

The **Truth** Behind Wild Animal 'Selfies'



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Introduction

Investigative work from Lady Freethinker shows how animals are suffering worldwide for "selfies."

Introduction

Following numerous investigations revealing the exploitation of captive elephants, tigers, orangutans, bears, and more, the evidence is clear: animal suffering for selfies is a global problem.

Footage and images from zoos in the Philippines, Thailand, India, and the United States show wild, exotic animals chained, whipped, yelled at, and rough handled at tourist photo ops, and commonly housed in small, barren enclosures.

This report will cover Lady Freethinker's investigations, including:

- **Tigers at Thai Zoos**
- **Roadside Zoos in the United States**
- **Tigers at Philippine Zoos**
- **Elephants in Thailand**
- **Orangutans at Thai Zoos**
- **Elephants in India**
- **Wild Animal Selfies on Social Media**

The report will also cover the prevalence of wildlife selfies on some of the most widely used social media platforms, including on Facebook, TikTok, X/Twitter, and Instagram.

Lady Freethinker hopes this report will inspire people everywhere to make humane travel plans and leave wild animal photo ops out of vacations.



Tigers at Thai Zoos

Tigers at Thai Zoos

A 2023 Lady Freethinker investigation into zoos in Thailand found big cats were tightly chained by their necks to concrete slabs, whipped repeatedly, and had lighter flames forced under their nostrils so the animals would pose in cruel, forced photo opportunities for visitors.

LFT's investigator visited 11 zoos in Thailand and uncovered widespread cruelty to big cats at each one, including distressed tigers pacing back and forth in barren, concrete enclosures with murky green water, and lions and ligers chained to the ground, cowering when handlers raised their fists.



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation

Lady Freethinker's investigation revealed that behind every photo op or selfie with a tiger is a lifetime of deprivation and misery. It's crucial that officials in Thailand ban forced photo ops with tigers, lions, and all big cats.



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation



Roadside Zoos in the United States

Roadside Zoos in the United States

A 2022 Lady Freethinker investigation into dozens of active, USDA-licensed exhibitors who feature animals — such as petting zoos, roadside zoos, and drive-thru safaris — revealed suffering, abuse, and death. Through Freedom of Information Act requests, we found a pattern severe federal violations at facilities claiming to prioritize animal welfare.

One of the facilities investigated by LFT was cited for a critical violation in 2020 after a 9-week-old otter was found dead following at least a dozen encounters with customers. The company remains in business.

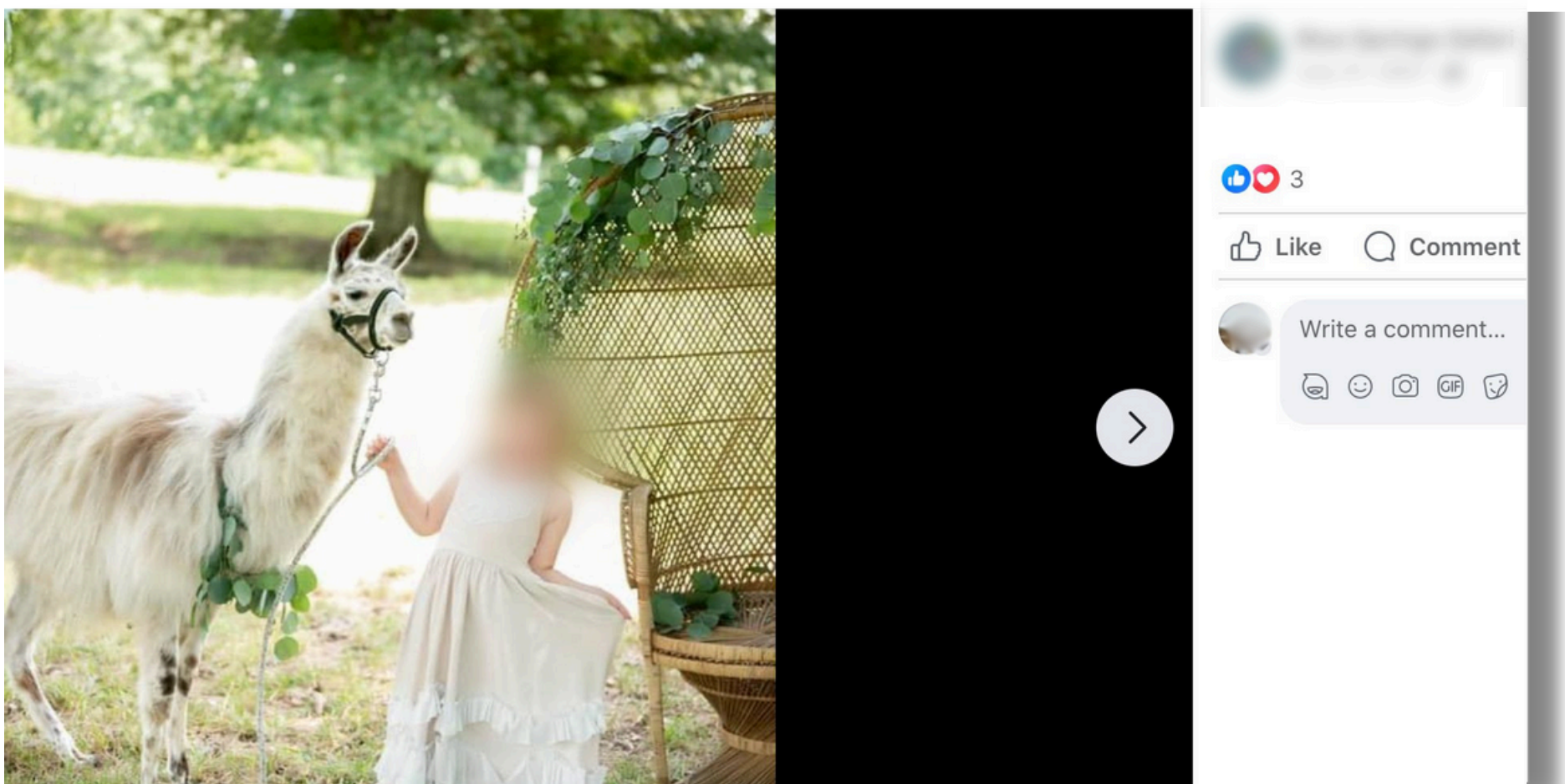


Image taken from Facebook

Another facility investigated says on its website that the facility is “committed to the welfare of abused and neglected bears by rescuing them from various harmful circumstances,” but the facility allows exploitative and dangerous photos with bear cubs.

A news report from KNAU quotes the owner in describing how he trains bear cubs not to bite. He compares cubs to puppies and say “to discipline a young puppy you slap him.”



Image via Instagram



Image via Instagram

Some violations of facilities investigated by Lady Freethinker include:

- A facility where capybaras had hair loss, underweight cows had “prominent ribs and pelvic bones,” rabbits were in feces-saturated enclosures at temperatures between 98 and 105 degrees Fahrenheit, and animals were left without adequate food or water, according to citations from federal inspectors.**
- A facility where bears, cougars, lions, and a jaguar experienced 31 violative, hands-on interactions as documented by federal inspectors from June 2020 to January 2022.**
- A facility cited by federal inspectors for allowing dangerous, unsupervised public contact with animals.**



Tigers at Philippine Zoos

Tigers at Philippine Zoos

In 2021, Lady Freethinker investigated five popular zoos in the Philippines and found sick and starving animals used for photo opportunities and selfies.

At one site, six tourists were able to pose at one time with a chained tiger for between 240 and 540 Philippine pesos (the equivalent of about \$5 to \$10 USD) — an “opportunity” that included hands-on contact and feeding the big cat white fluid in a baby bottle, as evidenced in the photo documentation.

One zoo visited by Lady Freethinker investigators also offered photo opportunities with a snake, who at the time of our investigator’s visit was kept in a filthy and barren cage.



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation

Upon reviewing the footage, Patricia Tricorache, Illegal Wildlife Trade Expert stated:

“Zoos such as these need to be shut down. From looking at the videos and images, I see no way they can improve the way they keep the animals or the activities they encourage.

Hand feeding an adult tiger milk is not appropriate or healthy, but even worse is having the tiger pose with people for a picture — especially kids! The closeness of both species should not happen.

Encouraging such interactions with children can make kids lose awareness of the fact that these animals are wild.”



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation

A close-up photograph of an elephant's head and trunk, looking towards the camera. The elephant's skin is grey and wrinkled. Its trunk is thick and textured. The background shows a lush green forest with tall trees. A teal banner with white text is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

Elephants in Thailand

Elephants in Thailand

A 2023 Lady Freethinker investigation into elephant “attractions” in Thailand revealed widespread cruelty, including elephants being chained in their own waste, stabbed with nails, forced to stand on top of one another for “entertainment,” and pose in photos.



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation

Elephants are sensitive and social animals who live in complex social groups and love their families. They’ve been known to console each other in times of stress by “hugging” with their trunks, they mourn the loss of their loved ones by caressing the bones of their late ancestors, and they have exceptional memories. It’s unacceptable to subject them to painful or unnatural conditions for photos, “entertainment,” or any other reason.



Orangutans at Thai Zoos

Orangutans at Thai Zoos

Lady Freethinker documented zoos across Thailand in 2023, and found orangutans biting the bars of their enclosures, eating trash, and otherwise suffering while forced to perform in demeaning shows like “orangutan boxing” or pose with tourists for selfies.



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation

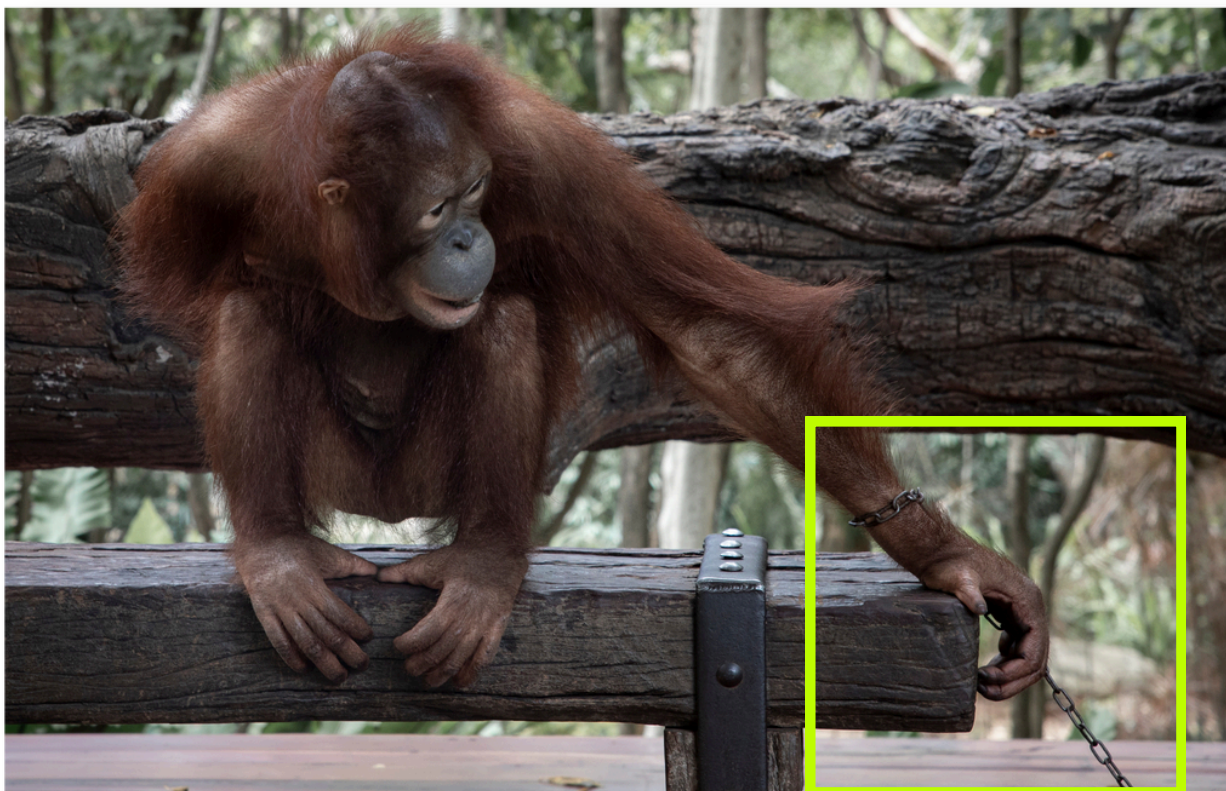


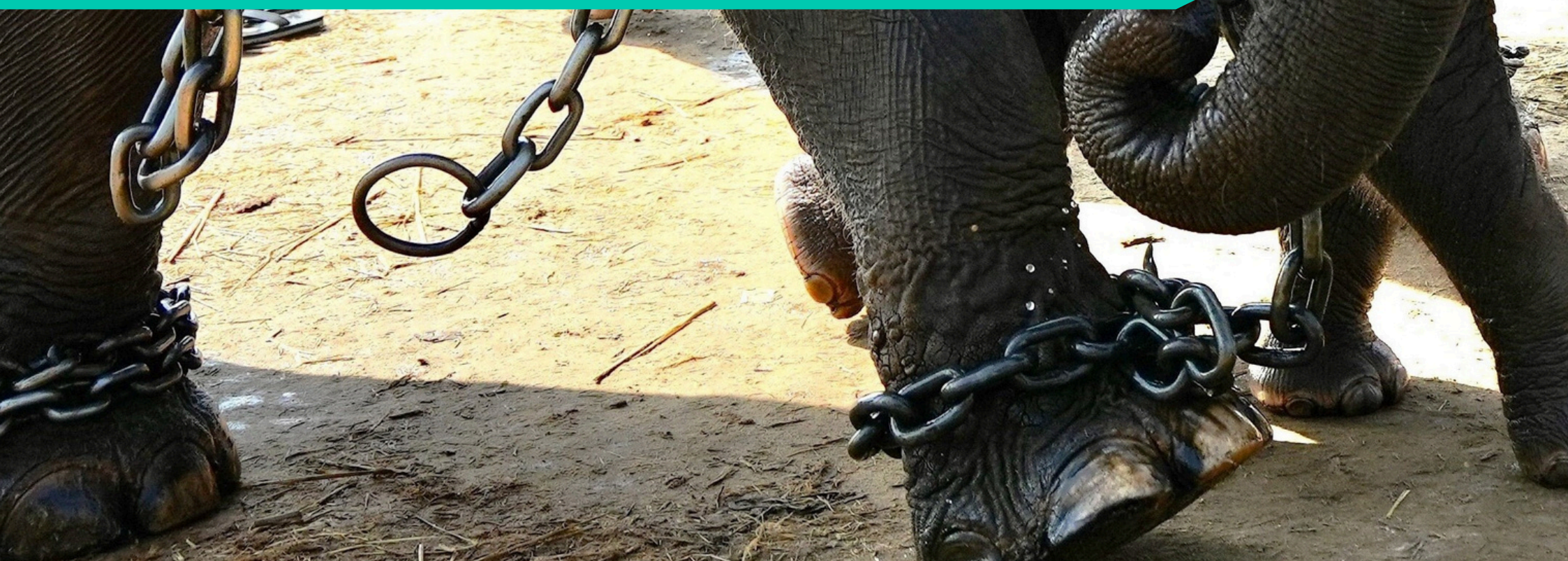
Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation

Upon reviewing the footage, Nedim C. Buyukmihci, V.M.D., Co-founder & Veterinary Advisor, Action for Primates stated:

"In summary, the situation for the orangutans in all the facilities was appalling and morally unconscionable. Orangutans cannot be humanely kept in captivity. Their physical and other needs, their opportunities for living a normal life, simply cannot be provided artificially. There is no doubt that these orangutans in Thailand are suffering physically and psychologically from being kept under such unnatural and poor conditions, and being forced to 'perform' for humans. This is a sad indictment of the inhumanity of people towards these critically endangered great apes."



Elephants in India



Elephants in India

An investigation by Lady Freethinker in 2023 revealed widespread abuse to elephants at tourist spots in India, including elephants with heavy chains around their necks and ankles, elephants forced to haul tourists on their backs for “entertainment” or pose with them in photos, and elephants with abscesses – or painful collections of pus.

At one facility investigated by LFT, Phansoli Elephant Camp, our investigator witnessed chained elephants being used as photo props and saw a handler smack an elephant in the face with the handle of a bullhook. One elephant displayed signs of zoochosis – or abnormal behavior associated with extreme psychological distress exhibited by animals in captivity – by bouncing her head up and down for nearly 30 minutes and constantly moving her back leg.



Image via Lady Freethinker Investigation

Upon reviewing LFT's footage, Duncan McNair, CEO of Save The Asian Elephants stated:

"The swellings beneath the skin are consistent with abscesses I have seen many times on trained elephants, resulting from puncture wounds or untreated abrasions becoming infected. Pink scarring around the ankle is commonly associated with past chain injuries, especially in adult male elephants struggling to free themselves when in musth. Injuries on hips, elbows and other parts of the body where there is little muscle mass between the skin and the skeletal protrusions are often the result of abrasion against the sides of a lorry when elephants are transported on bumpy roads, or against the sides of a 'crush' or kraal when being subjected to painful procedures. Left untreated, they too can become infected and result in abscesses or tropical ulcers which, when they eventually heal, leave pink scar tissue."

Wild Animal Selfies on Social Media



Wild Animal Selfies on Social Media

Selfies with wild animals are spreading across popular social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, X/Twitter, and TikTok.

Videos and photos of people posing with orangutans, bears, tigers, and other animals contribute to misinformation about the welfare of animals in captivity. This content also contributes to the demand for wild animal selfies – and the global trafficking and suffering of wild animals.

One video with over 300,000 views posted to TikTok shows a woman posing with an orangutan for photos. The woman holds the orangutan on her back, holds the animal’s hand, and wraps her arm around his neck.

In a photo posted to Instagram, a group of people surround a baby bear for a photo op, and a photo posted on Facebook with nearly 3,000 likes shows a photo of a man “kissing” a captive dolphin.

These are just a few examples that researchers with Lady Freethinker discovered online that are still active as of publication of this report. You can see more below:

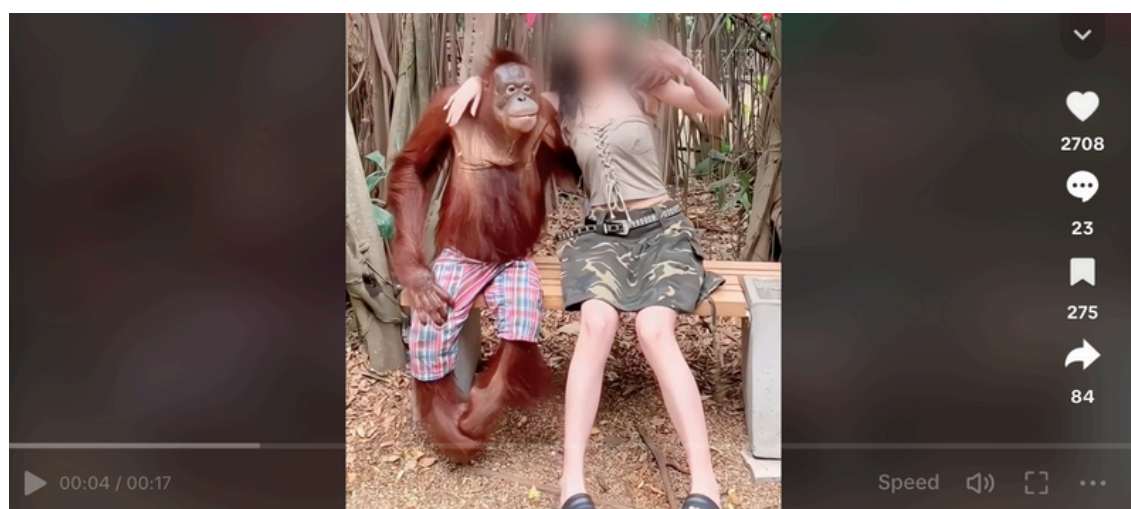


Image via TikTok



Image via Instagram

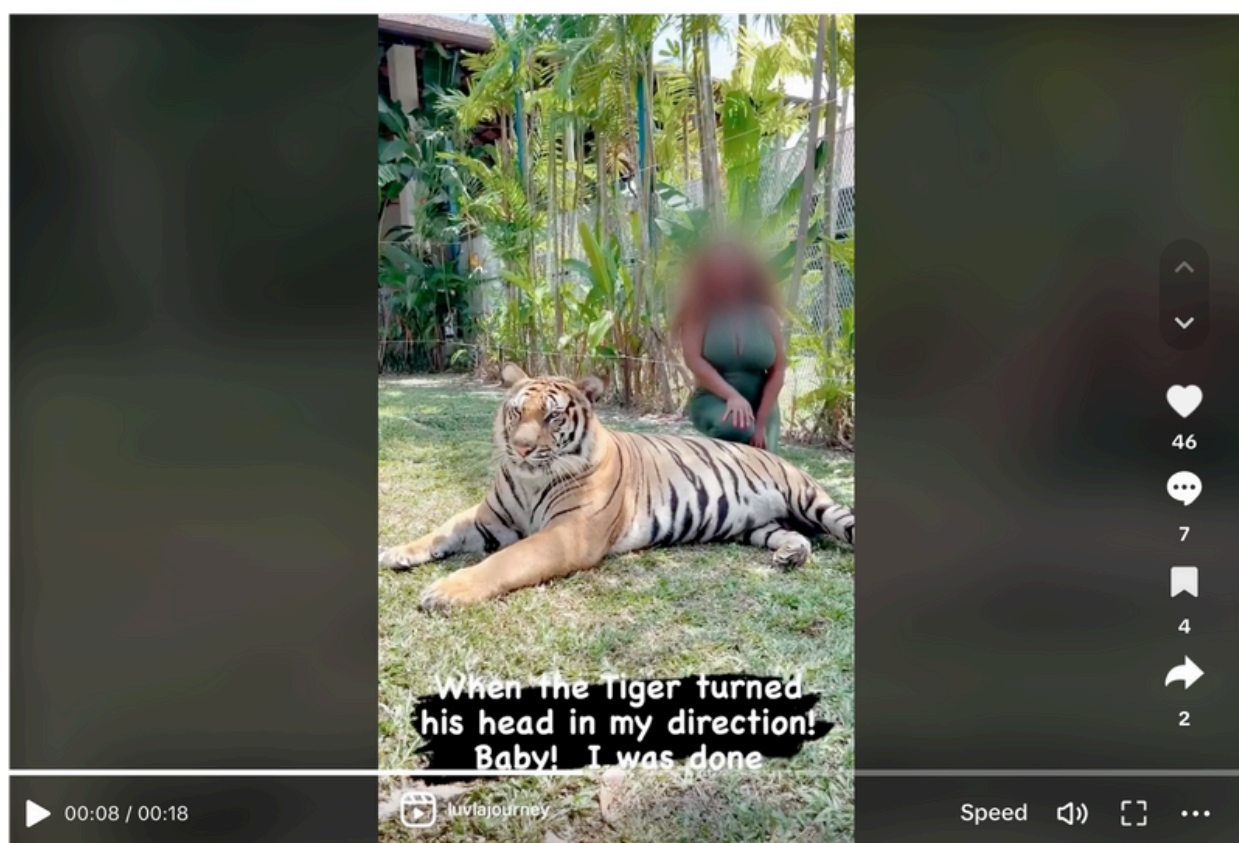


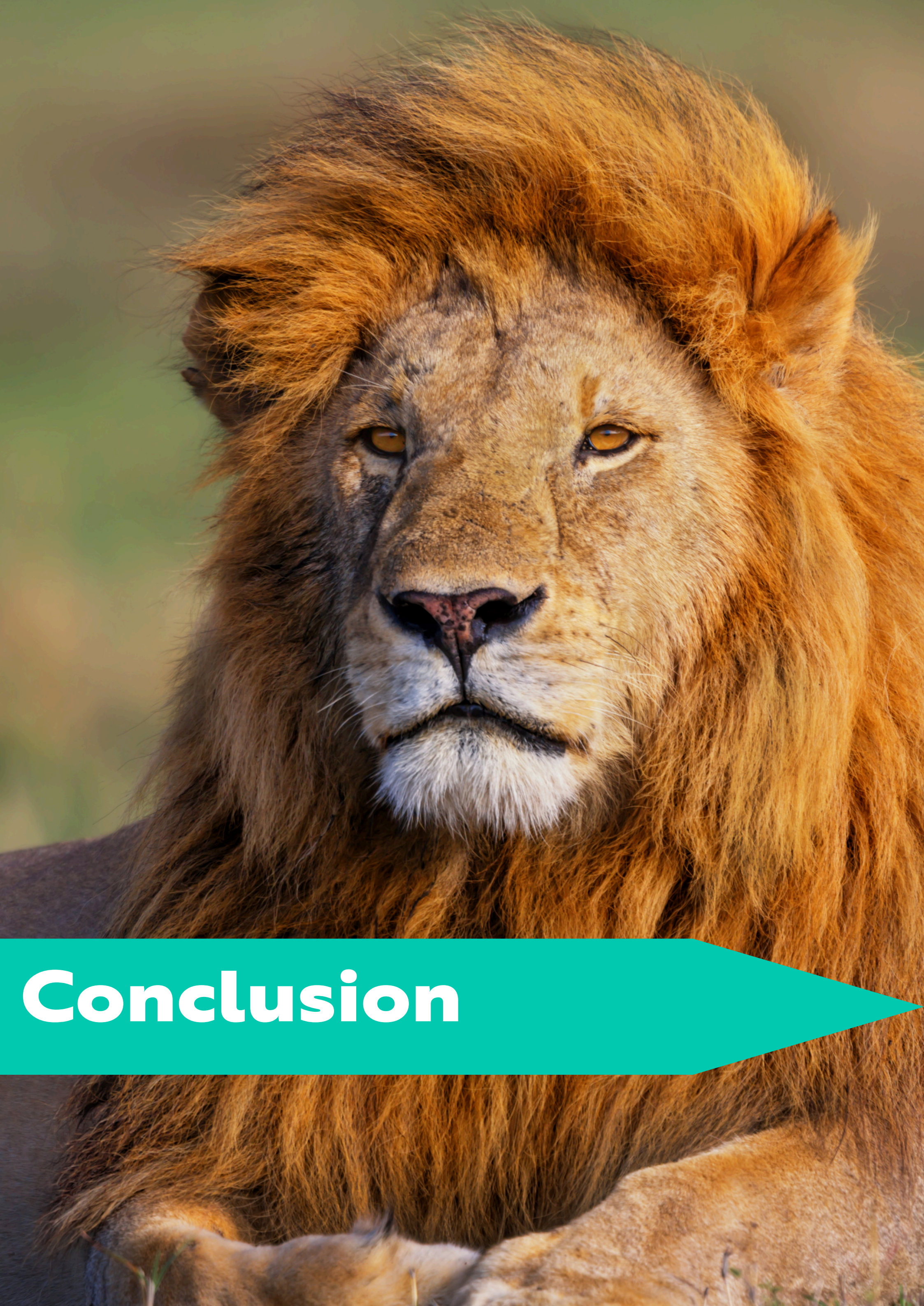
Image via TikTok



Image via Facebook



Image via Facebook



Conclusion

Conclusion

Facilities that sell forced photo ops with wild animals may claim that they are helping conservation efforts but experts agree these claims are untrue.

Animals used for selfies, including those who are endangered, are either bred for captivity or stolen from their wild homes (1). Infant animals are typically taken from their mothers before they would naturally be weaned so zoos and other facilities can easily "train" them and sell "cute" picture. These experiences are stressful and painful for the animals (2).

Animals are also often kept in cruel conditions, as highlighted in Lady Freethinker's investigations. They are often confined to small, barren, or filthy cages or enclosures, chained, beaten into submission, and more.

Participating in forced photo ops with wild animals contributes to the demand for more animals to suffer cruelty and captivity. It is crucial that we take a stand against this cruelty. Never take selfies with wild animals and urge others to do the same.

If you haven't already, please visit [LadyFreethinker.org](https://ladyfreethinker.org) to sign our petitions to help animals exploited for cruel selfies and photo ops.

References

**1 - World Animal Protection. (2021.) 10 Things to Know Before You Take a Wildlife Selfie. Available at:
<https://www.worldanimalprotection.org.au/news/10-things-you-should-know-you-take-wildlife-selfie>**

**2 - CBC News. (2017.) Your Wildlife Selfies are Hurting the Animals, Study Finds. Available at:
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/wildlife-selfies-good-and-bad-1.4340944>**