

Open Zoo & Safari, Kanchanaburi

First Visit: 30th May 2013

One of our researchers visited the safari during this time. However, it was a general visit with no counting of tigers and just a general overview of the situation. Therefore, the observations noted in the second visit are much more meaningful - the same researcher has visited in all three of the subsequent visits.

Safari Zone - four tigers in the enclosure with grass, natural vegetation, platform and ponds. Tigers appeared to be relaxed.

Cub Zone - at the front of the park, young leopards were in small pens for tourists to get photos.

Big Tiger photo - an adult tiger, Blue, was chained to a wooden platform for the day so that tourists could get photos with him.

Second Visit: 12th August 2015

Two years on from one of our researchers initial visit and a lot had vastly improved. Much however had not, and the apparent trading of the big cats to other facilities within the country, was reported to be ongoing.

For the majority of the tigers, their lives are relatively pleasant. As with most places in Thailand, they start their lives being tourist props, bottle fed and played with by tourists. If they are lucky they then will migrate to the Safari zones. These are large spacious enclosures full of natural environment, ponds, trees, grass hiding places etc, and are pretty impressive. However, the adult tigers are only out in this area four tigers at a time and on rotation. It is unclear what this rotation is, if it really exists at all.

Around the back are the night cages (or day cages for some). These are the standard 4x4m, with no enrichment or platforms to speak of and all consist of concrete flooring. Water is provided to all tigers in all areas. Some of the tigers here do not go out into the Safari Zone but are confined here indefinitely. One of the tigers, a female, is highly emaciated and never leaves. Breeding also takes place here. Heng Heng, a very cross-eyed male appears to be the main father. He was out in a small, barren concrete are, adjoining the other cages, reminiscent of a prison yard. He did appear to be very people-friendly but would not stop pacing.

Blue - the photo prop tiger - was still out on the platform for photos. He was not out all day but during the busiest hours. He resides in a small set of cages by himself, away from any other tigers and near to the giraffe and zebra housing. Originally he only had the indoor cage area but has recently had an outdoor extension put in, though this is still concrete-floored.

Near him at the front are three pens containing big cat cubs of various species. On this visit there was one tiger cub living with some lion cubs. Tourists can enter and play with them for an added cost.

A positive note for the park however, is that there is a dedicated team of volunteers who have strived to make the improvements that is now being seen. More enrichment and better healthcare for the tigers are just two of the changes that have been gradually implemented, however the practice of declawing all the cats has not been stopped, but every little helps and here in Thailand things do go slow. One of the big changes was the arrival of the Big Cat Garden, where sub-adult cubs can now go to roam a small enclosure complete with platforms and numerous toys. Visitors can enter and play with the cubs in a much less restrictive environment. It also helps in the transition for these cubs as they later head on to the Safari Zone.

Our researchers were happy to see some positive changes and hope these volunteers can continue forward.

Third Visit: 3rd March 2017

The Safari Zone, Big Cat Garden and Cub Photo areas are all still very much present. However, the big tiger photo with the tiger Blue, is now ended and no other big cat has taken his place meaning. While tourists can still get photos with tigers and other big cats, none of them are restrained. Blue now lives permanently in his small cage, which now has a pond - still no interaction with con-specifics and minimal enrichment. He remains very friendly with humans.

Small cubs to sub-adults are still kept in mixed species grouping and the younger ones can be bottle fed by tourists in the pens at the front. Cubs display a lack of fear towards people both staff and tourists and are generally playful and friendly. This is the same in the Big Cat Garden area where they have more space to roam and the improvement of having a large pond added to this enclosure. There was still a lot of enrichment items though less than the year before.

The Safari Zone remains the same. There is no permanent enrichment within the area, however the volunteers do run a consistent enrichment programme in the mornings before tourists arrive. This involves creating various tactile and sensory items thrown in to the areas. Again, there only appeared to be a few tigers in the area - other tigers could be seen pacing back and forth in their cages at the back. Tigers were disinterested in the vehicles, generally sleeping or, in some cases, pacing.

Volunteers report that new enclosures are to be built and potentially a retirement and/or breeding area created. Trade in big cats of varying species appears to be on-going.

Fourth Visit: 15th April 2018

Safari Zone, Big Cat Garden and Cub Zones were all much the same. There were more cubs in the Cub Zone and the areas had expanded. Each had some enrichment. The Big Cat Garden has declined somewhat with still less enrichment than before. Cubs in here appear to be suffering from various health issues with a female lion cub displaying an inability to walk properly. The Safari Zone is now overcrowded with 12 tigers out in the one area at the same time.

One of these was Blue who has finally been moved to the back area with his own species and now has access to this larger area - a happy ending to his tale. One younger tiger, recently moved from the Big Cat Garden displayed aggression and fear when the Safari bus and other vehicles came near.

A new feeding programme appears to have been implemented where tourists can feed the tigers from the outside of the enclosure. This involves using pieces of meat on sticks to encourage the tigers to stand on their hind legs. While this is good enrichment, the number of tigers clamouring at the fence for these treats was disturbing and it appears the tigers are kept hungry in order to want these treats. Many were pacing, though this could also be that the tiger enclosure is right next to an enclosure full of deer, thus creating a stressful environment.

The welfare situation here is going downhill once more.

Fifth Visit: 6th April 2019

Safari Zone and Cub Zone are all very much the same. The safari zone still has too many tigers for its size. There were also a number of very young cubs in the Cub Zone.

The Big Cat Garden has been expanded, which was a much needed addition as many of the cubs kept in that area were a lot larger.

The retirement area has also been finished and it appears Blue has been moved into this area alone. The area is a decent size, possibly just under 200sq m, it has vegetation and a pond. However it is fully walled in with only a few windows for the visitors to look in. It does not appear to have much in the way of enrichment. None of the areas really do, the volunteers apparently do enrichment activities in the morning. Cages appear barren and some are lacking in water.

Overall, the Safari Park has declined in recent years.