Think twice before booking an 'animal encounter'
By Carina DeVera

Encountering wildlife in their natural habitats can be awe-inspiring and may contribute to urgently needed conservation efforts. Tourism dollars can fund animal sanctuaries, and the rise of whale watching famously helps educate visitors and allows scientists to collect data on whale behavior. Unfortunately, distinguishing between ethical encounters and harmful ones isn't always straightforward — and slick, professional marketing can blur the lines between conservation and exploitation. With the summer travel season coming up, it's important we educate ourselves so our dollars don't contribute to inhumane treatment of animals.

A helpful starting point for this nuanced topic is understanding the five freedoms in animal welfare. These principles pertain to both the mental and physical well-being of animals and are globally recognized as the "gold standard" in animal welfare. Every animal should be guaranteed:

· Freedom from hunger, malnutrition, and thirst
· Freedom from discomfort
· Freedom from pain, injury, and disease
· Freedom to express normal patterns of behavior
· Freedom from fear and distress

With this in mind, one can see that activities like riding elephants or swimming with captive dolphins or whales typically infringe upon these freedoms, causing distress and harm due to the abusive training methods and extreme confinement involved. (Side note: SeaWorld does not meet Tripadvisor's Animal Welfare Policy standards, and in a rare and commendable display of ethics, the company "will not sell tickets to, or directly generate revenue from, attractions or experiences where captive cetaceans are placed on public display.")

When assessing wildlife animal encounter ethics, consider your impact. Ethical operators typically prioritize small groups and maintain their distance from the animals. They usually focus on passive observation, which ensures minimal disruption to wildlife. I had one such outstanding experience last year with a "wildlife safari" operator at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, where our small group of five guests was shuttled along the park's roads. From time to time, we pulled over to the side at specific locations, where the guides set up telescopic sights for us to spy on a herd of bison, a grazing pronghorn, and a group of beavers contentedly going about their business in the river.

For captive animal interactions, scrutinize the animals' origin and care. Sanctuaries and zoos should prioritize rehabilitation or lifelong care for injured or rescued animals in a setting that mimics their natural habitat and minimizes human interference. Accredited

organizations, such as those listed by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, adhere to stringent welfare standards.

“Animal cafes” have become particularly popular in recent years, but they can only be truly ethical if they house rescue animals (like cats and rabbits) and facilitate adoptions. Cafes that exhibit undomesticated animals like owls or meerkats typically exploit the animals for profit, subjecting them to relentless visitor interactions (and many species, like owls, sloths, and hedgehogs are nocturnal, so it’s even more distressing for them to be displayed and handled during the daytime).

Ultimately, many popular animal attractions fail to meet ethical standards and are subjecting animals to mistreatment. In Marin, permits regulate animal displays to ensure humane treatment and public safety. Nonetheless, standards for animal exhibits vary widely across different regions, which underscores the importance of informed decision-making. Be sure to spend time researching an encounter’s operator and look for social media posts or reviews that show what the experience is really like.

Choosing responsible wildlife encounters is not just about creating memorable moments for ourselves but also ensuring the well-being and conservation of the animals involved. By understanding and adhering to the principles of animal welfare, and by making informed choices, we can contribute positively to conservation efforts and inspire others to do the same.

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