
Chiang Mai Night Safari

by [Peter Dickinson](#)
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The Chiang Mai Night Safari is located about twenty minutes outside of the City of Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. The [Night Safari](#) is open seven days a week from eleven in the morning till eleven in the evening. Last ticket sales are at 10 p.m.

Chiang Mai Night Safari covers approximately 131 hectares which are divided into three zones. The North Zone and South Zone are only accessible by tram. The smaller 'Walking Zone' is, as the name suggests, an area which is visited on foot.



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/neurox/353737566/>

The website for the Night Safari states "**Chiang Mai Day & Night Safari is considered to be the most beautiful night safari in the world**". Well if they are not going to say it then who will? It is big, in fact twice as big as Singapore Night Safari and it is attractive but the Singapore Night Safari leaves Chiang Mai in the shade.

In fact it could be argued that Chiang Mai can no longer be called a Night Safari as it also operates during the day. This would probably make Singapore unique in that it is only open at night.

Another claim associated with Chiang Mai is that it is only the third night safari or nocturnal [zoo](#) in the world. This is incorrect as without getting picky with a worldwide assessment there was already nocturnal visits allowed in Khao Kheow in [Thailand](#) and at least two collections in Malaysia.

The Night Safari Zones originally were called Savanna, the Jaguar and the Predator. These names have since dropped out of use. So too has a lot of the effort in creating effect. In the months after the Chiang Mai Night Safari first opened there was a least some effort made to hide fencing and electric fences either by disguising them or with subtle lighting effects. In 2011 no effort is being made at all and electric fencing is visible everywhere. The use of lighting too has been lost with much of the tram rides being made in complete darkness with

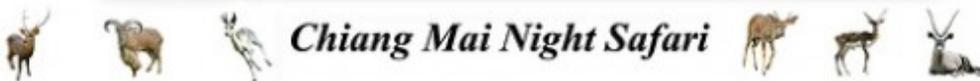
occasional bursts of the spotlight. The one benefit here is that the two diurnal birds of prey on display are no longer under harsh spotlight during the night.

Staying with lighting. Within the Walking Zone it is now extremely bad in that a trip or fall is a real possibility.

Chiang Mai Night Safari expected to open to the public on the 13th April 2005 as this was considered an auspicious date. Various delays stopped this happening and the actual opening did not take place till February 6th 2006.

The entrance area to the Night Safari is as impressive as it is beautiful. Its nearest competitor is probably [Bali Safari and Marine Park](#). The Night Safari goes one better however in that there is much in the way of art to admire here. When it first opened there was a surplus of food outlets. These have now disappeared giving the whole area a much more open and relaxed atmosphere.

Sadly this place has jumped onto the [animal petting bandwagon](#) with visitors being allowed to have their photos taken with lions and white tigers. This to my mind puts the place into the same genre as the Sri Racha Tiger Zoo and the infamous [Tiger Temple](#).



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/neurox/361277149/>

Chiang Mai Night Safari was a pet project of the former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and like him it has had a somewhat chequered history. At the official opening of the park a banquet was planned of dog, tiger, lion, elephant and giraffe for which guests were expected to pay 4,500 Thai Baht. Hardly the best of ideas for a zoo to come up with and naturally there was widespread protests from various conservation bodies. Happily the protests did get noted and the exotic menu was downgraded to farm reared crocodile and ostrich. The project director Plodprasop Suraswadi stated "*Any animal that is on display [at the zoo] will not be on the menu because it will cause confusion and misunderstanding about the intentions of the Chiang Mai Night Safari*". Noble words which leave one wondering exactly what the intentions are because without the protest the meal would certainly have gone ahead. Confusion and misunderstanding are extremely easy in the circumstances because earlier The Night Safari's project director,

Plodprasop Suraswadi, had told reporters: *"The zoo will be outstanding, with several restaurants offering visitors the chance to experience exotic foods such as imported horse, kangaroo, giraffe, snake, elephant, tiger and lion meat."*

The Night Safari project was part of a parcel of planned animal related projects. There was also *"Elephant Park and Bird Tunnel"*. *"Pisal said the Elephant Park and Bird Tunnel would be finished by the end of 2006 and located next to the night safari. It is expected to cost Bt700 million to develop the 600-rai area. There will be more than 600 elephants, which will make it the country's largest elephant park. The Bird Tunnel will be 500 metres long, making it the world's longest, and feature various species of birds and butterflies."*



Elephants and Fire



The whole Chiang Mai Night Safari project was a bit of a mystery. The land acquisition and awards of contracts were not transparent and there were questions asked in the Thai Parliament. The Night Safari was actually built by the Thai Army with design and input from the National Parks department.

Only months after opening Thai media claimed that 104 animals had died and animals were dying every day. Deaths included *"three out of six crocodiles had died of infection and one hyena had been eaten by others."* This report caused some concern to animal activists in Australia who were aware of a proposed animal swap. Eight Asian elephants in exchange for 40 native Australian animals.

On the matter of these deaths the Chiang Mai Night Safari Project Director Plodprasop Surassawadee**stated *"most deaths in the safari, resulting from the blood lost after the [cutting of their wings](#) to prevent them from escaping. He insisted this method was an international practice. Large animals that died include 2 giraffes and a hyena. A baby giraffe died because the mother would not feed it, and its mother died due to complications inside its womb and that Chiang Mai Night Safari has as many as a thousand animals and 100 types of faunas at present, and the deaths amounted to less than 1 percent of the total number. He believed the news was spreaded from ill-intentioned people or certain NGOs aimed at destroying the reputation of the safari."*

Before this Australian exchange fuss had died down a new one arose. It was reported the Night Safari would be sending 29 animals to the Guangzhou Panyu Xiangjiang Safari Park in China in September 2006. These would include five Elephants, Chimpanzees, Douc Langurs and False Gavia. Chiang Mai Night Safari would receive 89 animals in exchange. These would include White Tigers and Yaks. Questions were immediately asked as to the origins of the animals that the Night Safari proposed to export. The Chimpanzee was believed to have come from the infamous [Sri Racha Tiger Zoo](#) whereas the Night Safari did not have Douc Langurs or False Gavia.

Continually courting controversy the Chiang Mai also got itself involved in the Thailand Orangutan Saga. 53 Orangutans were smuggled illegally into Thailand by the commercially exploitative and conservation irrelevant [Bangkok Safari World](#) (some of which are still being used for Orangutan Boxing Matches even today). Five of these illegally held animals were on loan to Chiang Mai Night Safari. In the discussions surrounding these smuggled Orangutans the Night Safari stated that they wished to keep them instead of repatriating them.

Then there was the escape of a wolf, one of six grey wolves bought from the Czech Republic. It was recaptured a month later but not before it had killed more than 100 chickens. Sadly it died whilst being treated for injuries sustained in its recapture.

As can be expected with a start like this things carried on getting worse till just before Christmas in 2008 the Bangkok Post issued a story to say that *'300 animals die from poor care'*. Zoo News Digest had foreseen the situation some time before and remarked upon it and actually warned off for doing so. The Bangkok Post went on to say: *"A chronic lack of experience among zoo keepers had led to the deaths of almost 300 animals at the Chiang Mai Night Safari in just two years, zoo director Preecha Ratanaporn said yesterday. Poor diet and inadequate care from the zoo's veterinarians had caused the demise of many animals, including zebra and giraffe, he said "*

Here there is some confusion as to exactly who was running the Chiang Mai Night Safari because in February

"According to the Cabinet, the [Zoological Park Organisation](#) was to take control of the operations of the Chiang Mai Night Safari on January 22. The order will see the Special Zones Development Organisation for Sustainable Tourism, which now governs the safari, transfer power to the Zoological Organisation of Thailand and establish a company in which the government is the sole shareholder.

The Zoological Park Organisation is part of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and will therefore put most of its emphasis on the care of animals.

The Director of the Night Safari, Upatharn Bhava-phutanont na Mahasarakham, said that he and the safari's employees would accept the order, although they were not in full agreement with the decision, and would respond to the new plan in the near future.

Before the order was launched, about 200 staff at the Night Safari demonstrated on January 20 in front of Chiang Mai City Hall against the Cabinet's decision. The protesters believe that the objectives of the Zoological Organisation run counter to those of the Night Safari and therefore limit marketing opportunities....."

.Whereas "safari's employees would accept the order, although they were not in full agreement with the decision" They didn't actually embrace it with vigour as was shown by the demonstration.



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bwaters23/5413497342/>

Plodprasop Surassawadee

****Plodprasop Surassawadee** was the man responsible for the export of 100 Tigers from Sri Racha Tiger Zoo to China in October 2002. In 2007 it was decided to indict him as he had violated Article 26 of the Wild Life Preservation and Protection Act, which prohibits exporting protected endangered species, except for state educational projects.

Ten Chiang Mai Night Safari Employees turned up at court to support him.



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/silviavk/2427540097/>



A Partial Stock List in no particular order

Banteng, Goral, Serow, Yak, Hog deer, Eld's Deer, Sitatunga, Striped Hyaena, Spotted Hyaena, Gaur, Nilghai, Red Kangaroo, White Rhinoceros, Lions, Cheetah, Red River Hog, Wild Boar, Defassa, Ankole, Impala, Eland, Kudu, Water Buffalo, Giraffe, Lion, Cheetah, Ostich, Emu, Zebra, Asian Black Bear, Puma, Painted Stork, Barbary Sheep, Maned Wolf, Gemsbok, White Tiger, Bengal Tiger, Indo-chinese Tiger, Sun Bear, Sambar, Nyala, Red Lechwe, Cassowary, Fallow Deer, Flying Squirrel, Ring Tail Lemur, Black and White Lemur, Malayan Tapir, Brazilian Tapir, Leopard Cat, Greater Flamingo, Clouded Leopard, Sloth Bear, Caracal, Macaws, Pygmy Hippo, Squirrel Monkey, Jaguar, Lesser Mouse Deer, Malayan Porcupine.

Who Runs The Night Safari?

As to who is running the Chiang Mai Night Safari today is a bit of a mystery. It has some links to the Chiang Mai Zoo which it did not have previously but the Night Safari is not a member of the Zoological Park Organisation of Thailand and nor is it a member of SEAZA (South East Asian Zoological Association). It should be a member of both of these if it is actually genuinely serious about "*wild life conservation*" and "*world class standard of education*" as stated in their brochure. Not being a member of either of these organisations suggests they are not a member of any established [breeding programmes](#) and none of their stock will appear in a studbook anywhere.

In my visit I failed to "*gain knowledge about the real natural environment, including eco-systems, wildlife and natural resources.*" .

The Chiang Mai Night Safari needs to do a lot less of blowing its own trumpet and start tuning it. Promoting visits would not be a bad start. Within Chiang Mai there is not a single leaflet for the Night Safari to be had at any of numerous travel agent and 'trip' shops. One cannot escape the publicity for [Tiger Kingdom](#) however.

So is Chiang Mai Night Safari worth a visit? Yes it is. It is impressive and meeting the Giraffes by tram was somewhat special but don't expect to learn anything.

Last updated on June 15, 2011