



Visitors swim with a dolphin at Sea World Gold Coast in Australia. TripAdvisor will stop selling tickets for activities that include physical contact with captive wild animals and endangered species. *Flying Cloud / Flickr*

# Stops Booking Activities With Captive Animals and Endangered Species

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## SKIFT TAKE

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We expect there will be a lot of appeals – and that tourists who really want to swim with dolphins will just book that experience in another way. But TripAdvisor is trying to address a big issue, evolving issue in a measured, thoughtful way.

– Hannah Sampson

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After six months of soul searching – and consulting conservation, animal welfare, academic, trade, and tourism groups – TripAdvisor announced late Tuesday it will no longer allow users to book activities that involve contact with endangered species or captive wild animals.

The decision comes as public sentiment, and public companies' actions, evolve on the subject of animals and entertainment. Following years of pressure that reached a peak with CNN-produced *Blafish*, Seaworld said earlier this year that it would end its orca breeding program and theatrical shows. And Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey stopped using elephants in circus performances this spring as jurisdictions put more regulations on animal treatment into place.

“TripAdvisor’s new booking policy and education effort is designed as a means to do our part in helping improve the health and safety standards of animals, especially in markets with limited regulatory protections,” Steve Kaufer, CEO and co-founder of TripAdvisor, Inc., said in a statement. “At the same time, we want to celebrate those destinations and attractions that are leaders in caring for animals and those in the tourism industry who help further the cause of animal welfare, conservation and the preservation of endangered species.”

The new policy, which goes into effect at the beginning of 2017, means TripAdvisor (<https://www.tripadvisor.com>) and its tour subsidiary Viator (<https://www.viator.com>) will not sell tickets for tourist draws such as swim-with-dolphin programs, elephant rides, or pet-the-tiger photo opportunities.

Customers will still be able to review such activities, but the travel site will provide links to research and information from a variety of groups who have signed on as partners in the effort. Thousands of attractions will be designated with a special paw icon linking to a portal with educational material.

“Soon, for anyone who cares about animals, there will be some of the best minds in tourism, sustainability, conservation and animal welfare who will be able to put their best foot forward and make their arguments to hopefully sway millions of travelers one way or another,” Brian Hoyt, TripAdvisor’s senior director of corporate communications, said in an email. “In the long run, we believe this marketplace of ideas will help travelers write better reviews as our community continues their role as a check and balance on the tourism industry.”

The new policy doesn’t mean all animal contact is off limits. Domestic animal interaction, such as horseback riding or petting zoos with creatures that are considered domestic, will be able to be booked. TripAdvisor and Viator will also continue to sell tickets for supervised aquarium touch pools used for educational purposes; feeding programs under the supervision of zoo and wildlife officials; and volunteer programs with zoos, aquariums, or sanctuaries. And some types of activities — such as contact with camels — are still under consideration.

“They’re making a policy change that is pretty commendable and hopefully industry-leading — not only how these travel companies operate, but also how local tourist sites operate,” said Wes Sechrest, chief scientist and CEO at Global Wildlife Conservation (<http://globalwildlife.org>), which shared research with TripAdvisor.

TripAdvisor and Viator will still sell general admission tickets to attractions that include animal contact, but will not provide a way to book those interactive experiences — which are typically sold as an add-on to the entry price. Attractions and other tourist sites will be able to appeal if some of their activities are found not to be compliant.

Hoyt did not say exactly how many experiences would be affected, putting the number at “hundreds.” He said the company did not expect the change to be “material to the business” but would not say how much revenue TripAdvisor expects to lose.

And he acknowledged that tourists could still easily book activities without TripAdvisor’s help.

“If they want to go and choose someplace else to book that experience, that’s their prerogative,” Hoyt said. “Hopefully they’ll learn a lot about why that experience might not be healthy for that animal through the education portal. We hope they’ll make more informed decisions down the road.”

In crafting the policy, TripAdvisor consulted with groups not usually found on the same side of an issue, including People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (<http://www.peta.org>) and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (<https://www.aza.org>). The company also pulled in experts and endorsements from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (<http://www2.unwto.org>), Sustainable Travel International (<http://sustainabletravel.org>), Oxford University’s Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (<https://www.wildcru.org>), and others.

With that wide array of interests, not everyone is fully satisfied with TripAdvisor’s move.

PETA, for example, does not endorse any activity that involves animals in captivity for profit and encourages people to avoid marine parks, aquariums, and zoos. The Association of Aquariums and Zoos obviously does not appreciate that stance; its members also include theme parks such as SeaWorld, Disney’s Animal Kingdom, and Busch Gardens in Tampa.

"We know it will never be enough for some people, but to those individuals, we will have to agree to disagree," Hoyt said. "I think when you can get groups like PETA and AZA to partner on an effort like this, we must be doing something right to move the ball further down the field."

PETA praised what it called TripAdvisor's "precedent-setting move to stop selling tickets to attractions where people come into contact with animals" and a representative said the organization would make its additional positions clear in the educational material it provides.

"This move is a reflection of a sea change in public opinion," Stephanie Shaw, PETA's corporate liaison, said. "Consumers are more aware than ever of the suffering that wild animals endure whenever they're kept in captivity."

TripAdvisor is starting this week to spread the word to attractions whose activities will be affected and will help those that are deemed noncompliant learn what they can do to be bookable on the site again.

"There is a new generation of leadership at many of these attractions that are realizing they don't need to have these types of experiences to be a part of their business to really drive the educational, scientific and conservation needs of their organizations," Hoyt said.

Rob Vernon, a spokesman for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, said the nonprofit trade group was glad that users would still be able to buy tickets for members and was excited to partner with TripAdvisor on the education side. The association is providing information about its accredited members as well as what it takes to get and stay accredited for the information portal.

"To TripAdvisor's credit, they have committed to working with our members and making sure they're very informed on the policy decisions and working on an appeals process so if one of our AZA members believes that an experience was inadvertently left off or taken off the booking site, then TripAdvisor is working on putting together a process to get that relisted," he said. "And I think that's a fair approach and one we'll certainly take advantage of."

The decision came after animal welfare groups urged TripAdvisor to stop allowing people to book elephant rides several months ago. That led to an examination of all attractions involving animals, an exploration of international standards, and a process of seeking feedback from various organizations.

"Certainly getting into the booking business has probably added more attention to what we do and it's one of these things, when you're a fast growing company, it's important once in a while to say 'Hey, let's get off the tracks here for a second and think about this more,'" Hoyt said. "As we're growing, we want to grow into a company that is a business we can be proud of and do the right thing. This is version 1.0 of where we're headed."