

Hidden Connections:

Dolphin captivity in Thailand & the deadly link with Taiji



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Image: Dolphin hugged and kissed by a seal in one of the performances at a dolphin show venue.

Cover image: Dolphin performing hoop tricks in an enclosure.

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Executive Summary

Action for Dolphins acts to end dolphin suffering and has been working to impact the economic viability of hunting and capturing dolphins in Taiji, Japan since 2012 and end dolphin captivity worldwide since 2014. Investigations conducted since 2022 have revealed Thailand as one of the biggest importers of dolphins from the Taiji hunts in recent years.

Since 2010, there have been importations of 89 CITES II listed common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) from the wild to Thailand, almost all of which were originally from Japan, according to CITES Database.

This report outlines the dolphinariums in Thailand housing captive dolphins that have likely originated from Taiji and explores legal avenues to ban the import of wild dolphins into the country.

We found there are 3 laws in Thailand that oversee the importation of CITES-listed animals, regulate zoo operations, and prevent animal cruelty. Unfortunately, all of them fail to adequately recognise animal welfare.

To close the loopholes and stop the suffering of dolphins, the Thai government must act now. As tourism is the main driver of the demand for live dolphins, the Tourism Authority of Thailand must reconsider the endorsement of dolphinariums and stop encouraging the public to support animal cruelty through tourism.



Image: Dolphins surfacing at the edge of pool in a dolphinarium.

It is crucial that Thailand introduce the legislative ban of dolphin importation to:

1. Cut demand for wild populations. With Thailand being one of the key 17 destinations of the Taiji hunts, [1] the ban will impact this ruthless business significantly;
2. Cease animal abuse and adhere to internationally recognised animal welfare principles, the Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare: UDAW [2];
3. Promote accurate understanding of cetaceans and educate the public about the truth behind using dolphins for entertainment;
4. Set a course toward sustainable development according to the National Strategies [3] and endorse nature education to encourage a society that encounters and loves animals with respect.

This report calls on Thailand officials to commit “to respect animal welfare needs, and to end animal cruelty – for good” as promised when signing UDAW in 2008.

At the same time, travel companies must introduce robust animal welfare policies and stop selling tickets to harmful wildlife attractions.

As a tourist, you can help end the suffering by not visiting dolphin entertainment venues and spreading awareness about the suffering of animals in captive environments.

Dolphins in Thailand

Thailand is a Southeast Asian country renowned for its vibrant culture, stunning landscapes, and warm hospitality. The country has consistently ranked among the world's most popular tourist destinations. The country's coastal regions are renowned for their natural beauty and marine biodiversity, including colourful coral reefs, whales, sea turtles, and dolphins.

There are 10 species of dolphins native to Thailand. All of them are protected under Wild Animal and Conservation Act B.E. 2532 (2019), including CITES II listed bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops aduncus*) and CITES I listed Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) and Indo-pacific humpback dolphin (*Sousa chinensis*). [4] These three species are highlighted because they are found not only in the wild, but also in dolphinarium or zoos around Thailand.

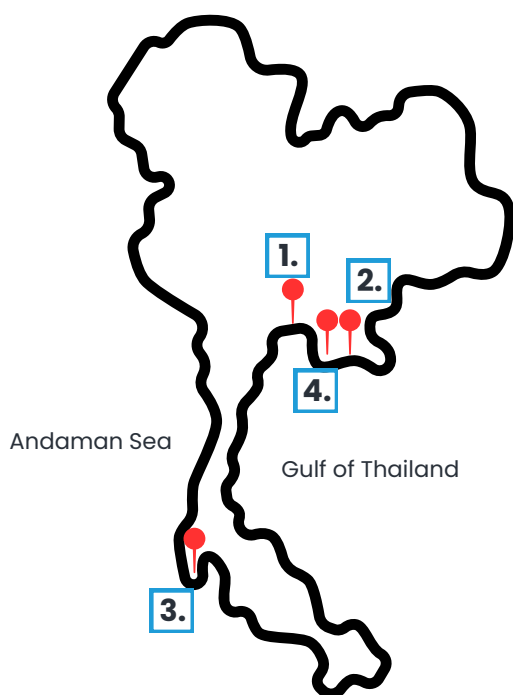


Figure 1. Dolphinarium in Thailand

Captive dolphin venues in Thailand

There are currently four dolphinarium in Thailand:

- 1. Safari World, Bangkok** - One of the largest drive-in open zoos in Asia [5]

At Safari World, opened in February 1988 (B.E.2531), [6] there are a total of 18 bottlenose dolphins, [7] including Indo-pacific bottlenose (*Tursiops aduncus*) and common bottlenose (*Tursiops truncatus*). Four are currently show dolphins, and others are breeders at its breeding facility. [8] Safari World offers a 16-minute dolphin show, once a day, seven days a week.

- 2. Oasis Sea World** - The only dolphinarium in Thailand with Irrawaddy and Indo-pacific humpback dolphins. [9]

Situated in Chanthaburi province in eastern Thailand, Oasis Sea World opened in 1990 and claims to be the only dolphin show that uses only hand signals to train the dolphins. [10] There are 6 Irrawaddy dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*) and 2 Indo-pacific humpback dolphins (*Sousa chinensis*) at Oasis Sea World. Some of them are show dolphins, while others who live in the back pool are separated for Swim with Dolphin activities. [8] This park offers 5 30-minute shows every day.

3. Nemo Dolphins Bay Phuket - The dolphinarium franchise from Ukraine [11]

Opened by Phuket Aqua Project Co Ltd in November 2015, [12] this is the first internationally franchised dolphinarium in Thailand. There are 4 common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) at the park, all are show dolphins. [13] The shows go for 3 rounds a day, from Tuesday to Sunday.

4. Pattaya Dolphinarium - The newest dolphinarium in Thailand [14]

Opened in May 2019, this park is popular among tourists, especially international visitors. [15] All 4 common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) at Pattaya Dolphinarium are show dolphins. [8] They offer 3 shows a day for 6 days a week (closed on Wednesdays).



Image: Trainer standing on a dolphin's rostrum as part of the stunt show at a dolphinarium.

From common ball and hoop tricks to dolphin ride stunts, the dolphins at these attractions are trained to perform alongside their trainers, and sometimes other animals. Every dolphinarium in Thailand also offers close physical interactions with dolphins including feeding, posing for photos, hugging, and swim with dolphin experiences.

The first dolphin show was brought to Thailand by Safari world in the late 1980s. [6] These venues promote themselves as a place for children to learn compassion for dolphins through memorable experiences.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) recommends dolphinariums as educational attractions for quality holidays, despite ample evidence showing dolphins and other animals suffer in captive environments.

[16][17][18][19]



Image: Close interactions such as 'photo with dolphin' are promoted during the dolphin show with additional fees applied.

Another concept that has been strongly promoted by the dolphinarium is “captive conservation.” [20] Visitors are told these captive dolphins have a better and safer life than those in the wild.

Some dolphinarium are accredited as an example for public zoos in Thailand, with the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP) approving the facility through collaborations and recognition as experts on wildlife conservation and zoo operation.

In reality, these dolphinarium don't offer proper and accurate education to their visitors. They are set up to prioritise profit over educating visitors about dolphins' natural behaviors and habitats.

Connection to the Taiji dolphin hunts

Since 2010, CITES Trade Database has received 106 exporter reports of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) to Thailand. 89 of them were wild-caught and originally from Japan.

The imported bottlenose dolphins are common bottlenose (*Tursiops truncatus*), which is not protected under Thai Wild Animal and Conservation Act B.E. 2562 (2019) and commonly found in dolphinarium.

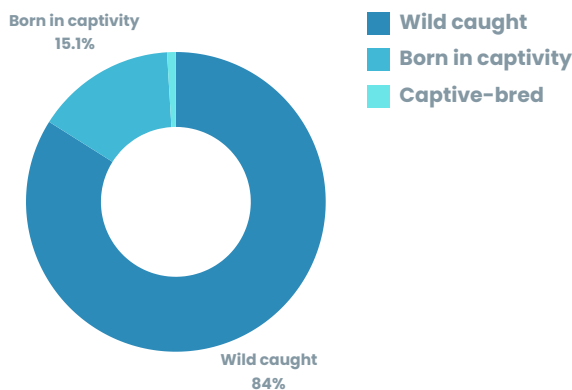


Figure 2. Sources of *Tursiops truncatus* being imported to Thailand between 2010-2024. [33]

Table 1. Importation of *Tursiops truncatus* into Thailand between 2010-2024 that are “Wild caught”. [33]

Year	APP.	Taxon	Importer	Exporter	Origin	Imp. Report	Exp. Report	Term
2010	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	JP		9		live
2014	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	JP		12	12	live
2014	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	UA	JP		2	live
2014	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	UA			3	live
2017	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	JP			15	live
2017	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	JP		15		live
2020	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	JP			12	live
2021	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	JP			15	live
2022	II	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	TH	JP		30	30	live

TH = Thailand, JP = Japan, UA = Ukraine

Most dolphinariums in Thailand state their dolphins were captive born in breeding facilities both in and outside Thailand. [7] [21] This led to occasional disputes over the origin of the dolphins over the years. For example, in 2014, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society claimed that some of the dolphins at Nemo Dolphins Bay Phuket came from Taiji, Japan. [22]

Safari World states in its 2023 Annual Report that it bought dolphins from Japan and likely that they are caught from the wild. [6]

In 2022, it also reported, “the latest animal procurement from overseas took place in November 2021 when the company purchased bottlenose dolphins from a vendor in Japan”. [23]

Nonetheless, CEO of Safari World, Litti Kewkacha, shared during an interview in August 2024 that all but a few breeder dolphins at Safari World were captive born there. [7]

Taiji is a small coastal town in Japan where the gruesome dolphin hunt is held every year from September to March. Each season, hundreds of dolphins are herded to the cove and trapped for the ‘selection process’ where they are chosen to either be slaughtered for meat or captured alive. In acute stress from being chased, the latter group are forcefully separated from their family and transported across the globe to perform at entertainment venues. Most of those selected for captivity are bottlenose dolphins. [1] In a 2017 Guardian interview, the Taiji dolphin hunters revealed live dolphins for entertainment venues are far more lucrative than their meat for consumption. [24]

How tourism drives the Taiji dolphin hunts

The main economic driver of the Taiji hunts is the captive dolphin trade which is propped up by international tourism. As long as travel companies such as Traveloka, Klook, Webjet, Get Your Guide, Tui, GroupOn and Trip.com continue to sell tickets to dolphinariums [1] and build positive perception about this type of activity, these attractions will be in demand. These travel companies are behind the times, major companies such as Airbnb and Booking.com have implemented robust animal welfare policies and do not provide their customers attractions or activities that involve animal cruelty.

Governments also play a vital role. It is urgent that the TAT takes a forward step to stop encouraging tourists to support these brutal practices. A credible authority like TAT is entitled to correct people’s understanding about these attractions and stop supporting animal cruelty through tourism.



Image: Dolphin getting physical interaction from tourists as part of the activity at a dolphin show venue.

Animal Laws in Thailand

Another opportunity to stop the import of wild dolphins to Thailand is implementing effective laws. This section will delve into laws around animal imports and animal captivity in Thailand. As of November 2024, there are three laws that regulate the importation of protected species and prevent animal cruelty:

1. WILD ANIMAL CONSERVATION AND PROTECTION ACT, B.E.2562 (2019) [25]

Enforced by the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP) and the Department of Fisheries (DOF), the updated Wild Animal Conservation And Protection Act was introduced by the cabinet in 2019 to replace the 1992 Act with stronger and more relevant regulations with increased penalties. [26] Corresponding to the modern international agreements on wildlife conservation, this Act mainly aims to protect wildlife from trafficking and exploitation.

According to the Act, a wild animal protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is referred to as a “controlled wild animal”. [24] Any possession of controlled wild animals must adhere to this Act, Chapter I: Wildlife, Section 19, which indicates that the owner “shall notify the possession to the competent official unless it is the possession, under a wild animal trading licence, by a holder of a trade licence.” [25] Imports and exports of controlled aquatic animals require a licence granted by the Director-General of DOF.

As long as travel companies continue to sell tickets to dolphinariums and build positive perception about this type of activity, these attractions will be in demand.

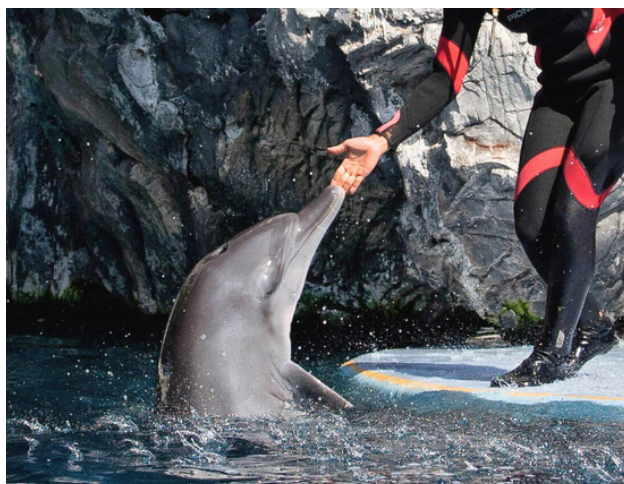


Image: Trainer giving dolphin a pat after performing tricks.



Image: Trainer taking hold of a dolphin's rostrum and pectoral fin to perform a stunt in a pool.

In this report, we specifically focus on dolphin importation and possession by zoos or dolphinariums. In Chapter II Zoo, the Act prescribes the standards for zoo management with key substances as follows:

- (1) The management of areas for nurturing and exhibiting animals;
- (2) Nutrition care;
- (3) Sanitation, wastewater treatment, waste elimination and disease control;
- (4) The upkeep of animals;
- (5) Animal welfare management;
- (6) Security and the maintenance of security;
- (7) Emergency operations and measures;
- (8) Directions for providing knowledge or education on animals.

2. REGULATIONS ON PUBLIC ZOO PERMITS B.E. 2562 (2019) [27]

In Thailand, public zoo permits are granted by two departments depending on animal species.

The Department of Fisheries (DOF) oversees those with aquatic animals. Since 2019, DOF has amended the regulations on permits for public zoos with aquatic animals.

In Section 12, the criteria for practices related to shows are prescribed (Section 12 (5)). Any show performed by the aquatic animals must not torture or put in danger the animals, and the zoo must provide thorough details of the shows and activities involving the animals in the zoo operation plan.

Another key criteria is the requirement of detailed records of animals in possession, for instance, record of origin, transport/transfer record, and record of the upkeep of animals (Section 12 (10)). The aquatic animals welfare is also one of the criteria (Section 12 (3)). However, the definition or elaboration of "animal welfare" is not stipulated in this regulation.

3. CRUELTY PREVENTION AND WELFARE OF ANIMAL ACT B.E. 2557 (2014)[28]

After 20 years of hard work led by Thai Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (TSPCA) to lobby lawmakers, Cruelty Prevention and Welfare of Animal Act B.E. 2557 (2014) was finally enacted by the Department of Livestock Development (DLD) and took effect in December 2014. [29] This forward-thinking law aims to make animal owners more aware and recognise their responsibilities to provide good care to their animals, whether they are pets, livestock, or animals used for entertainment or any other purposes.

This is the only Act in Thailand that provide the definition of “cruelty”:

...an act or a failure to act which causes an animal to suffer, physically or mentally, or causes an animal to suffer from pain, illness, infirm, or may cause death to such animal, and shall include a use of a disabled, ill, old, or pregnant animal for any advantages, a use of animal for sexual abuse, a use of animal to overwork or to perform an inappropriate work because such animal is ill, old, or underage. [28]

In other words, both active and passive cruelty is now clearly against the law. It suggests that acts of neglect are unacceptable. In Section 24, it prescribes that the owner or relevant person must provide proper animal welfare in transportation or use of animals for work or entertainment, taking into account the type, kind, character, condition, and age of the animal. [28]

The penalty of noncompliance with Section 24 is a fine not exceeding forty-thousand baht. [28]

While committing acts of cruelty to animals may result in imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years and/or a fine not exceeding forty-thousand baht, the penalty for poor welfare provision is a fine solely.

Unfortunately, the forty-thousand-baht fine has now been weakened and prescribed as “Disciplinary Fine” since June 2023, according to Disciplinary Fine Act, B.E. 2565 (2022). The offenders will neither have criminal records nor detention during the trial on these offences. [30]



Image: Trainer handstanding on two dolphins's rostrums to perform a stunt at a dolphin show venue.

Loopholes

The three Thai laws that relate to dolphin captivity do not allow for challenging imports of dolphins based on animal cruelty. The limitations in Thai law and with Thai authorities across departments mean that no one oversees the potential cruelty of where dolphins are taken from, for example the Taiji dolphin hunts. Instead, in Thailand the laws depend on CITES for oversight without addressing issues beyond Thailand's borders.

Thailand publicly demonstrates the commitment to stand against animal cruelty through National Strategies. [3][31] Unfortunately, no concrete plans and detailed regulations have been issued to support them.

The regulations around importations of protected and controlled aquatic species are entitled to the Director-General of DOF, and animal cruelty is not defined or regulated.

One of the 8 key substances of DNP's standard for zoo management (Section 13) is "animal welfare management". [25] Unfortunately, animal sourcing has never been stipulated in the Wild Animal Conservation And Protection Act as part of animal welfare regulation.

Public zoo operation, overseen by DOF, is regulated with broad criteria. There are no sub-laws for particular kinds of animals that include specific details on animal enclosure size, maintenance procedures, interactions, training, etc.

This leaves a loophole in how the "proper" location and operation are defined and hence approved.

The word "welfare" is not even defined in the Cruelty Prevention and Welfare of Animal Act and it does not cover the crime against the animal at its source.

As a result, the importations of abused dolphins are always considered "right" as they are compliant with the Wild Animal Conservation And Protection Act. DLD cannot disprove these importations as there is no regulation on the cruelty before an animal becomes in possession, and they also have no authority against the importation process.

Despite studies and evidence of importations being from cruel sources like Taiji hunts, the cross-border practice still prevents Thailand from adhering to animal rights since there is no rigorous law to regulate the importation of dolphins until the animals get into Thailand.

Possibility for Change

However, there is still hope for the importation of wild dolphins into Thailand to end. The following points present the promising opportunity for Thailand to act and break the vicious cycle.

End of animal cruelty

In 2008, Thailand signed the Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare: UDAW by the World Society for the Protection of Animals: WSPA. [32] UDAW is “an agreement among people and nations to recognize that animals are sentient and can suffer, to respect their welfare needs, and to end animal cruelty – for good.” [2] Recognising this action, Thailand should urgently revise the penalties against animal welfare laws violation and recognise the offences as serious offences.

When the Cruelty Prevention and Welfare of Animal Act Section 24 prescribed “proper animal welfare in transportation”, the transportation should include the whole sourcing process. “Record of origin” is already one of the requirements for zoo operation, as prescribed by DOF. [27] Therefore, it is crucial that DOF requires thorough records of animal welfare from the source in order to approve the zoo operation.

Additionally, DNP is currently drafting Thailand’s first zoo welfare standards (although this has been in the review process since 2016). Zoo welfare standards can be another measure to thoroughly regulate zoo operation to adhere with welfare standards, including criteria on ethical and cruelty-free animal sourcing.

Intergovernmental efforts

Looking at the broader framework, the country’s direction is quite promising for change. One of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE)’s 20-year strategies is to proactively improve international collaborations to address issues related to natural resources and environment. [31]

Considering the determination to conserve natural resources and environment in the near future, this policy provides an opportunity to cooperate with other countries to agree upon and implement effective measures to monitor and prevent animal cruelty along the animal trade route, which would be difficult otherwise.



Image: Trainer standing on dolphins with each foot on each dolphin's rostrum as part of a stunt at a dolphinarium.

CITES

Given that Thai law (and other countries around the world) rely on CITES to regulate the import and exports of wild dolphins, there is opportunity to challenge the non-detriment finding clause based on the cruelty of the Taiji dolphin hunts. This is an international advocacy angle that could be taken to pressure the international body to better protect wild animals captured during the cruel hunting process.



Image: Dolphin performing a trick by leaping above the surface to flap a ball with his fluke

Sustainable tourism: accurate and ethical nature education

Thailand's direction towards sustainable tourism is substantially prioritised. According to the 20-year National Strategy B.E.2561-2580 (2018-2037), "Strategy for Eco-Friendly Development and Growth" clearly prioritises the development and increase of eco-friendly marine activities by encouraging marine tourism with the capacity of ecology at heart. [3] Given the government put in place the directions for a more sustainable future, the private sector is expected to adapt to align with that direction.

Public campaign opportunity

According to the Cruelty Prevention and Welfare of Animal Act Section 12 (4) and (5) "An animal welfare organisation may be supported by the Department of Livestock Development or other State Agencies in (4) solving problems related to cruelty prevention or welfare of animals and performing (5) research on cruelty prevention or welfare of animals." This is an opportunity for civil society and the general public to take a stance and demand change.

The unfortunate fact that the imported dolphin species is not native to Thai waters hampers meaningful actions to be taken by the authorities whose first priority is protecting national resources.

Public campaigning is therefore the most powerful tool to compel Thai lawmakers to act. With public support, people can accelerate government actions, including the urgent implementation of a dolphin importation ban.

How you can help as a tourist to Thailand

As individuals, we can all take part by not supporting venues that hold dolphins and other animals in captivity. For those visiting Thailand, you can create impactful actions by spreading the word about the abusive practices and poor welfare behind the scenes at these venues.

1. Don't buy tickets to and attend captive dolphin venues
2. Give informative reviews on tourism platforms or social media to help raise awareness amongst tourist communities and wider audiences.
3. Let the Thailand Authority of Tourism (TAT) know your concern about animal welfare and have them stop promoting these so-called educational attractions. You can reach the TAT at (61 2) 9247 7549 (Sydney office), or via email info@thailand.net.au. Further details can be found on the TAT website, <https://www.tat.or.th/en/contact/office?office=oversea>.



Image: Tourists taking photos of a dolphin floating by the edge of the glass-walled pool and cheering.

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