

The hidden suffering behind Thai farms that produce lion cubs to become social media sensations and 'luxury toys' in the hands of the country's elite.



Image: AI-made artistic illustration

The rise in lions bred and sold for parties and social media displays reveals legal loopholes, safety risks, and serious animal welfare issues.

The presence of exotic animals in luxury homes in Thailand has grown intensely in recent years, because a new status symbol has emerged among the elite: lion cubs. This preference is spreading through social media and shows a trend marked by ostentation, ignorance, and strong criticism from activists.

Furthermore, the phenomenon exposes animal welfare issues and legal loopholes that have allowed the expansion of a trade that few imagined to be so widespread.

Videos posted from private parties in Bangkok illustrate this reality well. Champagne glasses clink as guests mingle in designer clothes and take lively photos.

Amidst the conversations, a lion cub is passed from hand to hand as if it were a luxury accessory. A woman, dressed for a cocktail party, lifts the animal and blows a kiss to the camera, balancing a glass of wine in her other hand.

This scene is repeated in hundreds of recordings that flood Instagram and TikTok. Therefore, it is no surprise that the new report produced by the Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand and the Oxford Wildlife Trade Research Group shows that the number of lions in captivity has more than tripled since 2018.

The growth of farms and the lack of preparation.

Lion farms have multiplied rapidly to meet demand, but many are run by people with no experience in handling wild animals. This is the case in Patamawadee Chanpithak.

Sitting on the nursery floor, she watches three newborn kittens crawling on her lap. The smell of kitten powder permeates the air, reinforcing the makeshift nature of the place. **We were very inexperienced when we started.** "She says."

The first few days were difficult. Five of her initial six cubs died quickly. Even so, the business prospered, and she has already sold more than 80 lions in the country. Some buyers are Thai. Others come from abroad. They are all wealthy, the breeder points out.

Lion cubs start at US\$5.000. White cubs can reach US\$15.000. Keeping a lion is expensive because it requires ample space and up to 10 kg of fresh meat per day. Therefore, only a very select group can afford it.

The search for the youngest animals

Buyers prefer extremely young cubs. This demand fuels the activity of agents who promote photos and videos on social media, offering the animals for sale or even for rent at parties and photo shoots. The problems begin when the lions grow up.

Some owners become desperate when faced with difficulties. It's common for them to try to return the animal to the farms and ask for it to be bought back.

Patamawadee explains that this has become an essential part of the business model. The farms take the lion back, pass it on for breeding, or deliver it to zoo-like facilities. Thus, profit continues at all stages of its life.

Recording failures and silent population growth

The report highlights the difficulty of tracking each animal. Frequent transfers between farms and buyers hinder official control. In 2018, records indicated 138 lions in captivity in the country.

Now, the report identifies at least 444. This number is higher than the 342 counted by the Department of National Parks.

Researchers say the true total is higher, as many sales and breeding practices do not appear in the records.

Laws with good intentions and unexpected effects.

In 2019, Thailand adopted the Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act to control species listed under CITES, such as lions. The intention was to limit ownership. The effect, however, was the opposite.

The law established licenses to own lions, but not to breed them. Therefore, anyone who has a legally registered lion can breed them freely.

Puppies only need to be registered after 60 days, which creates loopholes for unchecked animal transfers. Furthermore, hybrids like ligers were left out of the legislation, further widening the gaps.

The puppy trade exceeds US\$1 million per year. The market, therefore, has gained momentum.

Health and well-being issues

Veterinarian Taweesak Anansiriwattana, known as Dr. Vee, disagrees with the domestic ownership of lions. In five years, he has treated more than 25 animals belonging to private individuals.

He states that the country's humid climate promotes skin infections, and malnutrition is also a concern.

Many owners feed their animals only chicken, ignoring the need for organs such as liver and intestines. Therefore, serious health problems arise quickly.

The law requires enclosures to be at least 3 meters by 3 meters. Even so, less than half of the places he visited meet the standard.

Inadequate conditions and early separation of the lions

For Tom Taylor, head of operations at the Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand, the challenges are serious. He states that many facilities keep lions in small, sunlight-free enclosures on concrete with poor food. The consequences for their well-being are evident.

Breeders often separate cubs early so that the mothers can go into heat again. Furthermore, inbreeding is frequent, especially among white lions and more prized hybrids.

Risks to the environment and trafficking.

Lions are not native to Thailand. The IUCN classifies them as vulnerable.

The country's captive population does not benefit conservation. According to Taylor, this scenario creates fertile ground for trafficking.

He reports reliable information on illegal exports of both live and dead lions, destined for the extraction of body parts. These parts can supply a growing demand following stricter controls on tigers.

Danger to the population and recent incidents

Public safety has become a concern. Cases of lions escaping from private enclosures or roaming in public spaces have drawn attention.

In 2024, a viral video showed a man driving with a lion in a convertible car. The case generated great fear.

The director general of the parks department stated that the government is evaluating changes to the legislation.

Among them, severe restrictions on ownership.

The lion cub trade: A call for urgent change.

The report calls for an immediate ban on commercial breeding and private ownership. It also suggests stricter rules for licensing and for locations that profit from photos and visits.

"Many people are charmed by the idea of owning a lion, but they don't understand the ethical, financial, and safety implications."Taylor explains.

Furthermore, he points out that interest in non-native species is increasing. Ring-tailed lemurs and red pandas are beginning to follow the same path.

The aim of the report is to encourage reflection. And, above all, to raise awareness about the fate of these animals when they are no longer cubs and become too dangerous to be exhibited.

Based on information from The Guardian.