

If not a sea change, a ripple effect in our concern for animals

After 'Blackfish' and Cecil, the co-founder of PETA sees a shift in the travel paradigm

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

In a bygone era, the general public didn't think twice about bullfighting, bearbaiting or octopus wrestling. Animal-themed attractions were commonplace. Today, travelers not only are questioning these scenarios, but making choices that reflect their discomfort with using animals for entertainment. An increasing number of people view places such as marine parks and zoos as unacceptable and reroute their vacations and dollars accordingly.

At SeaWorld, for example, 2014 year-end results show a 4.2 percent drop in attendance and a net loss of \$25.4 million for the year's last quarter. These declines came after negative publicity surrounding the 2013 release of "Blackfish," which tells the story of a performing killer whale that killed several people while in captivity.

More recently, outrage erupted over an American trophy hunter's killing of a well-known lion in Zimbabwe named Cecil. Since the story broke, more than a half-million people have signed a petition urging the country to stop issuing hunting permits to kill endangered animals. (Last week, Zimbabwe suspended the hunting of lions, elephants and leopards in the area outside Hwange National Park.)

How do we go about making compassionate choices in our travel? To find out, we went to Ingrid Newkirk, co-founder and president of Norfolk-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the 35-year-old organization known for its relentless animal-rights campaigns (including those against Ringling Bros., which led the circus to announce earlier this year that it will retire all its elephants by 2018).

Here's an edited version of that conversation.

What are the overall travel trends concerning animals?

When times are tough with the economy, people tend to take very cheap package vacations. In the last seven years or so, people have become more animal aware. If they're going on a cheap junket to Cancun, they ask whether they should swim with the dolphins, have their pictures taken with parrots on their shoulder or if there's anything wrong with fish pedicures — which there is.

Did you say fish pedicures?

Yes. It's been banned in many places in the United States, but you see it in resorts where people are looking for something cheap to do. You put your feet into a glass container and the fish nibble the excess flesh from around your feet. They do it because they're hungry. They're not fed, and they carry diseases from person to person. It's all revolting. People think it's cute and amusing, but it isn't. It's unkind, and it's unhealthy.

Part of being a modern traveler necessitates understanding the concerns associated with animals in captivity. How do we do that with kids?

I think it's fairly easy with kids. It's adults who imagine, for the most part, their children might like to see a particular attraction that has animals. I remember when I was 7, in Spain, stopping outside an arena with bullfighting posters. I asked my parents about it, and they said, "We'll tell you and then you can decide if you want to go." Of course, I was horrified. I think a lot of children regret as they grow up being taken to these spectacles and feel guilty when they realize what they subsidized. Parents nowadays are more open to speaking honestly with their children. You can say, "Actually, those dolphins would rather be in the sea. The only reason they're not is that people are paying money to keep them in the small pool. Would you rather pay money to see them in a small pool or would you rather them be in the sea?" Invariably they say, "Oh, they should be in the sea!" Let the child decide.

Many people who work with or care about animals today were inspired by animal encounters as children. How can we foster animal relationships in a better way when we travel?

Bona fide farm and wildlife sanctuaries are worth a visit, as are the few places that are so precious — parks, bird refuges and swamps. Those types of places teach children to look for animals in their natural environments and to see their real behavior. You can do a service and teach the child

how to be respectful and awestruck rather than dominating and manipulating. But you need to be careful. In Thailand, there are painting elephants — they are always "orphaned" elephants. That's a big selling point, and it's a bunch of hokey. We know from National Geographic and people on the ground that they are deliberately orphaned and trained. It's a tourist gimmick and scam.

But unlike the theme parks, reserves and sanctuaries aren't equipped to handle large numbers of tourists.

Every year there are more, like Wild Animal Sanctuary in Colorado, Chimp Haven in Louisiana and Save the Chimps in Florida (chimps were rescued from roadside zoos), Poplar Spring in Maryland and Animal Place in California. Hordes of tourists can't go, you're absolutely right. But I find many people don't even know they exist. They're not going to be in tourist brochures because they're charities. But do a little search online, and you'll find a gem.

How can we tell — beyond national parks — what places have a good record with animals? Are there accreditations?

In the United States, there are accreditation agencies for sanctuaries but only for certain kinds. Overseas, it's an even a bigger conundrum. But if you Google and look for complaints or contact PETA, you can sort the wheat from the chaff just like we would on TripAdvisor.com. I have an easy rule: I avoid it if I don't know. It's just like if you're a vegetarian, you

don't go near the meat aisle.

Are there any zoos that are doing it right?

There are. The Detroit Zoo does a very good job in many respects. The director is quite — I don't want to say progressive, because we're so far behind — but he knows when the elephants die, they will not be replaced. Zoos are trying to wean themselves away from certain cruelties we didn't understand in the past.

A vegetarian goes to a restaurant without any vegetarian options. Would you walk away or ask the kitchen to make a meat-free dish?

I have never found a restaurant that won't accommodate you unless it's a fast-food outlet in the middle of nowhere. They will make you a fabulous plate of pasta and vegetables, or they'll find a veggie burger somewhere. Many countries have a vegan soup — like Spain, Portugal, Turkey and Corsica. Go in and show what the market wants. Be nice and helpful and explain what you'd like.

What can we ask for at hotels, other than non-down pillows and comforters?

Cruelty-free toiletries from companies like Paul Mitchell or Aveda. Any hotels that offer brochures from cruel attractions like SeaWorld should be asked to remove them. Tell the hotels it's upsetting to you and your family because — always give them a reason. And always fill out comment cards, everywhere, very politely. Same with airlines. When they evaluate,

they'll change accordingly.

Speaking of airlines, what's the status of your campaign with Air France, the only carrier still transporting primates to labs for research?

Yes, and it breaks my heart because I have used Air France and of course will not now. They are picking up most of the business for bringing primates from Mauritius in the Indian Ocean and also from China into France, Chicago and New York, and shipping them all over the world to be hurt and killed in laboratories. We've already stopped the use of chimpanzees in experiments, and now it's time to stop it with all primates. We had people in airports in France dressed as Air France flight attendants handing out leaflets. We were able to commandeer the sound system, and we said, "Passengers, please do not pay any attention to the primates crated and on their way to laboratories under your seats in the cargo hold."

What other campaigns are you working on in the tourism industry?

We're active with bullfighting with Spain and other countries. Some towns have banned it. The vast majority of people polled in Spain oppose the bullfights now. Only the tourist trade keeps it alive. Another issue is whale-watching boats — some are intrusive and get too close to mothers with calves.

What will it take for the animal movement to become as mainstream as the environmental



MIKE BLAKE/REUTERS

ABOVE: SeaWorld, whose parks such as this one in San Diego feature performing killer whales, suffered losses after the 2013 documentary "Blackfish."

BELOW: A polar bear at the Detroit Zoo, which People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' Ingrid Newkirk says is among the nation's more forward-thinking.



JOSE JUAREZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

movement? Today, for example, we're used to seeing little signs in hotel bathrooms asking us to save our towels between uses.

I think it's slowly getting there. Not too long ago, people might have cocked their heads and looked at you sideways if you mentioned cruelty-free toiletries. On the plane in India, their meals are "vegetarian" or "non-vegetarian." In Los Angeles at Mohawk Bend, they have non-vegan dishes marked, "NV?" I saw that and thought, the pendulum is swinging here. The more people say things and ask for things, the quicker things will change. Our motto is never be silent.

Other countries have banned animals in circuses. Will the United States follow?

Yes, it already is, jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Counties are banning wild animal acts or banning keeping wild animals as pets. There was a time you could just buy a chimpanzee to raise as a child in your home, only to find out they're 10 times stronger than you and want to mate. You remember Mike Tyson used to have tigers in his Las Vegas mansion? Those days are going.

What other animal-friendly steps can we take before and during travel?

- People can always contact us at Peta.org with questions. We're happy to research.

- We work with Humane-Trip.com, which helps people who are compassionate, ethical, animal-friendly travelers to choose good destinations and get good deals from companies that are animal-friendly.

- Pick up trash on the beach. A lot of beach toys are sold in plastic net bags that end up blowing into the water, and anybody from a herring to a seal to a turtle could get their head stuck and not extricate themselves and die. I always have a plastic bag for trash inside my beach bag.

- If you go to an underdeveloped country where you're likely to find animals in trouble, don't just turn around and think it's hopeless. Make inquiries about shelters. I carry a can or two of pop-top cat food that has come in handy for a starving cat; or a thin leash to try to get a dog off the street.

- Wherever you're traveling, know the words for "I am vegetarian," as well as "Please," "Thank you" and "There's an injured animal. Can you help me?"

What else do you do during your travels?

I like to tithe a little bit of vacation money when I travel. It could be for stray dogs or the local humane society that's trying to help the carriage horses. All the hotels and airports and roads have taken habitat away from animals and shrunk their world. So giving some money — it may not be much for you, but may be a lot for them — is like the tourist tax at hotels. But it's a self-imposed tourist tax to do good.

travel@washpost.com

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