

TripAdvisor to stop selling tickets to swim with dolphins



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BY CHABELI HERRERA
cherrera@miamiherald.com

The growing push to increase awareness of animal welfare has reached the ears of leading travel site TripAdvisor, which announced this week that it will stop selling tickets to attractions that involve animal interactions.

Beginning early next year, the site will discontinue sales for “hundreds” activities that include physical interaction with wild captive animals or endangered animals, such as swimming with dolphins, riding elephants and petting tigers. TripAdvisor will also launch an education portal — identified with a “PAW” icon — linked to every animal attraction on its site. The portal will provide information on animal welfare practices to help travelers write more informed reviews.



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Stephen Kaufer, president and CEO of TripAdvisor

“In turn, TripAdvisor believes that better reviews will enable travelers to make more informed booking decisions and improve the standards of animal care in tourism worldwide,” the site said in a release. Organizations like the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Global Wildlife Conservation, the Travel Association and the People of the Ethical Treatment of Animals will contribute to the education portal.

“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,” said Stephen Kaufer, president and CEO of TripAdvisor, in a release. “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 push for more stringent animal welfare laws exploded after the 2013 documentary “Blackfish,” which detailed the alleged unfair treatment of killer whales in captivity. Then in March, SeaWorld announced it would end its orca breeding program. In May, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus said its touring elephants, a century-and-a-half long tradition, would be retired to a conservation center in Florida.

The decision from TripAdvisor comes six months after the World Animal Protection advocacy group launched a petition urging the travel site to stop profiting for wildlife tourist attractions. The petition drew more than 558,000 supporters.

The new rule will likely have far-reaching implications in Florida, where animal encounters are popular with tourists.

Aside from the monetary challenges, area attractions worry about the repercussions the rule could have for the future of zoos and aquariums, particularly from a company with the reach of TripAdvisor, said Kathleen Dezio, president and CEO of the Alliance for Marine Mammal Parks & Aquariums, an international organization. The site sees 350 million unique visitors a month.

“This is a strategy using the more charismatic, popular programs. If [animal welfare activists] can pressure travel companies to abandon them, they can abandon others,” Dezio said. Her organization works with the Miami Seaquarium, SeaWorld and various dolphin encounter parks in the Florida Keys.

The rule includes exemptions for educational programs supervised by wildlife officials but not for traditional swim with dolphin programs at accredited parks, for example.

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Dezio argued the rule could also cut into the interaction program’s role in the conservation effort.

“It is those sorts of encounters that really provide the magic that inspires people and really helps them connect with these animals and really helps conserve them,” Dezio said. “The announcement was shocking and really tragic.”

The Miami Seaquarium and Theater of the Sea marine mammal park in Islamorada said they could not comment on the new TripAdvisor rule because they can not yet asses how their parks will be impacted. TripAdvisor has not reached out to either park yet.

Zoo Miami spokesman and goodwill ambassador Ron Magill applauded TripAdvisor’s decision Wednesday, saying it will largely target road-side attractions that are not accredited and place animals in stressful and potentially dangerous situations.

“This is a very welcome decision from our end,” Magill said.

Zoo Miami is exempt from the TripAdvisor rule because its animal interaction opportunities are feeding programs in which guests feed the animals under the supervision of zoo officials. Also exempt from the new rule: petting zoos with domestic animals, aquarium touch pools for educational purposes under supervision and voluntourism programs for endangered specials where physical interaction with animals is possible.

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PETA, which has waged a battle in South Florida over Miami Seaquarium's orca Lolita, applauded the move by TripAdvisor. While the organization advocates for observing animals in their natural habitat, it called the move an "industry-leading decision."

"We are in favor of where society is heading in general, which is animal-free interactions," said PETA corporate liaison Stephanie Shaw. She added that public awareness for the suffering some animals endure in captivity is "stronger than ever."

For several years, TripAdvisor has prohibited bookings for activities where animals are killed or injured for blood sport, such as bullfights. That policy will continue, along with the new rules, which site president Kaufer said he hopes will help educate travelers and cause a ripple affect across the tourism industry.

"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," Kaufer said in a release.

Chabeli Herrera: 305-376-3730, @ChabeliH