

TRAVEL | UPDATE

TripAdvisor to Stop Selling Tickets to Many Animal Attractions

By JUSTIN SABLICH OCT. 11, 2016

TripAdvisor, one of the world's largest travel websites, and its booking service, Viator, will no longer sell tickets to hundreds of attractions where travelers come into contact with wild animals or endangered species held in captivity, the company announced Tuesday.

The attractions include elephant rides, swimming-with-dolphin experiences and the petting of endangered species like tigers.

The decision, the first of its kind by a leading travel booking site, came after roughly six months of research and consultation with animal groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Association of Zoos and Aquariums (A.Z.A.), Global Wildlife Conservation (G.W.C.) and others.

“TripAdvisor is a leader in the industry and we understand and applaud that this is a precedent-setting move,” a corporate liaison for PETA, Stephanie Shaw, said. PETA and other animal welfare groups say dolphins and elephants held in captivity for entertainment purposes can suffer severe physical and psychological damage.

TripAdvisor also announced the creation of a wildlife tourism education portal, in partnership with leading animal protection organizations, that will inform the site's users who review attractions and general visitors about animal welfare issues.

“We believe the end result of our efforts will be enabling travelers to make more thoughtful choices about whether to visit an animal attraction and to write more meaningful reviews about those attractions,” TripAdvisor’s chief executive and co-founder, Stephen Kaufer, said in a statement.

All animal attractions, even those that will no longer be bookable, will remain on the site in the review section, as long as they follow standard listing procedures, but will be marked with a “PAW” icon that will link to the education portal with “numerous points of view” relevant to the animals involved from a variety of organizations, TripAdvisor said.

TripAdvisor will stop selling tickets to some attractions immediately, but the totality of the booking policy changes, as well as the educational portal, will not be completely implemented until early 2017. There will also be an appeals process for the hundreds of affected attractions should they be able to prove they are within the new policy, the company said.

Last October, Oxford University’s Wildlife Conservation Research Unit, which will be working with TripAdvisor on its education initiative, released a comprehensive study on wildlife tourism. Among its many findings was that between two million and four million tourists per year pay to visit attractions that are considered harmful to animal welfare, and that a large majority of TripAdvisor reviews for such attractions failed to mention animal welfare concerns.

“I think the average person would think that there’s animals there, there’s gotta be laws and regulations behind what’s happening, but that’s not the case, even in places like the U.S.,” Wes Sechrest, the chief scientist and chief executive of the conservation group G.W.C., said.

While most of the animal groups involved in this effort echoed PETA’s overall approval of the new policies, not all groups had every concern addressed.

“There are some areas that I think every one of these groups we spoke with would agree on, and there are some that are not universally agreed upon,” TripAdvisor’s chief marketing officer, Barbara Messing, said. “We just had to, at the

end of the day, come to our own conclusions internally about what makes sense for us and what we thought reflected the totality of what we learned from the groups.”

PETA opposes all activities where animals are kept in captivity for profit, including those at zoos and aquariums, but these attractions will remain bookable. However, add-on attractions that are not in compliance with the new policy will not, TripAdvisor said.

TripAdvisor’s new policy also includes many exemptions, like feeding programs where visitors are under the supervision of zoo or wildlife officials, such as giraffe feeding at the San Diego Zoo, children’s petting zoos with domestic animals and voluntourism programs like the ones at the Elephant Nature Park in Thailand, where contact with elephants is likely for visiting volunteers.

Animal welfare groups are hoping these changes create a ripple effect throughout the travel booking industry.

“TripAdvisor’s competitors and others within the travel industry will take note of this, and we hope and expect that many other companies will follow,” Ms. Shaw of PETA said.

TripAdvisor, and its competitors like Expedia, already do not allow bookings that involve killing or injuring captive animals for blood sport, but TripAdvisor is the first travel booking site of its size and influence — the company reaches 350 million unique visitors per month — to limit access to attractions featuring more commonly practiced tourist-animal engagement.

“We do think it’s an important issue, and we want to be part of the solution,” Sarah Gavin, vice president of global communications at Expedia, said of animal welfare and the travel booking industry. “But we need help from the animal welfare community to make it a reality.”