



Too Close For Comfort

story and photos by ADAM M. ROBERTS

October 9, 2004. The tiger was about ten feet away. Sure, he was in a zoo enclosure, behind an iron gate, but this wild animal, capable of killing a man, was still only 10 feet away. Strangely, the padlock on the door was open. I opened the door and entered a small utility room, filled with mops and buckets. A smaller gate led into the tiger enclosure. There was the tiger, on the other side of the gate, 10 feet away. But that small gate was also unlocked. With curiosity, I opened the gate, and the tiger arose and slowly crept in my direction. I quickly closed the gate and backed out of the room. What if the tiger got through the gate before I closed it? What if it was not me at that open gate? What if it was a lost 8-year-old child?

The Sriracha Tiger Zoo, an hour outside of Bangkok, Thailand, is truly an amazing place. Boasting more than 400 tigers, a handful of Asian elephants, piles of crocodiles, camels, snakes and other exotic animals, the zoo has some intriguing, yet troubling exhibits.

In one glass room, a farrowing crate entombed a pig who, lying on her side, nourished both her piglets and tiger cubs. Across the hall, another glass

room housed a female tiger, who fed piglets adorned in tiger-print costumes. This incongruous display was replicated elsewhere, where enclosures housed tigers, pigs, and dogs together.

In another area, a visitor could feed milk to a young tiger resting on his or her lap—a young tiger still in possession of his claws. When a tiger clearly had his fill and became restless, he was yanked away, carried off to a holding area and quickly replaced by a fresh feline face. There appeared to be an endless supply of animals available to meet the demand for photos.

There was a tiger circus, not dissimilar from a circus anywhere else: tigers leaping through rings of fire, walking across a double tightrope, parading around the ring on hind legs, and riding around on the back of the horse. Up close, however, one could clearly see the animals' debilitation and fear. All of the animals awaited their turn to perform in a gated tunnel, keepers constantly poking them with a steel pole through the iron mesh. The animals in the show were smacked in the face with the pole fairly regularly and most seemed to have drastic weakness in their hind legs. It was a painful display to watch.

The elephant show was equally disturbing. Wandering behind the stage before the performance, one witnessed chained elephants, tethered to the ground by a two-foot chain, swaying back and forth. One elephant had a long, deep scar across his ear; another across her trunk. I witnessed elephants playing basketball, walking across a double tightrope similar to that in the tiger show, dancing, playing the drums, standing on their heads and giving a "Thai massage" to two members of the audience brought on the stage. After the show, the elephants stood in front of the seats taking money from people with their trunks and passing it to the trainers astride their backs.

Sriracha is a combination zoo/circus. Notwithstanding the aforementioned bizarre multi-species enclosures, the potentially dangerous human-tiger and human-elephant close interaction and the fact that many of the tiger enclosures were left unlocked, the enclosures and performances reveal no substantially drastic departure from most facilities of this kind.

What is particularly troubling, however, is the fact that, according to press reports, Sriracha is also breeding

tigers for commercial export. According to the Straits Times newspaper, it is currently under investigation for allegedly breeding protected wildlife illegally. A year ago, the facility was implicated in a sale of 100 tigers to China, where tiger parts are sought after for use in traditional Chinese medicines, despite being illegal.

During the CITES meeting in Bangkok, Sriracha's tigers were "confiscated," though left at the facility, pending an investigation and DNA analysis of the tigers to assess the legality of their origin. AWI is deeply concerned about the welfare and conservation implications of keeping tigers and other endangered species in captivity, as well as the potential pressure to trade in these animals commercially. There is a growing—albeit mistaken—impression that we must breed wildlife commercially to save it.

The seizure of over 400 tigers at Sriracha Zoo suggests the law enforcement authorities in Thailand may share our concern about the humane treatment of captive endangered species, and we encourage diligence in trying to clarify the legality of the origin of the Sriracha tigers.

October 20, 2004. After a brief holiday, I board the Phuket Airplane in Ranong, Thailand for the return flight to Bangkok, and I look at the front page of the Bangkok Post. "Virus kills 23 tigers at private zoo," the headline reads.

Sure enough, the avian influenza was killing the tigers I had been so close to less than two weeks before. It seems that the staple of these tigers' diet is raw chicken carcasses from a nearby poultry processing plant. As a result, Sriracha was shut down. Temporarily.

Dozens more tigers were diagnosed with the virus, and more than 80 died or were euthanized during the month-long closure, although some reports had the tiger mortality at well over 100 animals. Meanwhile, not surprisingly, millions of chickens also were destroyed.

Undaunted, hundreds of visitors reportedly flocked to Sriracha's reopening in November, taking advantage of the free admission. While the zoo has allegedly stopped the practice of patrons taking photographs while holding and feeding tiger cubs, there is no indication that the larger safety issue of unsecured enclosures has been addressed. We await the outcome of the investigation into the sale of tigers to China as well. 🐾

Photos, clockwise from top left: Unlocked gate brings a tiger too close to the author; countless tiger cubs were brought to visitors who feed them bottles of milk; the massive entrance to Sriracha Tiger Zoo; tigers and pigs bizarrely are forced to share life together; elephants criss-cross a tightrope as one of many sad animal acts; an elephant's trunk bears the scar of a difficult life in the captive entertainment industry—another elephant at the facility had a similar scar across his ear.