

“How Much is that Slow Loris in the Window

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Feeling confident in my ability to navigate Bangkok’s largest capitalistic labyrinth, recently I ventured to the infamous Chatuchak market. Shuffling amongst a sea of locals peppered with gaggles of tourists, I was reminded that if you can’t find it at Chatuchak, it probably doesn’t exist.



Wending my way further into the bowels of the market, not knowing if I would be able to find my way out again, I came upon an area of stalls hidden away in the far corner filled with types of animals that I have never seen in Thailand outside of the Dusit Zoo. Rows of cages contained strange fish, fowl and beasts of all types; I’ve spoken to others who’ve seen a clouded leopard and even Rihanna’s photogenic friend the slow loris.

Despite periodic raids by authorities that always generate media buzz internationally, these vendors appeared to be advertising their endangered species for sale with relative impunity.

Although the prospects of owning the only slow loris or wide-eyed lemur in your neighborhood may sound tempting (or not), beware that endangered animals, along with a list of others, are illegal to buy and sell in Thailand. Trade in

“preserved” (endangered) or protected wild animals and products made from those animals is governed by the Wild Animal Preservation and Protection Act B.E. 2535 (1992).

Under this Act, both the purchase and sale of preserved or protected animals or products made from these animals could result in a fine of 40,000 baht and/or an imprisonment of up to four years. Ignorance is no defense under the law, so it is best to know exactly what you are purchasing and from where it originated before handing over your baht.

The Act lists over 1000 preserved and protected species, ranging from crab-eating macaques, to flying squirrels, to banded surilis, to giant clams, which cannot be bought or sold without permission from the Director-General. Just because a creature is for sale, does not mean it is legal for you to buy it. For example, despite their prevalence in marketplaces, it is against the law to purchase any type of turtle shell in Thailand. The purchase of products made from preserved and protected species can result in the same penalty as the purchase of the animal itself.

Though on paper the legal sanctions are designed to have a deterrent effect, the continued existence of animal marketplaces like Chatuchak means that enforcement of the law is rather limited.

Thailand does not have direct laws against the animal cruelty that arguably takes place in markets like Chatuchak by vendors of endangered species and their suppliers, but there has been a recent push in that direction. In November of last year, the House of Representatives held its first reading of the long-awaited Animal Welfare Bill for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It has since seen little movement within the Parliamentary halls, but is slated for its second reading in the House soon.

In addition to introducing the penalties for those caught treating animals cruelly, this legislation goes on to create a National Commission who will be tasked with regulating the measures prohibiting the acts of cruelty that create unnecessary suffering to animals and authorizing officials to act on behalf of the State when inspecting suspected venues and vehicles for evidence of animal ill treatment, and if necessary, confiscating animals. Acts of cruelty include exposing an animal to drugs or other toxins that cause suffering, taking newborns away from their mothers, and failing to provide treatment for an animal that has become sick or injured. The Commission will also draft the implementing regulations for all persons in regards to animal welfare and the duties of persons responsible for animals to ensure suitable welfare including methods of transport and the prevention of animal abandonment.

Thailand is naturally endowed with types of animals that are found in few, if any, other locations in the world. As a consumer it is important to verify both from a legal and moral point of view that you are not purchasing products made from endangered or protected animals. Historically we have relied on “beasts of burden” like the elephant and buffalo that have been used for centuries in construction, agriculture, and even national defense.

It is important that we implement laws like the Animal Welfare Bill to ensure that these and other animals are treated humanely. After all, we are all animals ourselves.

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