

**Environmental, Food and Rural Affairs Committee Inquiry:  
Animals Abroad Bill**

**Submission from ABTA – The Travel Association**

**Introduction**

1. ABTA is the largest travel association in the UK, representing over 4,300 consumer brands – approximately 90% of the package holiday industry. Our Members range from small, specialist tour operators and independent travel agencies specialising in business and leisure travel, through to publicly listed companies and household names, from call centres to internet booking services, and from high street retailers to homeworking travel agents. Pre-COVID, ABTA's Members had an aggregate annual turnover of more than £40bn.
2. ABTA believes that travel and tourism is a powerful force for good: creating economic and social value, sustaining jobs, supporting businesses and boosting inward investment not only for destinations where many livelihoods depend on tourism, but also here in the UK.
3. Travel companies are addressing the environmental and social challenges that tourism faces by, for example, delivering on carbon reduction targets, developing excursions which maximise the benefit to local communities, reducing single use plastic and implementing human rights and animal welfare policies.
4. ABTA is committed to working with our Members, their suppliers, destination authorities, travellers, the wider industry, and the UK Government to build a more sustainable industry so that tourism is a benefit to everyone.
5. Building on ABTA's longstanding work on sustainability, our Tourism for Good<sup>1</sup> report provides a framework to guide ABTA's activities to support its commitment to continue to champion sustainability with its Members, the wider travel industry, destinations and customers, as well as ways in which this can be supported by policies and action by government.

**ABTA's Animal Welfare Guidelines**

6. The recognition of the importance of animal welfare in tourism is not new. ABTA has been leading the way on animal welfare in the UK and global travel industry for over 10 years – developing the first ever guidelines for animal welfare in global tourist attractions.<sup>2</sup> The guidelines, developed in consultation with a broad range of experts across NGOs, academia and industry, help our Members, as well as their suppliers and customers, to manage interaction with animals – laying out requirements for animal welfare and highlighting unacceptable practices.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.abta.com/industry-zone/reports-and-publications/tourism-for-good>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abta.com/industry-zone/sustainability-in-travel-and-tourism/animals-in-tourism>

### ABTA's guidelines on elephants in tourism

7. ABTA believes strongly that elephants should not be subject to punishment and cruelty in order to make them submissive to humans. There is now a strong weight of evidence to suggest that harmful training methods of elephants are widespread. For that reason, ABTA revised its guidelines, working with experts and Members to update these, categorising activities such as contact or feeding of elephants without a barrier as unacceptable, including riding and bathing elephants. Elephant shows such as headstands, football or painting are also unacceptable. The guidelines also state that the revised basic welfare requirements, which build on the extended 'Five Domains Model' of animal welfare, should be met. The vast majority of ABTA Members, including the UK's largest travel companies, have already stopped selling elephant rides and similar activities and we encourage consumers to avoid these activities.
8. In this context, ABTA's submission to this inquiry will focus on the proposals contained within the anticipated Animals Abroad Bill which aim to legislate to end the domestic sale and advertising of experiences overseas, like elephant rides, that are cruel to animals.

### Response to inquiry questions

***What will be the impact of the proposed domestic ban on advertising and offering for sale overseas attractions, activities or experiences that involve the unacceptable treatment of animals?***

9. It is important to note that ABTA supports the intention of the Animals Abroad Bill, and we are supportive of the Government taking action on the sale of tickets in the UK to attractions which involve activities like riding or bathing with elephants – ABTA's own guidelines say these activities are unacceptable.
10. However, we are acutely aware that even if UK travel companies stop selling an attraction, this doesn't mean that the problem of poor treatment of animals (in this case elephants) goes away – the attraction can still exist and be visited by tourists from other parts of the world, or be booked independently by UK travellers in-resort. This is why ABTA Members also work with local suppliers in destinations to help them to develop responsible environments for tourists to admire elephants. When travel providers and suppliers work together, visitors can have meaningful, rewarding experiences and standards of animal welfare and customer health and safety can be upheld.
11. Understanding the complexities around elephants in tourism, such as the dependence on these animals for communities' livelihoods and cultural attitudes towards animals, is an important part of this work. Working with local suppliers to change practices takes time, and change will not happen overnight. Despite these challenges, progress is being made as travel companies work together with local communities to develop more positive and responsible ways of involving elephants in the tourist experience.
12. As with any new legislation, ABTA would also urge the Government to ensure that the proposed bill is drafted in such a way that any unintended consequences, such as an increase in the financial or administrative burden placed on travel businesses, and particularly SMEs, are minimised, while maintaining the bill's overarching objective. It is ABTA's understanding that the Animals Abroad Bill will aim to legislate for a ban on both the advertisement and the promotion of low welfare experiences. ABTA will await the publication of the bill before making a detailed assessment as to its proportionality and impact on travel businesses.

***Who should be responsible for ensuring attractions, activities or experiences overseas do not cause the unacceptable treatment of animals?***

13. Current global legislation relating to animal welfare, animal acquisitions and keeping of animals is complex and subject to local variations. ABTA develops and provides guidance to our Members and their suppliers on animal welfare, but does not have the powers to make legally enforceable regulation, either in the UK or overseas. It is neither ABTA's responsibility, nor the place of our Members, to do this. The UK Government should consider working directly with their overseas counterparts to directly influence the behaviour of overseas attractions.
14. Many ABTA Members are implementing animal welfare policies voluntarily, by taking actions such as assessing attractions and including animal welfare standards as part of supplier contracts. Travel companies are also using ABTA's guidelines, including the unacceptable practices overview, to inform what to sell and what to avoid.

**Case study**

15. ChangChill<sup>3</sup>, an elephant camp located near Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, started its journey in 2017, then still known as Happy Elephant Valley. With the support of World Animal Protection, and some of the world's leading travel companies, ChangChill has transitioned away from commonly seen activities that allow tourists to ride, bathe and feed the elephants, to allow the six resident female elephants the freedom to roam the valley, graze, and bathe in the river, mud and dust, while socializing with each other. Visitors are no longer allowed to directly interact with the elephants, but are now given the chance to observe elephants as they spend their days in the valley. Visitors can learn from the mahouts about their role in Thai culture and history and prepare herb vitamin balls for the elephants, or view the elephants from the observation deck.

**Conclusion**

16. In many tourism destinations around the world, opportunities to view or interact with animals are commonly offered and very popular with many holidaymakers. These experiences can be enjoyable, educational and support conservation. However, where experiences are not carefully managed they can jeopardise animal welfare and people's holiday experience. Animal welfare is a complex area and ABTA provides guidelines for the tourism industry on basic welfare requirements and unacceptable practices.
17. Stopping the sale of low welfare activities in the UK won't stop people from visiting these attractions, as travellers can still book them independently. But it does give companies a greater platform to work together with local communities to develop best practices in the way tourists can experience wildlife. When travel providers and suppliers work together, visitors can have meaningful, rewarding experiences and standards of animal welfare and customer health and safety can be upheld.

**Further information**

For further information, please contact ABTA's Public Affairs Team (E: [publicaffairs@abta.co.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@abta.co.uk))

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<sup>3</sup> [www.changchill.com](http://www.changchill.com)