The Mis-Advertisement of Wildlife Tourism: A Media Investigation into the Conservation Threats Facing Wildlife from Two-Shot Imagery Posted on Zoo Websites and Social Media.

Introduction

Aim: To identify potential issues caused by posting two-shot images on zoo websites and social media (Figure 1).

Properly managed wildlife tourism can have potential economic benefit to communities without compromising animal welfare, however, this is rarely the case, and exotic animals used for tourism purposes are subject to unethical treatment (Moorhouse et al., 2015). Focusing specifically on zoos in the British Isles, and elephant volunteerism in Thailand, I evaluated the potential impact that both two-shot imagery on zoo websites, and user generated content on social media, has on the portrayal of wildlife tourism.

Case Study: Thailand Elephant Sanctuary Volunteers

Thailand offers tourists opportunities to participate in ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ experiences that interact with elephants (Figure 2) and primates, however, tourists are often unaware that these industries are highly unethical (Figure 4). Post-experience photographs published online can advertise these experiences to prospective travellers and have damaging effects to wildlife (Leighty et al., 2015).

Methods & Results

- I analysed two-shot images on twenty-five zoo websites (Figure 3).
  - Why? To evaluate the impact images have on visitors’ education.
  - I collected survey results from twelve volunteers at an elephant sanctuary in Chang Mai.
    - Why? To understand the motivation behind post-experience social media usage.
  - The time frame extended from June 2018 to January 2019.

Key Finding: Those who have conservation at the heart of their motivation are unintentionally counteracting this conservation endeavour, inadvertently promoting unethical wildlife-tourism online.

Discussion & Conclusion

- Zoo visitors enjoy personal connection with animals and engagement increases educational potential (Luebke and Matiasek, 2013). However, such closeness to zoo visitors is a source of stress to captive animals (Morgan and Tromborg, 2007).

- Expectation of closeness generated by two-shot photographs posted online can lead to mis-advertisement and the financial support of unethical wildlife tourism when travelling abroad, hindering conservation efforts.

- This research is important for determining threats to wildlife within the tourism industry, including how both organisations and individuals with positive intentions could be hindering conservation efforts through their online portrayal of human-animal interactions.

References: