Potentially applicable laws relating to ecotourism are ambiguous depending on how the animal is sourced, how it is used, who is handling them and where.

But, despite these ambiguities, the activity we witnessed appears to be illegal. From a national perspective, none of the species we observe at Puerta Alegria (except the capybara) are currently listed in the Resolucion Administrativa No. 089-2017 Appendix I, which identifies species that can legally be used for commercial purposes.

The total or near total lack of enforcement certainly means that WTA's are able to amass even bigger menageries of captive animals. Subsequently they are the perpetrators of additional and a greater variety of animal welfare concerns than in Manaus. More research is required to determine if the lack of enforcement is due to a lack of resources, political will or legal loopholes.

Our welfare concerns



Anteater

Legal status: CITES Appendix II

At Puerta Alegria, Peru, we have evidence that Giant Anteaters are being paraded in front of large groups of tourists for people use as photo props for wildlife selfies – by up to 25 tourists in each boat load that arrives.

Both tourists and guides are poorly handling this wild animal. Researchers have witnessed this anteater being flipped onto its back, pulled by its tail and / or legs. In one instance they also observed the anteater being deliberately hit in the face by its owner.

World Animal Protection has particular concerns regarding the likely use of violent training methods to make this aggressive species safe enough for tourists to handle. We also have particular concerns regarding the provision of an improper diet – given that this species feeds exclusively on ants.



Yellow-rumped toucan

Legal status: CITES Appendix II

At Puerta Alegria, Peru, we have evidence that Yellow-rumped toucans are being poached from the wild and to be used as photo props for tourist wildlife selfies – by up to 25 tourists in each boat load that arrives.

Researchers have witnessed toucans with concerning symptoms such as feather loss and bumble foot – an inflammatory foot condition that results in sores and bacterial infections that can result in the death of a toucan. World Animal Protection has particular concerns about improper perches or surfaces in the bird's living environment. If a toucan stands for extended periods of time on a cement floor, a wooden surface or a perch of rough material, small cracks or worn-away areas form on their feet.

Chronic stress caused by repeated improper handling may be responsible for feather loss. These birds have large home ranges, a high level of sentience, and a complex social nature.

Ocelot

Legal status: CITES Appendix I

At Puerta Alegria, Peru, we have evidence that Ocelots are being poached from the wild and to be used as photo props for tourist wildlife selfies - by up to 25 tourists in each boat load that arrives.

Researchers have witnessed Ocelots kept on leashes and walked alongside tourists. Behind the scenes they are tethered by short chains and housed in small barren wooden crates - limiting their opportunities to move freely and express natural behaviour.

Ocelots have also been observed showing physical symptoms of animal welfare concern. For example, observed areas of fur loss are typically indication of parasite infestation, poor diet and or stress resulting from repeated improper contact with visiting tourists. It is important to note that despite their appearance Ocelots are not domesticated cats - despite their captivity - they remain wild animals.



Manatee

Legal status: CITES Appendix II

At Puerta Alegria, Peru, we have evidence that a manatee taken from wild and used by tourists as photo props for wildlife selfies - by up to 25 tourists in each boat load that arrives.

In the wild, Amazonian manatees are graceful swimmers that traverse coastal waters. Our researchers were told that the captive manatee was temporarily moved to a pond in the village while a new enclosure was being built. The manatee, named Nina Bonita, weighs 286 pounds and is fed milk by people in the village. The keeper told our researcher that the manatee was caught three years ago in a fishing net. The keeper claimed that they cannot set it free because it would be hunted within a few hours, as they are prized by locals for their meat.

A new enclosure was being built to allow tourists a 360-degree view of the manatee, so at the time this fieldwork took place, the manatee was temporarily placed in a pond in the village.





Spotlight on sloths

One very popular animal being used for wildlife selfies in the Amazon is the brown-throated three-toed sloth. In Manaus and Puerto Alegria combined over 14 individual sloths were offered for close or direct encounters.

Sloths are an iconic mammal of the Amazonian rainforest and are present in 13 countries in the region.⁴¹ Their recent prominence in film and television (Zootopia, Animal Planet's "Meet the Sloths", CNN Heroes) speaks to public interest in these intriguing creatures.

What most people don't know, however, is just how fragile sloths are.

Their extremely slow metabolism means they need to sleep between 15 and 18 hours a day. Their metabolism also means they need to move into sun or shade to maintain core body temperature, unlike most mammals. Their slow movement, in fact, is their evolutionary advantage; it helps them avoid detection by predators.⁵⁴

Many photo prop sloths are taken from their mothers as juveniles. Because the mothers are fiercely protective, their mother is killed in the process.⁵⁵

Being taken from their natural environment, combined with being handled by many tourists every day, likely causes stress, fear and anxiety, having a negative impact on their mental well-being.

All of this makes for disastrous consequences when they are taken captive to be used for tourist props.

While researching Wildlife Tourist Attraction's (WTA) in Manaus World Animal Protection also studied closely the impact of tourist selfies on the behaviour of the sloths that were being exploited by these operators.

What we observed

Each sloth was held on average by five people within just a few minutes. The animals being handled spent 51% of their time surveying their surroundings. Research on wild sloths, by contrast, found that they typically spend 10% of their time engaging in this behaviour. It is likely that this increased level of vigilance indicates fear and anxiety.⁵⁶

The sloths that were being handled only slept or rested for 2% of the time – as opposed to wild sloths who have been observed sleeping/resting as much as 56% of the time.

No doubt this is causing a great deal of physical and psychological distress for these animals.⁵⁷

Sloths were frequently held inappropriately, often having parts of their bodies manipulated and/or being held by their claws.

Exacerbating the problem is the fact that sloths' faces may appear to humans to be smiling, no matter what environment they are in. To the untrained eye these animals can appear happy, when in fact this is simply a result of their facial structure, and gives absolutely no indication whatsoever of their level of anxiety, stress and pain.

It is extremely likely that poor handling, combined with poor nutrition and housing, all in the name of selfies, is a death sentence for the sloths we observe, and others like them. We surmise this in part because we know that the mortality rate at rehabilitation and rescue facilities⁵⁸ (where sloths have been rescued from the tour operation facilities like the ones we visited in the Amazon, and where they receive the highest quality care) is nonetheless quite high compared to other species.

We estimate that sloths taken from the wild to be used for wildlife selfies may not survive longer than six months.

Photos left: The use of sloths as photo props for wildlife selfies has an extreme negative impact on their welfare.



Conclusion

Wildlife selfies that involve captive wild animals as photo props are an increasingly alarming source of animal welfare concern, as evidenced by our two case studies in the Amazon. The prevalence of these images on social media is almost certainly driving up the interest in this activity, and as a result masking the cruelty that lurks behind the scenes.

Compounding this disturbing trend is the reality that a significant number of species on offer at the Wildlife Tourist Attraction's (WTA) we researched are either threatened by extinction or are listed as needing international protection.

If the Amazon WTA's we researched are any indication, it's quite possible that the majority of animals being taken from the wild for wildlife selfies experience cruel conditions and even a premature death. The potential impact on species decline needs serious consideration.

Though this type of tourist activity appears to be illegal in the two locations we studied, there are legal grey areas and loopholes that need to be closed. Most of all, enforcement, particularly in Puerto Alegria, is seriously lacking.

Law aside – harmful wildlife selfies that involve irresponsible baiting and wild caught photo props are a welfare concern and as tourists we should not take part.

Because much of the cruelty takes place behind the scenes, we recommend you:



Sign our Wildlife Selfie Code

and commit to keeping wild animals in the wild



If you can hug, hold or have a selfie with a wild animal, the chances are that it's enduring ongoing cruelty. You may be approached to pay for your picture with a wild animal. Don't do it



Don't chase or capture wild animals for a selfie



Don't feed or lure wild animals with food or bait so they come closer to you for a photo



Ask your tour operator whether they allow direct contact with wild animals. If the answer is no, the chances are they are a responsible operator



Report any concerns you have about the welfare of wild animals in tourist attractions via online platforms such as TripAdvisor and your social media channels – this helps to make others aware of the cruelty so they also choose wildlife experiences that are good for the animals



We all have the power to change the future for these animals

By talking to our friends and families about this form of animal abuse, by sharing your concern when you see wildlife selfies online, and by donating to World Animal Protection's steadfast efforts to stand up for animals, you are part of making change happen.

Together we can ensure a better future for animals in the Amazon, and around the world, and make sure wildlife tourism globally becomes, and remains, cruelty-free.

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We are World Animal Protection.

We end the needless suffering of animals.

We influence decision makers to put animals on the global agenda.

We help the world see how important animals are to all of us.

We inspire people to change animals' lives for the better.

We move the world to protect animals.

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