

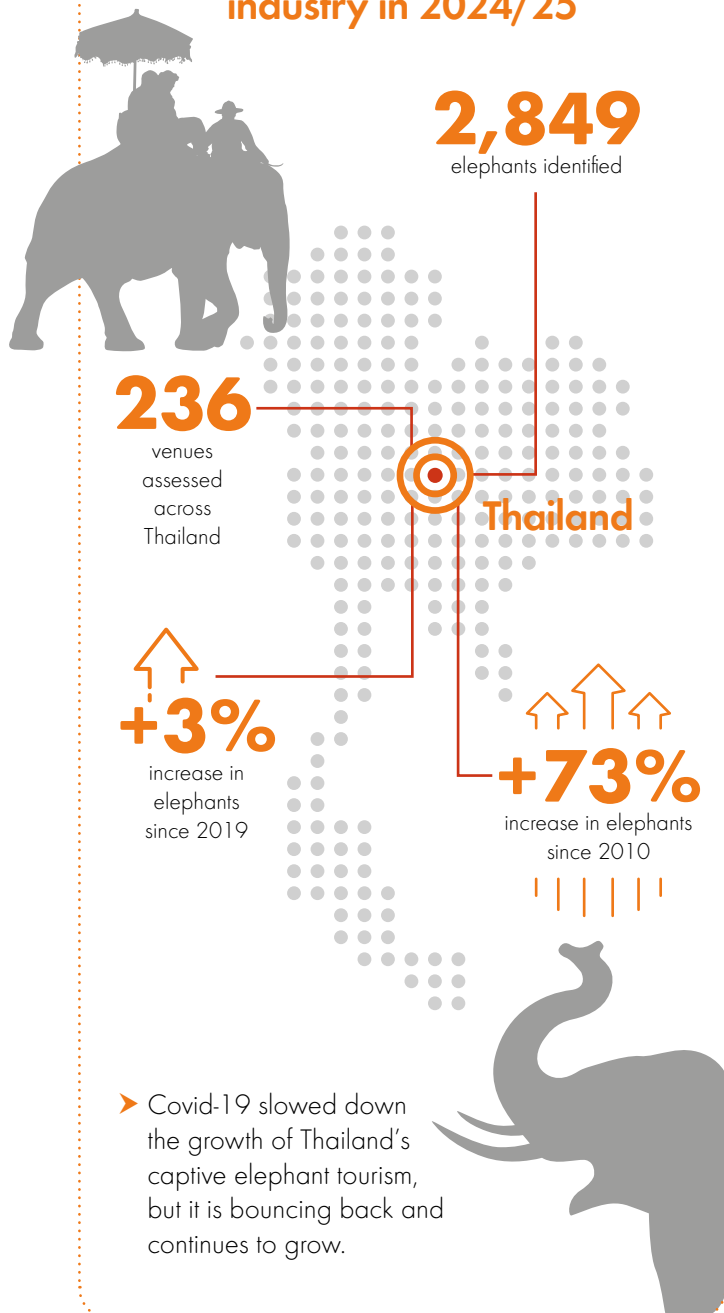


# Bred to Entertain

## - A new assessment capturing 15 years of Thailand's elephant tourism industry

This report presents the most comprehensive assessment to date of Thailand's captive elephant tourism industry. Building on 15 years of monitoring, our research offers unique insights into the scale, practices and welfare conditions of elephants in the country's tourism sector. Through field research conducted between February 2024 and January 2025, we identified and assessed 236 venues holding 2,849 elephants across Thailand. This represents an increase of 73% on the number of elephants surveyed in 2010, but only a marginal increase of 3% compared to our last survey in 2019.

### Thailand's captive elephant industry in 2024/25



### Key findings

#### Scale of the industry

Despite disruption by the Covid-19 pandemic, Thailand's captive elephant tourism industry has bounced back. With 2,849 elephants, the number of elephants kept in tourism venues is slightly higher than our 2019 survey revealed. The breeding of young elephants continues, sadly ensuring a steady pipeline of animals for tourism.

#### Living conditions for elephants

2 out of 3 elephants are kept in poor living conditions at elephant tourism venues. We found that more than half of all elephants were kept on short chains during the day with little or no opportunity for natural social interaction. Only a quarter could interact freely with peers while not chained. Spending long periods of time in concrete standing grounds and noisy environments remains a frequent concern for the many elephants in tourism venues. Daily hygiene was often controlled by humans, rather than allowing elephants autonomous access to bathing or dusting. Meanwhile, faeces and urine often accumulated around the elephant shelters. Nutrition provided to the animals was often unvaried, which contributes to health issues.

#### Types of tourism activities

Elephant riding and entertainment shows have declined significantly in their prevalence in Thailand, compared to our first survey in 2010. But the numbers remain sadly high: more than 1,200 elephants (42% of all elephants) are still used for rides, and 1 in 5 are housed at venues that offer shows. Our research found that venues offering elephant rides and shows were most likely to offer poor living conditions. Experiences offering close-contact activities such as washing (42% of elephants), hand feeding (92%) and 'care taking' (11%) have surged, marketed as ethical alternatives. Venues with these experiences are often promoted as 'sanctuaries', 'rescue centres' or 'refuges', which contributes to tourists being misled.



• • • In reality, these practices also require punishment-based training, regular restraint and unnatural visitor interactions. They are therefore not the humane, sustainable alternative to more 'exploitative' elephant attractions that they are often marketed as. Observation-only experiences remain niche (7% of elephants in our survey), although these venues consistently achieved the highest welfare scores in our study's assessment.

### Role of the travel industry

The travel industry is the critical link between travellers and elephant venues. Every experience offered and every venue promoted directly influences whether elephants are exploited or protected. The global travel industry has shown mixed progress in adopting policies that avoid exploitative experiences. Encouragingly, more than 200 companies have committed to wildlife-friendly policies, ceasing to sell exploitative elephant and other wild animal experiences. Yet many others continue to sell elephant rides or promote washing and hand feeding interactions under misleading marketing, enabling harmful practices to persist. Online booking platforms in particular play a critical role in sustaining demand for exploitative attractions.

The travel industry's influence extends beyond the experiences it sells. By providing travellers with clear information on what responsible elephant tourism looks like, companies can empower them to make better choices – even when exploring the country independently. This is particularly important because elephant experiences are easy to find and book on their own.

### Policy and regulatory context

Thailand's legal framework regarding captive elephants remains outdated and fragmented. Wild elephants are strictly protected, while captive elephants are still classified as livestock under laws dating back to 1939. This dual system creates loopholes, permits unchecked breeding, and leaves captive elephants with minimal welfare safeguards. The Prevention of Cruelty and Provision of Animal Welfare Act of 2014 provides broad protection but lacks enforceable, species-specific standards. Enforcement is weak, certification schemes are voluntary and ineffective, and systemic reform efforts have stalled despite strong domestic and international support.

### Relevance to animal welfare

Evidence from our research confirms that captive elephant tourism in Thailand remains of fundamental concern in terms of animal welfare. Asian elephants – as endangered highly sentient, social and complex animals – cannot have their physical and psychological needs met in captivity, particularly within high-intensity tourism contexts.



Elephant used for tourist rides in Thailand

Practices such as chaining, social isolation, forced tourism interactions and cruel training methods undermine welfare, cause trauma and pose risks to human safety and public health.

While some improvements are evident, such as the decline in rides and shows, the overall welfare landscape for captive elephants has not meaningfully changed in the 15 years since our first survey. Worse is that unacceptable activities marketed as 'humane' simply mask ongoing exploitation, giving travellers a false sense of ethical engagement – especially if these are promoted and normalised by travel companies.



## Recommendations

To end systemic suffering and move towards genuine reform of the sector, World Animal Protection calls for:

### Travel industry action

- Travel companies to strengthen corporate wildlife policies to exclude all forms of close-contact elephant interaction tourism, including washing, hand feeding and care-taking experiences.
- Promote and prioritise genuine observation-only venues and responsibly and humanely conducted wild encounters.
- Ensure that staff and suppliers understand the corporate policies, implement them reliably, and, in case of non-compliance, for the travel company to take corrective action.
- Audit supply chains rigorously and avoid reliance on misleading certification schemes.
- Use communication channels, including social media, to educate travellers and promote responsible, wildlife-friendly tourism.

### Legislative reform in Thailand

- Enact a strong elephant-specific legal framework that brings captive elephant populations under robust protection from commercial exploitation.
- End commercial breeding of captive elephants and phase out exploitative tourist activities that rely on direct tourist interactions or involve inhumane practices such as shows or rides.
- Establish enforceable, species-specific welfare standards recognising elephants' biological needs and their status as endangered species.
- Create transparent, publicly accessible registration and provenance systems for all captive elephants in Thailand.

### Support local efforts to transition away from exploitative practices

- Provide financial, technical and marketing support to help conventional elephant venues transition to observation-only models that exercise best-practice welfare standards. This should come from the travel industry and Thai government.
- During a gradual industry phase out and where required, ensure that mahouts (the traditional caretakers of captive elephants), elephant owners and communities dependent on elephant tourism are prepared for adjusting their livelihoods without sustaining inhumane practices for elephants.
- Preserve the culture and traditions around human-elephant relationships in Thailand without sustaining inhumane practices for elephants.

### Key takeaways

Thailand's captive elephant tourism industry remains a source of widespread animal suffering, enabled by outdated legislation and sustained by gaps in responsibility by travel companies. Elephants in Thailand continue to be bred primarily as commercial profit making assets for the tourism industry. Incremental improvements are encouraging but remain insufficient. True progress requires corporate accountability, decisive legal reform, and a collective shift towards wildlife-friendly tourism models that avoid exploitative practices and ultimately lead to protecting wild elephants in their natural habitat. This is both a moral imperative and a strategic opportunity – protecting elephants from exploitation safeguards Thailand's global reputation, supports sustainable tourism, and aligns with the growing demand from travellers for ethical, responsible experiences.

