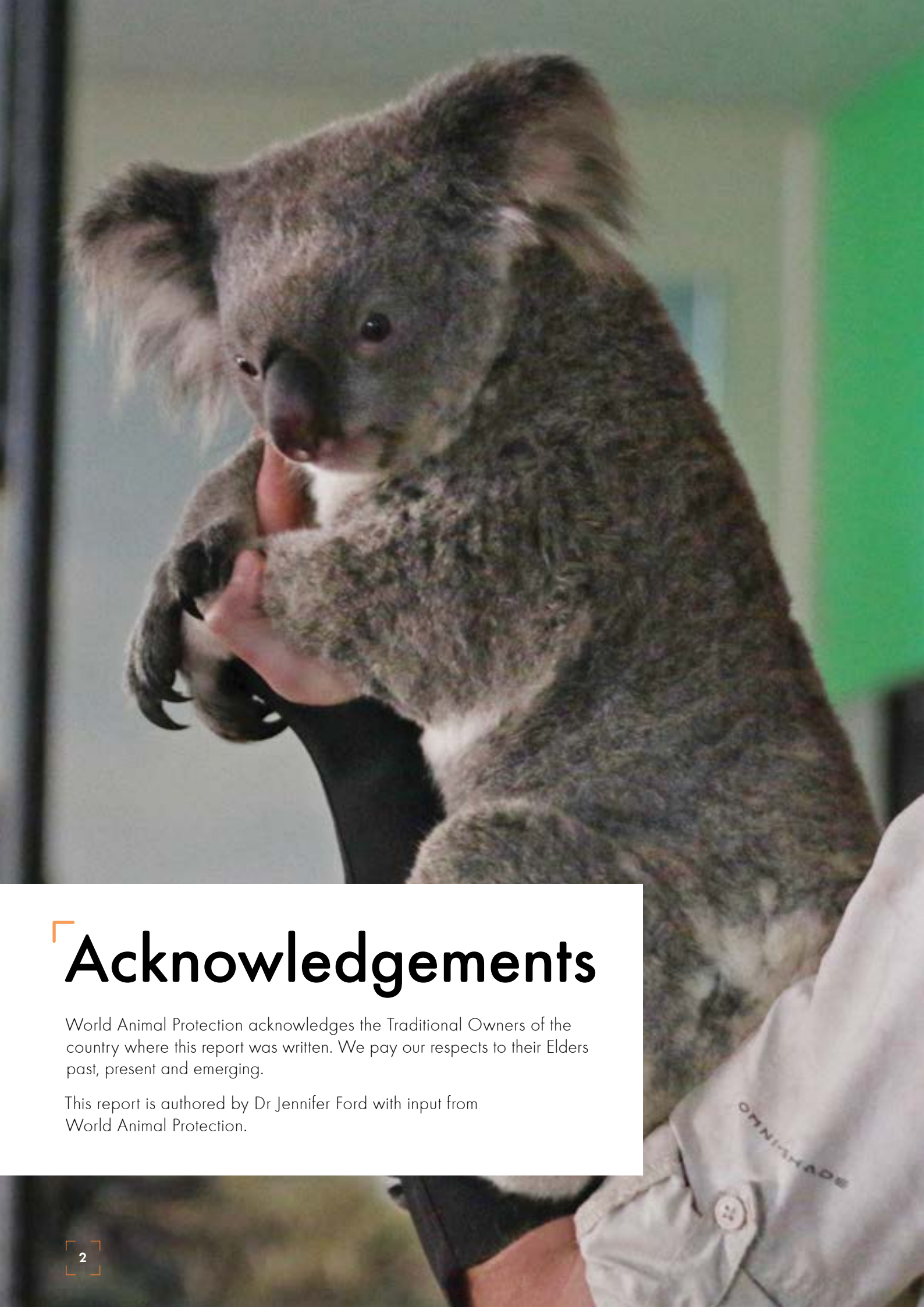


A close-up photograph of a koala being held by human hands. The koala has grey fur and a white chest. The hands are visible, holding the koala's body and limbs. The background is dark and out of focus.

TOO CLOSE
FOR COMFORT

WORLD
ANIMAL
PROTECTION



Acknowledgements

World Animal Protection acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the country where this report was written. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

This report is authored by Dr Jennifer Ford with input from World Animal Protection.



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Preface

World Animal Protection campaigns to end the use of captive wild animals in entertainment venues. There is no justification for keeping wild animals in captivity other than legitimate conservation programs or for rehabilitation and release, and no way that a captive environment can allow a wild animal to fully carry out their natural behaviours and instincts. Venues that keep, and breed, wild animals merely for human enjoyment are profiting from their suffering.

This report documents the extent to which iconic Australian wildlife venues are exploiting wild animals by forcing them to engage in behaviours and experiences that are unnatural and distressing. From koalas being held by humans for photos through to tigers and dolphins forced to perform unnatural tricks, the practices documented in this report are of concern, and must stop.

Community attitudes to keeping wild animals in captivity are changing and will continue to shift. Just as elephant riding is increasingly seen as unacceptable, many of the practices documented in this report will soon also be viewed as unacceptable. This threatens not only the social license of these venues, but their long-term financial viability. The recommendations made in this report are therefore not only of benefit to the wild animals held at these entertainment venues, but the viability of the venues themselves.

In the long term, the Australian wildlife entertainment industry must transition to a model which prioritises seeing wild animals in the wild – where they belong.



Introduction

The use of wildlife for entertainment is a global phenomenon. In 2018, wildlife tourism directly contributed US\$170 billion to global gross domestic product, with the Asia-Pacific forming the largest regional market¹. With COVID-19 restrictions lifting and tourism starting to resume, it is a reasonable prediction that wildlife entertainment tourism will recover to previous levels and overseas tourists will again arrive in Australia seeking out our unique wildlife.

Humans have a fascination with wildlife, especially those species that are viewed in an anthropomorphic way, regarded as intelligent, playful or cute. Consequently, opportunities to get close to captive wildlife, and shows displaying performing wild animals, are popular worldwide. Unfortunately, most people who seek out captive wildlife experiences are unaware of the cruelty involved in keeping these animals captive and, frequently, the interactions they are forced to endure.

Wild animals are sentient beings that experience positive feelings and emotions such as contentment and joy, as well as negative ones such as pain, fear, boredom and frustration. There is evidence that species often found in captivity in Australia, such as dolphins, have high intelligence comparable to that of a human toddler². Other frequently captive species, such as big cats, have complex behaviours and social structures. These traits are part of the reason these species are not suited for a life in captivity, as their captive environment cannot replicate the complexity and richness of the wild home in which they evolved. Captive wild animals are not able to fully engage in natural behaviours, impacting both their physical and psychological welfare.

In addition to the negative welfare impacts of captivity, regular interactions with human visitors can also be detrimental for the species involved, given they are wild animals who have not evolved to be comfortable in the presence of people. Typically, venues offer these wildlife attractions daily, sometimes multiple times per day. Unlike in the wild, where these animals would avoid or flee such a situation, in many captive venues they have no choice about being involved in these attractions, or

distancing themselves from unfamiliar visitors, sights and noises³. In the case of popular animals like the koala, the situation is made worse by the fact that they are solitary, docile animals who in the wild would sleep most of the day.

Close encounters

Close encounters where visitors have direct physical interactions with wild animals are a major component of the offerings of wildlife venues. A close encounter can involve holding, patting, swimming with, or walking with a captive wild animal. A 2019 desktop review of 1,241 zoos and aquaria that are members of The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA), found that 929 (75%) offered Animal Visitor Interactions (AVIs) with wildlife⁴. As not all venues with captive wildlife are WAZA members, the total number of venues offering AVIs globally is likely much higher. Holding and patting captive wildlife was the most common activity advertised (43% of facilities), with mammals most commonly used (53%)⁵.

Venues often justify their close encounters by stating they play a role in connecting people with animals, which encourages respect for animals and a desire to protect them. The late Steve Irwin (of Australia Zoo) once said, *“when people touch an animal, the animal touches their heart. And instantly, we’ve won them over to the conservation of that species”*⁶. However, this claim does not hold up to scrutiny. There is little evidence to show that close encounters or direct interactions have any net positive impact on conservation or education objectives. The evidence indicates that the opposite may be true. A review of wildlife tourism attractions globally found that the majority had negative animal welfare and conservation impacts⁷, including captive interaction.

The popularity of direct interactions with wildlife has been further enhanced by 'selfies' and sharing of photos on social media. During close encounters, tourists typically want a photo taken with a wild animal for the primary purpose of sharing it online, and this is strongly encouraged by venues. Specific wildlife photo sessions are offered where visitors can get photos taken by a dedicated photographer whilst holding, patting or standing next to an animal.

However, 'selfies' with animals can have negative consequences, not just for the individual animals involved but also for the conservation of the species. The public perception of wild animals is influenced by sharing of images on social media and can increase the number of people wanting to take part in these low-welfare encounters with wildlife. Images shared online often have little or no context or explanations accompanying them. Therefore, any suffering imposed on the animal to allow the interactions to take place are not evident to the viewer. Studies have suggested sharing of images online can also lead to an increased desire to have the species as a pet and create an assumption that the species in the photo is not threatened, which can undermine conservation messages⁸. Moreover, for the wild animal involved, being touched or even in close proximity to humans with limited control over whether or not to participate is likely to be distressing.

The link to poor animal welfare has led some social media sites, such as Instagram, to have policies that alert users to posts associated with animal abuse, including posing with and holding wild animals. If users search for such content, they receive a pop-up message that reads "You are searching for a hashtag that may be associated with posts that encourage harmful behaviour to animals or the environment"⁹. Selfies, direct interactions with wildlife and animals performing also encourage anthropomorphism, leading to undesirable outcomes. Animals are viewed as tame, which increases people's desire to hold and pat them, and encourages misperceptions about their natural behaviour¹⁰. For example, the use of dolphins in performances can lead to misleading views of the animals including misinterpreting behaviour.

Behaviour portrayed as playful during shows can be displays of aggression or disturbance¹¹. The use of language in advertising close encounters including 'cuddle', 'pat', and 'walk with', only reinforces these damaging anthropomorphic views of the animals.

Normalising cuddling and patting wildlife, and selfies with wild animals, also legitimises close encounters in countries where they are linked to extremely poor welfare, poaching in the wild and illegal wildlife trading¹². Tourists may think that a tiger show in Thailand is acceptable, as these shows are offered in Australia – not understanding the vast differences in how the animals are sourced, training practices and living conditions between the two venues.

Emerging higher-welfare standards

In response to the mounting evidence of the animal welfare impacts of close encounters, several important stakeholders, including higher welfare public zoos and travel companies, are moving away from encounters and attractions that cause stress to wild animals. These include the holding of animals and the performance of unnatural behaviours, particularly in shows. They are also reforming how they utilise photography involving animals so that representations of them are respectful and focussed on the animal and his or her intrinsic worth, instead of using them as photo props.

The photography guidelines of zoos like Taronga Conservation Society Australia and Zoos Victoria outline criteria such as the avoidance of unnecessary touching of animals, forcible manipulation of animals for photographs, and the need for animals to have the opportunity to move away from the situation and not be involved. The guidelines also encourage 'giving thought' to photos that don't seem to have a purpose beyond human enjoyment.

Travel companies are also developing higher-welfare policies, both in response to advocacy campaigns and shifting public attitudes. The policies and their rationale clearly communicate an understanding of the need to avoid inappropriate interactions

and using animals as photo props.

Expedia – one of the world’s largest travel companies – recently updated its animal welfare policy to state: “We will not allow intentional physical contact with wild and exotic animals, which include but are not limited to dolphins, whales, cetaceans, elephants, big cats, bears, reptiles, and primates.” Expedia even prohibits “Activities that promote utilization of an animal as a prop (e.g. for selfies)”¹³.

The policy for TripAdvisor and its Viator brand states that they “... will not sell tickets to, or generate booking revenue from, specific experiences where tourists come into physical contact with captive wild animals unless certain exceptional circumstances apply”¹⁴.

Similarly, Booking.com’s policy is to prohibit direct interactions with wildlife and animal performances, shows, and circuses involving wild animals including big cats, elephants and primates, and aquariums with captive cetaceans¹⁵.

One of Flight Centre’s “Six ways to do Ethical Travel” is putting animal welfare first by a ‘look but don’t touch’ approach to wildlife¹⁶. The company also asks tourists to avoid attractions involving ‘performance’, riding or close contact with wild animals¹⁷.

The Zoo and Aquarium Association of Australasia (ZAA) accredits zoos and aquariums across Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Singapore. ZAA has guidelines for direct animal encounters, setting out expectations for all accredited venues. While ZAA does not oppose interactions per se, they do set criteria. An important one is that “If at any time during the interaction, a trained staff member sees that an animal’s behaviour indicates it does not want to participate, the animal must be taken out of the interaction”¹⁸. Regarding animal-visitor interactions, they “must foster respect for the species by presenting the individual in a respectful context as well as supporting the animal’s welfare” and “should not compel an animal to perform unnatural behaviours”¹⁹.

Image: A sign for koala photos at a wildlife entertainment venue in Queensland.



Spotlight on Australia

In strong contrast to best practice approaches, wild animals in Australian wildlife entertainment venues continue to be used as photo props in photography sessions, are forced to endure close encounters and handling by humans, and compelled to perform unnatural behaviours in shows.

A 2022 desktop review of zoos and aquariums in Australia (including theme parks and wildlife parks and excluding sanctuaries where visitation is a minor focus) found that 95% of 82 venues offered close encounters (Table 1). Shows in which animals are required to perform – involving dolphins, seals/sea lions, tigers and crocodiles – are less common than close encounters, but are still advertised at 17 venues, with 10 of those in Queensland.

Table 1: Overview of wildlife attractions nationally (number of venues)

State/ Territory	Total venues	Close encounters	Shows*	Koalas					Use of 'Up close & personal'
				Holding	Patting	Total (holding & patting)	In exhibit (no touching)	Koalas with no encounters	
Queensland	27	25	10	13	16 (11 both)	18	0	4	20
New South Wales	19	19	4	#	7	7	2	1	16
Victoria	12	12	0	#	6	6	2	1	7
South Australia	8	8	0	3	6 (2 both)	7	0	0	4
Western Australia	7	7	1	2	1	3	0	2	5
Tasmania	4	4	0	#	0	0	0	1	3
Northern Territory	4	2	2	#	0	0	0	0	4
Australia Capital Territory	1	1	0	#	0	0	0	1	1
Totals	82	78	17	18	36 (13)	41	4	10	60

* Shows and performances where animals are required to perform, including crocodile jumping/feeding that is not for routine husbandry purposes. Does not include keeper talks where animals are used for show and tell.

Not legal in this state/territory

A range of native and exotic species are involved in close encounters and shows in Australia. Species include koalas, dolphins, pinnipeds, big cats (tigers and cheetahs), crocodiles, other reptiles, and penguins.

The predominant wildlife encounter offered across the country is direct interactions involving holding or 'patting' koalas, through paid photography sessions or privately booked encounters. A total of 41 venues in Australia (representing 75% of those that house koalas) offer close encounters and photo opportunities with koalas involving either holding or patting the animals (Table 1). Another four venues allow visitors to enter exhibits to



Image: A booked close encounter at Dreamworld in Queensland.

take photos next to the koalas. Photo opportunities are also available for a range of other native and exotic species, including marine mammals and shows with dolphins or seals and sea lions performing.

Crocodiles feature in shows and in booked feeding encounters, mainly in their native jurisdictions of Queensland and the Northern Territory. The tourist fascination with saltwater crocodiles has led to performances on offer where crocodiles are baited to demonstrate predatory behaviour. These shows and performances also incorporate the thrill of handlers getting close to the animals and putting themselves in 'danger'. Six operating crocodile farms, as well as Australia Zoo, offer crocodiles as a tourist attraction.

Big cats are also an attraction, with tigers in shows at Dreamworld and Australia Zoo. Additionally, you can walk with tigers at Australia Zoo and engage in a cheetah walk at the National Zoo and Aquarium in the ACT.

Attracting visitors to the venues through the offer of close encounters is a key marketing message. In contrast to the 'look but don't touch' messaging of higher-welfare venues and travel companies, the use of words such as 'get up close and personal' was found on 73% of venue websites to promote these experiences. The National Zoo and Aquarium uses 'get up close and very personal'²⁰, Featherdale

Sydney Wildlife Park in New South Wales (NSW) advertised in two local papers to 'Get Closer at Featherdale'²¹, Sydney Zoo calls to 'Get even closer' to our animals²² and 'Down Under Up Close' is used by the Koala Park Sanctuary²³. Walkabout Wildlife Park takes a more anthropomorphic approach by advertising 10 minute 'up close and personal' experiences as 'Speed Dates'²⁴. Oakvale Wildlife Park uses the words 'See, Touch, Feel' on the homepage, with rotating images of visitors patting and hand feeding animals²⁵. In all cases, visitors are enticed to come to a venue and engage in a direct physical encounter which may be uncomfortable for the wild animals.

Close encounters with wildlife are clearly an important element of the business model of many venues. There are also the high prices charged for these encounters at the venues in addition to the entrance fees. A 45-minute close encounter with dolphins at Sea World costs AU\$649 for a couple and AU\$769 for a family, with many offerings daily. An experience of walking tigers at Australia Zoo costs AU\$399 for two people, and a cheetah experience at the National Zoo is AU\$495 per person for 45 minutes. Koala cuddling photos cost between AU\$24 to AU\$29.95 depending on the venue, with queues of people lining up each day for this souvenir²⁶.

Koala cuddles

Of all the direct interaction opportunities available in Australia, koala handling is probably the most well known and widely advertised. The iconic species is an integral component of Australia's identity and used to promote Australia²⁷. Even official government websites targeting tourists promote koala cuddling. The Tourism Australia website hosts a page called "Where to cuddle a koala" with the words "Cuddling a koala is a wildlife experience like no other"²⁸. When asked by the Sun Herald in April 2022 "What is the one wildlife experience everyone should have?" the high-profile Robert Irwin was clear that in Australia it was "cuddling a koala"²⁹.

Given the extensive offering of koala interactions and the central role they play in attracting tourists, both domestic and international, it is worth reviewing the evidence that establishes how distressing direct human interactions can be for this animal.

Koalas, even if born in captivity, are wild animals with wild instincts and behaviours. They are solitary animals in the wild, yet in many captive venues they are kept in enclosures in inappropriately close proximity to one another³⁰. Like other wildlife used for close encounters, they are not adapted to having close contact with humans. The naturally docile nature of koalas means that they can appear quite calm as they sit in someone's arms or on a prop, but this does not mean that they are not experiencing stress.

The few studies conducted have shown negative impacts on koala welfare by the presence of visitors alone, even without any physical contact from holding or patting. In a study at Taronga Zoo, the presence of visitors in the koala enclosure, who were there to take photos with the animals, increased stress levels of the koalas as measured

through physiological indicators in fecal samples³¹. Behavioural changes by koalas when visitors are present have also been observed. A study on captive koala reactions to the presence of visitors used measures of visitor-vigilant behaviours. These included avoidance (climbing up or away on visitor approach), alertness to visitors (relaxing body with pricked ears, staring at visitors), alarmed and startled (head raised, eyes wide, ears pricked, looking at stimulus). The time that koalas spent being vigilant increased with the number of visitors nearby, noise levels, and how close visitors were to the koalas³². The koalas spent around 25% of their 'awake and active' time vigilant to visitors.

These stress responses exhibited by koalas in the presence of visitors use energy that the animals are not naturally adapted to cope with³³. As koalas have evolved on a diet of low-energy eucalyptus leaves, which are difficult to digest, their natural physiology and behaviour are adapted to minimising energy expenditure by sleeping 20 hours per day. The impact the daily encounters have on koala welfare through disrupting their rest and sleep periods is of concern³⁴.

There has been some recognition of the negative welfare impacts of strangers holding koalas in Australia. The state of New South Wales announced a ban back in 1995 and it is now illegal in all states with wild koala populations except Queensland and South Australia. Queensland is the state where koala cuddling is by far the most available and has been called "Australia's koala-cuddling capital"³⁵. The state accounts for 18 of the 41 venues nationally offering koala encounters. These 18 venues with close encounters (holding and patting) represent 82% of venues with koalas in Queensland, with 13 venues offering koala holding opportunities (Table 1).

The cruel reality of koala handling is obscured by using words like 'cuddling', a term used by many venues which creates the impression of a pet, young child or cuddly toy. It is inherently deceptive as 'cuddling' implies mutual agreement and consent in the interaction, and the idea that both parties are enjoying it. The reality is that the koalas are being forced into the interaction and held against their will.



Image: A koala being handed to a visitor for a photo at a wildlife venue in Queensland, Australia.

In addition to welfare concerns for captive koalas, research has revealed that Queensland's wild koala population has plummeted by an estimated 50% since 2001 and the NSW koala population up to 62% over the same period. In February 2022 koalas were listed as an endangered species in Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory³⁶. While venues offering the experience of holding koalas like to claim that interactions foster respect and concern for endangered species, they are clearly failing to do so, undermining a key rationale for the practice.

The norm of koala 'cuddling' and the extent to which this practice appears disconnected from animal welfare and conservation considerations was exemplified in January 2022. News reports about the announcement of federal government funding for koala conservation were accompanied by images of the Australian Prime Minister holding a koala³⁷.



Assessment of venues

A field assessment of some of the most well known Australian wildlife venues was conducted by World Animal Protection. This assessment compared venues' close encounter and wild animal photography offerings against available evidence on welfare impacts, the policies of higher welfare zoos, travel companies and ZAA guidelines.

Queensland was chosen as the focal state as it is one of the few jurisdictions where koala cuddling is both legal and common, and because the state is home to several iconic and popular venues. The state has 27 identified wildlife entertainment venues (33% of the national total), 25 of these offering close encounters, and 20 with 'up close and personal' messaging on their websites. Queensland also tops the country for number of shows with wild animals performing.

Three major venues were reviewed over three visits in January, April and May 2022. These were Australia Zoo, Sea World and Dreamworld. These venues were chosen as they are the most prominent and well known Queensland entertainment venues with captive wildlife.



It's Time for Your Animal Encounter

Visit us at Australia Zoo to see over 1,200 animals including those found in our African Savannah, South-East Asia exhibit and Bindi's Island – as well as the original part of the zoo with all your Aussie favourites!



Image: A section from the Australia Zoo website.

Australia Zoo

Australia Zoo was made famous by Steve Irwin and his daring direct interactions with wildlife, particularly crocodiles, played out in the famous 'Wildlife Warrior Show'. There is much to admire about the zoo's conservation messaging and opposition to wildlife trading, particularly relating to the harvesting of crocodile eggs for use in farms that produce luxury items like bags and belts. The Australian Zoo Wildlife Hospital saves thousands of injured wild animals every year, and the Irwin family also has three reserves in Queensland that provide thousands of hectares of refuge for Australian wildlife. The sincerity of the Irwin family's commitment to wildlife is not in question.

Regardless, Australia Zoo is the epitome of the close encounters model in Queensland, as its selling point is an extensive offering of photo opportunities and close encounters with wild animals. The website is an extensive montage of Irwin family members holding various wild animals and offering to "... get you up close and personal with our incredible wildlife"³⁸. The selling point is the opportunity to directly engage with animals, including holding and patting.

The website's advertisement for walking with tigers, for example, has three main photo images – Robert Irwin patting a tiger, a disembodied hand patting a tiger and then two paying customers patting a tiger while he or she is being led on a walk by keepers. While the messaging on the website has a conservation component, the primary drawcard is clearly the direct interaction offered, and, as noted above, evidence suggests that the images themselves can directly undermine conservation messaging.

Close encounters

On any one day at Australia Zoo there are 20 different wildlife attractions on offer, including two shows. Their 18 close encounters with wildlife and shows are promoted through extensive advertising throughout the zoo itself, messages in shows and talks, the website and the visitor brochure. From the moment visitors drive through the gates of the zoo, and throughout their zoo visit, they are bombarded by images of close encounters and selfies with wild animals. These images involve Irwin family members, zoo staff and visitors, and advertisements enticing visitors to take part in photo opportunities and close encounters. Visitors are encouraged to get photos with animals through paid photos in the 'Wildlife Photo Studio', paid close encounters, the Wandering Wildlife Team with "photographers and keepers" holding koalas, lizards and snakes, and walk-through exhibits where visitors can pat and take photos with koalas and kangaroos.



Image: A visitor at Australia Zoo holds a koala for a photo.



Image: A wombat being walked on a leash at Australia Zoo.

On one visit, there were even wombats being walked around the venues on a leash, an activity that blurs the line between a wild animal and domesticated pet. The Australia Zoo official visitor brochure also aims to create the impression that the animals get enjoyment from the interactions with claims such as meerkats "...just love meeting our visitors"; the tortoises "absolutely love a pat"; and the echidna may "sit on your lap"³⁹.

No specific animal welfare policy was found for Australia Zoo but the Terms & Conditions for all booked encounters at the zoo include the claim that "All interactions will be instigated by the animals." This choice was not evident in the close

encounters observed by World Animal Protection, such as the keeper talk where a baby alligator was seen walking away from the crowd several times before being picked up and brought back closer to the viewing public, nor in the koala handling opportunities.

Direct interactions with koalas take place at a specially designed area, in which a number of koalas live in fake trees on a hard surface under an awning. On one visit, a keeper told World Animal Protection that this is their "home" and that they live in the fake trees permanently. While the zoo is open, the koalas are in close proximity to, and available to be viewed by, visitors and are made available for touching and patting on a rotation basis. A mobile staircase is moved into position in front of the 'tree' whose inhabitant is next on the list. The koalas are never out of view, nor can they distance themselves from the visitor. On a busy day they can potentially have visitor presence and noise from all sides for the full eight hours of opening, a challenging situation for an animal that in the wild sleeps for up to 20 hours a day.

During a visit by World Animal Protection in May, a visitor was observed ascending the staircase to engage with a koala. The animal exhibited clear avoidance behaviour in response, moving further up the fake tree and at one point seeming to swat away the visitor's hand as she touched her.



Image: Open koala zone for close encounters.

In response, and to the keeper's credit, he terminated the interaction, saying "she's getting a bit annoyed I think", then adding that usually she is "really really good" but something might have happened before he arrived for his shift "like some kids being too rough with her". This is a disturbing insight into the treatment these docile animals might sometimes endure. Later, the keeper observed that this koala was usually their "most tolerant one", by implication acknowledging that their involvement was far from voluntary or enjoyable. On a separate visit in January, a koala keeper stated that "it takes a lot of training, and some (koalas) don't like being held by strangers, so are used for carrying around the zoo grounds by keepers for patting". While this evidence is anecdotal, it is worrying.

Australia Zoo also has approximately 12 koalas that are rotated for the cuddling photo sessions⁴⁰. Three 30-minute sessions are offered each day. A board near the studio advertises the sessions with a call to "Cuddle a koala". On the day this offering was reviewed at Australia Zoo, which was not a busy day, a koala was passed into the arms of 20 different people in 30 minutes, with some family groups consisting of four to six people. The photo studio was loud with constant noise from people and surrounding activities.

└ The Australia Zoo official visitor brochure also aims to create the impression that the animals get enjoyment from the interactions with claims such as meerkats "...just love meeting our visitors"; the tortoises "absolutely love a pat"; and the echidna may "sit on your lap"³⁹.





Image: Koala encounter at Dreamworld.

Dreamworld

Dreamworld is a theme park, owned by Ardent Leisure. A proportion of its revenues funds the Dreamworld Wildlife Foundation, which helps finance a variety of conservation and education projects in Australia and globally for species such as tigers, koalas, and bilbies. While World Animal Protection has not conducted an in-depth analysis of this work, we acknowledge the intent of it and the efforts by Dreamworld to create a sense of wonder and respect for wild animals in many of the signs and educational materials at the venue.

Their website invites visitors to get up close and personal with captive wild animals as a means of saving their wild cousins from extinction. Dreamworld is best known for its tigers. The main viewing area for them is Tiger Island, which consists of the enclosure designed so visitors can get “mere centimetres” from the tigers and “so close you could feel the breath of a tiger”⁴¹. It also includes the main exhibit with a stadium for the tiger presentations.

Unnatural behaviours

The Dreamworld statement on animal welfare, presentations and conservation says that: “Dreamworld only undertakes animal presentations that reflect the animal’s natural behaviours and provide for the dignity of the animal. No animals are ever forced to participate in an interaction”⁴². When World Animal Protection visited the venue in May 2022, we did not see tigers being “forced” to

perform, but they clearly had no choice other than to go through a highly choreographed show in which they engaged in behaviours that required training. As to reflecting natural behaviours, in the wild tigers are most active at dawn, dusk or during the night, not during the day when these performances occurred. It is also questionable how a tiger drinking milk from a bottle held by a human trainer can be said to reflect natural behaviours. The tigers displayed tricks for milk treats as a reward for jumping from one platform to another, climbing a tall post, standing on hind legs, being hand-fed milk, swimming and diving, and opening their mouths for health checks.



Image: A tiger drinks milk during the Tiger Presentation at Dreamworld.

The tigers are trained to pose by the edge of the pool at the end of the show, and visitors are encouraged to come down from the stadium to take photos, and selfies with tigers behind them.

The portrayal of the tigers was very much like that of pets and circus animals – not as the apex predators they are. This was further reinforced by the opportunity to feed a tiger raw meat through a fence using tongs. When asked what the meat was, a staff member said it was a variety of things but included ex-racehorses.

Close encounters

Dreamworld also has koalas. Their photo studio, which is open for 4.5 hours each day, lets visitors cuddle a koala brought out from a nearby enclosure. Staff were seen placing koalas on paying visitors and helping to manipulate their arms around visitors' necks for photos.

During a visit by World Animal Protection, a keeper talk involved a koala being made available for patting by the crowd. Evidence that the koalas were not willing participants was obvious. One koala did not want to let go of the trunk he was on when the keeper attempted to take him for patting during a keeper talk. The keeper persisted in peeling his claws off the trunk, and when held, the koala turned



Image: A tiger in the pool in front of a crowd at the Tiger Presentation at Dreamworld.

away from visitors and presented his back. Although the animal clearly showed avoidance behaviour due to not wanting to be involved in the encounters, he continued to be used with the keeper noting that the behaviour was 'something it typically does'.



Image: Koala enclosure at Dreamworld near the photo booth.



Image: A booked dolphin encounter at Sea World.

Sea World

Sea World is run by Village Roadshow Theme Parks. It is one of the world's largest captive dolphin venues and offers numerous opportunities to interact with them. Sea World also undertakes rescue work for injured marine animals, and rehabilitation where possible. World Animal Protection acknowledges this work and its value, although it is no justification for the continued breeding of dolphins for a lifetime in captivity.

Dolphins are the star attraction at Sea World. In addition to the photo opportunities and the flagship Affinity Dolphin Show, there are five additional booked close encounters on offer with them. According to signage at the park, dolphins are held in a series of filtered lagoon systems throughout the venue, with nine being visible to the public. While the pools vary in size and depth, they are all tiny compared to a dolphin's wild environment, and are chlorinated. The pools vary greatly in size and depth. Some appeared less than one metre at the deepest point and not large enough for significant swimming or diving, but provided good visibility of the animals for human visitors. There was no enrichment of any kind seen in the pools themselves on the day of review. The dolphins can live for 50 years in these pools.

Unnatural behaviours

The Affinity Dolphin Show was highly choreographed, and clearly the dolphins involved had been through rigorous training and repetition. They had no choice but to perform in these shows which included a large range of unnatural behaviours. Although wild dolphins do leap from the water, the great heights of their jumping seen in the show is the result of training and not typical in the wild. They also performed vertical spinning in the water, flips in the air, and pushing trainers through the water, none of which are natural behaviours and designed only for the enjoyment of human visitors.



Image: Coordinated spinning during the Affinity Dolphin Show.



Image: Direct contact with a dolphin during the Affinity Dolphin Show.

Close encounters

In addition to the twice daily Affinity Dolphin Show there are five different booked dolphin close encounters, each of which are offered from one to three times daily, depending on demand. Observations of these encounters showed up to four separate groups in the one pool, going through a set routine. The dolphins performed tricks in response to commands by both the handler and the visitor, including 'clapping' and flicking water.

Patting was encouraged, with a photographer close by to capture the images. The inappropriateness of some of the photo opportunities is disturbing. The 'dolphin pat' photos on the website show a dolphin, who in their natural environment would live in deep waters and never naturally come onto land, with the majority of their body out of the water to enable a pat and photo.

It was unclear how many shows and encounters each individual dolphin is involved in each day. However, it was observed that dolphins were routinely moved between pools depending on the activities at the time. The intensity of the show and the regularity and popularity of the close encounters indicates an intensive life of human contact for these wild animals. There are also occasional nighttime shows in which the dolphins

perform, such as the 'Affinity by Night' show to mark Halloween. In addition, a significant and regular noise for all animals is the Sea World helicopter flying directly over the venue. This considerable noise was observed to temporarily halt a keeper using a microphone during a polar bear talk until the helicopter had passed.

The nature of the dolphin encounters and shows at Sea World stands in stark contrast to international developments in relation to dolphin captivity and captive breeding, and progress in other Australian jurisdictions. Most Australian dolphinariums were closed decades ago following the 1985 Federal Senate Inquiry that recommended a phase out of captive dolphin venues. This left New South Wales and Queensland as the only states in which dolphinariums operate. In 2021 the New South Wales Government introduced a regulation to the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (NSW) that banned dolphin breeding and the importation of dolphins to the state, meaning the three dolphins at Dolphin Marine Conservation Park in Coffs Harbour will be the last to be held in captivity in NSW⁴³.

Internationally, the tide is turning against dolphin captivity. Canada has banned the keeping of dolphins in captivity for entertainment and in France it will be illegal to capture wild dolphins or breed captive dolphins⁴⁴.

Travel companies are also distancing themselves from captive dolphin venues. Expedia recently updated its animal welfare policies to "prohibit activities that feature interactions with or performances by dolphins, whales, and other cetaceans"⁴⁵. TripAdvisor's animal welfare policy says the company "will not sell tickets to, or directly generate revenue from, attractions or experiences where captive cetaceans are placed on public display" with the exception of seaside sanctuaries⁴⁶. Booking.com's policy also prohibits visits to aquariums with captive whales and dolphins⁴⁷.





Image: A tiger is fed milk during the Tiger Presentation at Dreamworld.

Reviewing wildlife attractions

Reviewing shows and close encounters at these three venues highlighted significant welfare concerns. Wild animals were not accorded dignity and respect, instead being used as photo props and forced to endure close proximity and handling by humans, as well as perform in shows.

In many cases, animals exhibited clear signs of distress and the desire to not engage, yet had no opportunity to withdraw from the interaction. Many of the behaviours they were trained to perform in shows were either not natural or an exaggerated

version of natural behaviour with no educational purpose. Instead, the behaviours were designed only to entertain human visitors and generate profits for the venues' owners. A range of activities and offerings were inconsistent with available evidence about the welfare implications of direct encounters, and the consequences of certain types of photography. They were also inconsistent with the spirit and intent of the guidelines of accreditation agencies and travel companies, and the best practice standards of higher welfare zoos.



Conclusion

The majority of the Australian wildlife tourism industry continues to rely on an outdated business model that exploits captive wild animals for profit, forcing them to engage in interactions with human visitors and shows that are often stressful.

Many venues make genuine attempts to include conservation messaging and even fund conservation programmes, and most aim to educate their visitors about the animals they are seeing. Yet these worthy initiatives are compromised and undermined by the direct interaction and photography opportunities on offer, and the advertising for them, all of which encourage a distorted view of wild animals and their nature. Even in a captive environment, wild animals should not be forced to directly engage with humans unless it is for a genuine husbandry reason. They would certainly never do so in their natural environment.

The removal of these offerings and reform of photography guidelines would see the venues identified in this report continue to attract paying visitors, while contributing to education and conservation outcomes. Ultimately, though, holding wild animals in captivity for no other purpose than private profit must be phased out. There are many opportunities in Australia to see wild animals in the wild – where they belong. The Australian tourism industry must evolve to a model where this is the norm.

Recommendations

1. The Queensland Government should match other jurisdictions and ban handling of koalas by humans, with exceptions for keepers engaged in welfare-related activities or veterinarians.
2. All venues holding wild animals in captivity should discontinue any offerings that involve holding wild animals or having humans in proximity to them in a way that may cause the animals distress.
3. The breeding of wild animals at private venues for entertainment purposes should be banned by state governments. Only breeding for a genuine conservation purpose should be allowed.
4. The use of captive wild animals for performances should be banned by state governments.
5. All venues holding wild animals must adopt best practice photography guidelines, such as those of Taronga Zoo and Zoos Victoria, that treat the animals with dignity and respect, not use them as photo props.



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