

TOUCHING THE WORLD'S EDGES

In a tiny corner of Thailand in Lum Sum, the so-called “Tiger Temple,” originally intended to be an animal sanctuary, has been long accused of mistreatment of the creatures it promised to protect, violating numerous policies and regulations intended to protect Thai wildlife. Sadly, institutions like this one where animals and people alike are exploited in order to rake in tourist money are increasingly common, although many face pressure to practice more ethically with increased agitation from environmentalists and humanitarians today—for instance, after over a decade of controversy, Seaworld has finally agreed to end the breeding and captivity of killer whales. If I had a million dollars to commit acts of kindness, I would use it to aid in the fight against unethical tourist operations and amplify the voices of those who find difficulty in doing so themselves.

My interest in ethical tourism stems in large part from my passion for travel. For instance: In another part of Thailand, the Padaung hill tribe attracts tourists to their village because of their unique tradition of women placing brass rings around their necks as a symbol of beauty, which, over time, makes it appear as if their necks have been elongated to unnatural lengths. Although the Padaung women don't mind foreigners' curiosity, as refugees from Myanmar, running a tourist village like this is one of their only options. They and other tribes like them are still treated like outsiders, and they lack access to many rights and services that Thai citizens have. As someone with ambitions to travel the world one day, the idea of interacting with cultures so drastically different from my own intrigues me. But as someone who has also always been interested in activism, I also know that just because something is popular doesn't make it right.

The issue of unethical tourism in particular is one that will come up almost immediately for anyone researching international travel, especially to more “exotic,” off-the-beaten-path destinations. If I had a million dollars, I would use the money in multiple ways, with the overarching goals of education and change. In terms of change, that means things like hiring lawyers and organizing protests, and, if successful and necessary, providing support needed for the transition to a new life of those affected. However, in order to make people more informed about the ethics of tourism and other cultures in general, the majority of money would go into creating independent documentaries, informational websites, or even short advertisements for YouTube or television. I care about making sure my generation knows about this issue, because as the next generation of potential world travelers, we have more power than we sometimes realize to make a difference. Being able to spend some of that money to travel to various places to interview people and learn more about different cultures would be extremely valuable, and would allow insight to the lives of various peoples which westerners don't often get the chance to see. For many (like the Padaung), being interviewed and filmed is a show of appreciation of the beauty of their culture, and an act of kindness in itself.

In the end, I don't have millions to contribute to the fight against unethical tourist attractions. But neither did the many protesters and other activists who pressured Seaworld to stop keeping orcas. Although I don't have unlimited resources and power, I can still add my voice to the campaign for justice. For anyone out there who wants to help others in situations like this but doesn't think they can: The simple act of your support is worth much more than you believe, and, for those who will someday benefit from your kindness, means much more than you could ever imagine.