

## **Thailand Makes Strides in Animal Welfare Amidst a Pandemic**

Thailand, as a country that does not tolerate animal abuse, gives precedence to solutions and facilitations to address the controversies relating to the animal abuse allegations during the COVID-19 situation. Back in March 2020, the rising cases of local COVID-19 transmissions in Thailand prompted the government to implement partial lockdown measures, which affected the country's economy, particularly the services sector. This economic blow was further compounded by allegations of animal abuse in Thailand and subsequent campaigns to ban Thai products. Such campaigns have affected local communities that are already struggling to survive amidst the pandemic. Thailand addressed the controversies head on when news emerged of elephants suffering from the downturn in tourism and when allegations were made on the use of monkeys in Thailand's coconut industry, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand states.

Thailand's notable progress on animal welfare started in 2014 with the promulgation of the Cruelty Prevention and Welfare of Animals Act. Following this Act, the Department of Livestock Development (DLD) established the Division on Animal Welfare and Veterinary Service, dedicated to resolving animal welfare issues with DLD provincial offices around the country, as well as designing regulations and guidelines to improve welfare standards for specific animal species. The sub-regulation on elephant welfare management released in 2014, for instance, reenforces the five freedoms of animal welfare, catering to the specific physical needs of the elephant. Moreover, the elephant sub-regulation encourages elephant camps in Thailand to elevate their animal welfare management to be on par with international standards by issuing certificates when requirements are met.

When Thailand's tourism industry was heavily hit by COVID-19 this year, DLD was able to use its network of provincial offices to solve the problem of food shortage for elephants due to lack of tourism income. It was able to distribute over 8 tons of fresh grass and over 25 tons of hay to elephant camps all over the country, resolving the problem within weeks. In addition, animal welfare organisations were brought on board to assist in temporarily relocating elephants to locations with adequate food supplies.

DLD realises that cooperation from all sectors and the public is crucial to improving animal welfare standards. As such, it has established complaints channels to raise awareness and encourage public participation in monitoring animal abuse. Any perceived mistreatment of animals can be reported directly to local authorities or through the mobile application called "DLD 4.0." Any violations against the Cruelty Prevention and Welfare of Animal Act are

punishable by up to two years in prison or a fine of up to 40,000 baht (USD 1,300) or both.

Moreover, Thailand promulgated the Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act of 2019, which categorises macaque monkeys as a protected species, and registration is required for ownership. Allegations by certain animal rights organisations about the abuse of monkeys in Thailand's coconut industry earlier this year thus led to skeptics seeking the truth among Thai society. Reports and footages alleging monkey abuse were both shocking and incredulous, given that these monkeys are widely known to be treated like members of families who pick coconuts for their livelihoods. Many local news agencies, as well as foreign media conducted their own investigations. For example, PPTV, ThaiPBS, MONO29 News and BBC Thai, all featured documentaries clearly proving that monkeys were used only in small scale coconut harvesting. These investigations concluded that in Southern Thailand, monkeys have traditionally been trained to pick coconuts for the livelihood of local communities. Monkeys are pampered and fed well, enjoying prominence in the household, as only healthy and happy monkeys are able to provide food on the tables for humans.

“Mutual Dependence and Local Way of Life of Monkeys and Men by MONO29 News” : <https://youtu.be/QyjC-LcgcLU>

The Thai Food Processors' Association (TFPA) also confirmed that monkeys are not used in the harvesting of coconuts at an industrial scale. Export firms have arrangements with global retailers and suppliers to ensure that no monkeys are involved in their supply chains. An auditing system, including random inspection, is in place to ensure this. Additionally, TFPA will work with government agencies to implement a more stringent traceability system.

This demonstrates that Thailand will not tolerate any form of animal abuse. However, animal maltreatment could still be happening at any given time. This is why laws and mechanisms have been put in place to facilitate rapid reporting and legal procedures. But it is when all stakeholders are fully engaged, that the system works best. It is hoped that civil society organisations will demonstrate accountability and responsibility by stepping up to provide clues and facts about any allegations of animal abuse so that actions could be taken in accordance with the law, and any possible animal cruelty, finally put to an end.

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