Cat-Poo-Chino and Captive Wildlife: Tourist Perceptions of Balinese Kopi Luwak Agrotourism

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Abstract

Kopi luwak, known as the world’s most expensive coffee, is made from coffee beans that have been partially digested by the Asian palm civet (Paradoxurus hermaphroditus). This study aims to assess how tourists perceive the inclusion of captive civets within curated Balinese kopi luwak tours by analyzing 3,364 reviews of 25 sites housing live civets, posted to the tourist review platform, TripAdvisor, between October 2011 and March 2020. Overall, reviewers concerned with animal welfare were more likely to leave a negative review. Two emergent themes, encounters with caged animals and encounters with sleeping animals, are explored through a multispecies lens. Civet displays are discussed in relation to passive and true animal encounter, animal dignity, shared suffering, and cognitive dissonance. Although caged practices persist across sites, results also indicate new forms of concealed cruelty as civets are likely sedated to enable photographic souvenirs.

Keywords

Kopi luwak – civet – tourism – encounter – animal welfare

Kopi luwak is an exclusive coffee produced by the partial digestion and excretion of coffee beans by Asian palm civets (Marcone, 2004), a small arboreal nocturnal carnivore native to Southeast Asia (Duckworth et al., 2016). The civet’s digestive enzymes are said to produce a less bitter tasting coffee, low in caffeine and prized by coffee lovers for its nutty aroma and smooth rich taste (Kopi Luwak Direct, 2020). Brought to international fame in 2003 on the...
Oprah Winfrey Show and again in the 2007 film, “The Bucket List” starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, kopi luwak is frequently cited as the most expensive coffee in the world due to its rare and unique production (Muzaifa et al., 2019). Yet with its fame came a shift towards caged farming (Shepherd, 2012). Kopi luwak agrotourism has since emerged as a popular tourist activity throughout Bali, marketed as an exclusive and authentic Balinese experience. Although the concept of “authenticity” has been widely debated within tourism studies (see Reisinger, & Steiner 2006, and Belhassen, & Caton 2006 as examples), the theory of staged authenticity can be observed in many tourist activities from re-enactments (Lovell, & Hitchmough, 2020) to film tourism (Buchmann et al., 2010). Similar findings are observed in sites of kopi luwak agrotourism which are constructed in such a way as to encourage tourists to believe they are witnessing kopi luwak production from bean to cup.

First, tourists are introduced to a small garden of tropical plants, and are invited to see coffee cherries in their natural form. They are then guided towards a row of small cages, each containing a bowl of coffee cherries and one or more civets. Here, visitors can view how the unique coffee is “processed” through civet consumption and defecation. Next, tourists can try grinding the beans by hand and roasting them on a fire, after which they are presented with a complimentary selection of endemic teas and coffees with the option to purchase kopi luwak for a nominal fee (typically $4 USD). The entire curated experience typically lasts no longer than thirty minutes before the tourists exit through a gift shop selling teas, coffees, and various trinkets.

Balinese Tourism

The beauty of the Balinese landscape has been a tourist draw for decades and in the 1970s, designated tourist routes were installed through the rice fields to enable access to the most rewarding views. The subsequent development of tourist facilities along these routes have had a detrimental effect on the local ecosystem as hotels, golf courses, and the rice fields compete for water to sustain them (Cole, 2012). When planned effectively, however, rural tourism has been known to afford communities the opportunity to safeguard environmental biodiversity, local economy, and tradition (McAreavey, & McDonagh 2011). Agrotourism has thus become a popular tourist strategy throughout Indonesia, promoting additional income to farming communities via product and service diversification and sustainable income (Hakim et al., 2019). Although marketed as kopi luwak agrotourism, such sites are small in scale and located in difficult terrain on the island’s main tourist trail extending from Denpasar International Airport in the Southern peninsula, to Mount Batur to the northwest of Mount
Agung, making them unsuitable locations for sites of coffee farming or caged kopi luwak production. In fact, the majority of kopi luwak production for local and global markets takes place in areas far from the tourist trail, in locations that Cahill (2020) likens to Tsing’s (1993) marginalized “out-of-the-way places.”

In 2016, Carder et al. investigated the welfare of civets housed within 16 kopi luwak tourist sites, containing a combined total of 48 wild-caught common palm civets (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*). Their findings were consistent between sites in that all civet housing and husbandry provisions were inadequate in meeting basic nonhuman animal needs. No provisions of enrichment were observed, all civets had either no water or limited access to clean water, and the animals were forced to stand and sleep on either wire mesh or slatted floors, conditions well associated with causing abrasions and injury, as well as stereotypic behavior (Mason, & Latham, 2004).

**Nonhuman Animal Displays**

From zoos to circuses, wildlife is put on display in varying contexts across the globe. Where the media and the public condemn practices such as captive orca performances at SeaWorld and orangutan boxing in Thailand as exploitative (for examples see Bitsky, 2017, and Fluckiger, 2019), immersive eco-tourism such as wildlife tours are often promoted for their conservation potential (Stronza, & Pégas, 2008); arguably achieved through the dilution of the human-animal divide. Contemporary zoological collections have also adopted strategies to diminish the sense of human domination of wildlife, a solution partly achieved by the transition from traditional cages to immersive zoo experiences (Pennisi et al., 2017). Zoological exhibits have progressed in their naturalistic aesthetic, with barred walls giving way to moats and glass windows (Grazian, 2012), all in an attempt to bring the human in to what visitors perceive as animal-dominated landscapes, despite most zoos being located in urban environments (Braverman, 2011). Naturalistic enclosures have long been approved by zoological collections for enhancing positive visitor perceptions as visitors engage with immersive exhibits longer and deem the animal welfare to be greater than non-naturalistic enclosures (Melfi et al., 2004).

Whilst the zoo as an institution has been problematized by many in relation to welfarist perspectives, the anthropocentric exertion of power over animals for the purpose of commerce and spectatorship has been deemed by others as abhorrent. In his 2017 critique “The Problem with Zoos,” Malamud claims “zoos are merely palliatives, giving the public the macabre opportunity to see the last surviving specimens, whose public display titillates audiences aware that these specimens will soon be gone” (p. 397). For Malamud, the zoo as a spectacle of
the vulnerable renders all other objectives, such as conservation and education, obsolete. Indeed, although the level of exploitation can vary depending on the context of confinement, all animals housed in captivity are subjected to the biopolitics of surveillance. Biopolitics, originally theorized to describe the state control of human biological processes (Foucault et al., 2008), is a theory wholly applicable to animals. Animal tourism relies on exerting biopower over animal bodies, bodies which are confined to spaces specifically intended for human viewing. Visibility itself can be a state of vulnerability and the visual gaze has been well documented as an effective strategy of dominance and submission (Holland et al., 2017). Architecturally present in prisons and early zoo enclosures, captive individuals were housed in stalls specifically designed for constant onlooker observation (Braverman, 2012). Similarly, onlooker gaze plays an important role in the othering of animals and women in Thai tourism (Bone & Bone, 2015). Within kopi luwak tourism, civets are housed in panoptic displays, not dissimilar from prison cells, where their bodies and bodily functions are visually consumed and physically commodified. Unlike the specimens Malamud (2017) describes, Asian palm civets are listed as Least Concern by the IUCN (Duckworth et al., 2016). Therefore, their inclusion in kopi luwak agrotourism cannot be justified for conservation purposes, nor is it claimed to be. According to Carder et al. (2016), tour guides openly confirmed the civet’s inclusion was for display purposes only. In Indonesia, civets are often captured by farmers who perceive them as pests (Shepherd, 2008), and where once they would have been disposed of, now these animals find themselves sold into the kopi luwak industry (Shepherd, 2012). Although caged production of kopi luwak has received criticism over welfare concerns, it is unknown how captive civets are perceived by tourists. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze tourists’ attitudes towards the inclusion of captive civets within the kopi luwak tourist setting and whether the use of display civets is a necessary component to the kopi luwak business model.

Methods

Kopi luwak agrotourism reviews were obtained from the TripAdvisor platform (TripAdvisor, 2020). Online review sites are powerful devices for consumer decision making processes (Karakaya & Barnes 2010), and research has shown that prospective holidaymakers seek reviews written by previous clients when making travel decisions (Manap & Adzharudin 2013). At the time of writing, TripAdvisor is the largest user generated tourist review site exceeding 150,000,000 site visits per month (Similarweb, 2021), making it a wealthy
database for ethnographic investigation and a powerful tool for users to base their purchasing decisions (Soomro et al., 2020). TripAdvisor moderates entries before publication and users are encouraged to be open about their opinions and experiences (TripAdvisor, 2020). Previous research substantiates the credibility of TripAdvisor reviews, finding claims of false postings to be unfounded (O’Connor, 2010). In addition to reviewer comments, users are required to rank their experience (1= terrible; 2= poor; 3= average; 4= very good; 5= excellent) allowing for additional quantifiable analysis. Although TripAdvisor offers researchers a large, open-access dataset, two primary cautions must be made. Firstly, not all tourists will take the time to leave a review which underestimates the pool of potential informants. The number of visitors to kopi luwak agrotourism sites is likely much higher than documented here. Secondly, whilst most reviews were written in English, non-English reviews were excluded from analysis to avoid misinterpretation. Thus, the analysis here cannot account for all cultural nuances of kopi luwak tourists. Further reflexive methodological recommendations are provided at the end of this paper.

Kopi luwak agrotourism sites were identified by searching TripAdvisor for keywords “kopi luwak,” “civet,” “coffee,” and “civet coffee.” Sites were selected for analysis on the basis that they either explicitly stated the attraction features animals (denoted by a paw print on the profile page of the attraction), or where photographs uploaded by reviewers clearly depicted live civets as part of the experience. TripAdvisor was selected not only due to its ease of access, customer reach, and subsequent influence potential, but because the data allows for longitudinal assessment of trends in tourist perceptions from the industry’s emergence to the present day. In all, 3,364 reviews of 25 plantations were analyzed ranging from October 2011 until March 2020. Thematic analysis was conducted in three phases. Firstly, reviews were copied into an excel spreadsheet and read for an initial phase of data familiarity. From initial reading, emergent themes and common discourse were then categorized. Finally, reviews were read again where they were scored against each category, and their attributed ranking (1 to 5: terrible to excellent) was noted.

In analyzing the meaning of reviews, the reflexive aspects of Altheide and Schneider’s (1996) ethnographic analysis approach were applied, whereby the perceived reality of the reviewer’s experience was denoted rather than “true or false” claims. For example, if a reviewer believed the animal was sleeping when photographic evidence supplied indicated the animal may have in fact been sedated, the review would not receive a score under “welfare concern” as the reviewer did not express a concern for the animal’s welfare. Reviews which included more than one thematic category (e.g., “we met a civet – so cute!”) were scored twice. Total frequency and percentage of categories are
presented in Table 1. Finally, reviews were then analyzed using two dominant posteriori themes for further critical qualitative analysis, a methodological approach taken from aspects of Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) Grounded Theory. Two themes are discussed: encounters with caged animals, and encounters with sleeping animals.

**Table 1** Thematic categories into which reviews were placed, review excerpts for each category, and total number of times reviews included each thematic category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civet/luwak reference</td>
<td>“You can see the civet cats!”</td>
<td>991 (29.46%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cage</td>
<td>“Probably great coffee if you can ignore the civets caged up”</td>
<td>506 (15%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We got to see the Luwak’s in their cages roaming around.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Animal reference</td>
<td>“… she showed us the gardens, past the animals and the coffee-making process”</td>
<td>268 (7.97%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“A nice surprise was feeding the large bat, and touching the python on the way out!”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cute/adorable</td>
<td>“… they are soo cute, like aussie possums”</td>
<td>68 (2.02%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual (documentary/campaign)</td>
<td>“I saw an article in the paper about PETA’s outrage regarding the luwak coffee farms”</td>
<td>33 (0.98%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“See articles in the Huffington Post and elsewhere”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservation concern</td>
<td>“… how this Kopi Luwak has affected the wild Palm Civet population and the environment of Indonesia is a worry”</td>
<td>39 (1.16%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cruelty/Welfare concern</td>
<td>“… the enclosures are far too small and just not very pleasant”</td>
<td>392 (11.65%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“One of the animals had half a tail missing – the wound looked very nasty”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The animals are drugged”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“… didn’t like seeing the poor civet cats in cages”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Number</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Coffee in general</td>
<td>&quot;... lots of coffee samples to try and buy if you want to&quot;</td>
<td>2882 (85.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Civet coffee specifically</td>
<td>&quot;Cat-poo-chino&quot;</td>
<td>1925 (57.22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Poo coffee&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Kopi luwak&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Education value</td>
<td>&quot;very knowledgeable tour guide&quot;</td>
<td>1903 (56.57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Interesting to learn how the coffee was processed&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Cultural experience</td>
<td>&quot;Everything grown and processed is organic and done the way the Balinese have been doing it for centuries which makes it all the more special&quot;</td>
<td>475 (14.12%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;... this coffee is not even drunk in Bali&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Beautiful scenery</td>
<td>&quot;A gorgeous setting&quot;</td>
<td>1221 (36.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;The views are to die for&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;... great view of the jungle&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Celebrity/press endorsement</td>
<td>&quot;They keep civets to produce the &quot;poop&quot; coffee that seems to be in vogue right now&quot;</td>
<td>20 (0.59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I was very interested to taste the original Kopi Luwak after watching &quot;the bucket list&quot; which came to reality here&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Supporting the locals</td>
<td>&quot;I really think you should buy something if you take the tour, they make their living that way.&quot;</td>
<td>202 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Photo opportunity (location)</td>
<td>&quot;... she took some nice pictures of myself and my partner overlooking the panoramic views&quot;</td>
<td>266 (7.91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Photo opportunity (animal)</td>
<td>&quot;We were lucky enough to hold a Luwak and get a photo with it&quot;</td>
<td>66 (1.96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Rare/unique opportunity</td>
<td>&quot;... the most expensive coffee in the world&quot;</td>
<td>703 (20.9%)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Worth a visit to say you've tried luwak coffee when you get home.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Health benefit/s of kopi luwak</td>
<td>&quot;Luwak coffee is good for health and prevents heart attack&quot;</td>
<td>11 (0.33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Trip advisor rankings remained stable each year demonstrating a consistent trend of positive perceptions towards kopi luwak tourist agrotourism among their visitors. The mean rating each year remained at 4 (“very good”), thus most reviewers ranked their experience of kopi luwak agrotourism positively each year since the industry’s emergence (see Figure 1). Of reviews published by users between 2012 and 2020, 74.51% of reviewers ranked their experience above average (31.4% “very good” and 44.11% “excellent”), whereas 12.59% of users ranked their experience as below average (8.69% and 3.9% for “poor” and “terrible,” respectively).

Emergent Themes

Encounters with Caged Animals

Of the 25 surveyed plantations, all contained civets as part of the curated kopi luwak experience. Tourists described similar captive conditions for civets across all locations. Civets were housed in small cages with mesh, wire, or slatted floors with minimal shelter, and were located near other civets, all of whom were reportedly fed a diet highly (or exclusively) composed of coffee cherries. Reviewers recounted civets “missing a tail,” “unable to stand,” and with “deep wounds.” Enclosures were most often described as “small,” “tiny,” and “dirty,” with the most common depiction being “cage” rather than “enclosure”

Figure 1 TripAdvisor rankings for Kopi Luwak plantations in Bali housing live Civets between 2012 and 2020
or “exhibit” (see Figure 2). The captive conditions detailed by reviewers were consistent with those reported by Carder et al. (2016), indicating similar conditions persist for civets in the tourist setting.

Despite the importance of the civet to the production of kopi luwak, relatively few reviewers (29.46%) commented on observing live civets when describing the tour. Given these results, it may make little sense to include live civets in the experience at all. Agrotourism workers frequently justified the use of live civets as being for “demonstration purposes only” because “tourists want to see them,” yet tourist reviews did not support this assertion. The most common thematic categories were “coffee,” “kopi luwak,” and “scenic beauty,” which implies these features held greater value to tourists. Caged civets may have even detracted from the overall visual aesthetic of the experience.

Historic discourse concerning wildlife and what it means to be wild has traditionally evoked a romanticizing of nature as pristine and free from human influence (Braverman, 2015). As was noted by the following reviewer, the viewing of civets in bare cages evoked a sense of unease for tourists more familiar with naturalistic captive environments:

**Figure 2** Civet feces are placed on display above three adjacent cages of sleeping Civets housed in a Kopi Luwak tourist plantation

*Note: Photograph taken by anonymous TripAdvisor reviewer (TripAdvisor.com)*
It was unsettling to see the civets in cages, I had imagined they might enjoy a more native habitat similar to what one might see at a zoo. 

Reviewer, TripAdvisor

The likening of native habitats to a zoo environment highlights the effectiveness of naturalistic zoo exhibits for promoting positive visitor perceptions (Pennisi et al., 2017). Kopi luwak agrotourism, in contrast, presents a conflicting narrative. Caged civets ultimately unravel the romanticized story of wildlife free from human disturbance as tourists are actively told civets are caged specifically for their viewing privilege. Thus, omission of the civet from user reviews could be a cognitive dissonance strategy, a way to avoid addressing their personal role in the spectacle of civet digestion.

Typically, reviewers who raised concerns for the welfare of caged civets reasoned the practice as unethical either based on the animals’ wildness or their species-typical behavior. Reviewers cited civet behavior as “shy,” “solitary,” and “nocturnal,” terms which were also stated by plantation employees during guided tours. The obvious inability for the captive conditions to meet the needs of nocturnal and solitary animals led many reviewers to conclude the practice was cruel, and so perceived the experience negatively.

Noticeably, most negative reviews depicted the cage as emblematic of a violation of the civet’s intrinsic nature as a wild animal. The emotional impact was clear in those who ranked their experience as “terrible” in relation to animal welfare concerns, describing civets as “neglected” and “terrified.” One reviewer likened the civets’ treatment as worse than that experienced by “convicted murderers” while another compared the enclosures to “the punishment boxes of Japanese WWII prison camps.” Such descriptions imply a heavy emotional burden can be experienced by those viewing poor animal welfare.

Research has shown that persons with high levels of empathy are more likely to support animal rights narratives (Signal & Taylor, 2007), and sharing of images of violence intended to gain an emotional response from onlookers is a well-grounded communication strategy within animal rights discourse (Fernández, 2020). Jenni (2005) describes such imagery as a way of evoking a “vivid awareness of individual suffering” (p. 6). In the case of kopi luwak agrotourism, caged civets become such imagery. The recognition of the web of connection between the suffering Other (civet) and observer (tourist) lead some tourists to experience what Haraway (2008) terms “shared suffering” (p. 71), an appreciation of the fact that the ethical issues surrounding animal treatment (such as the process of kopi luwak production) had far reaching implications beyond the initial interaction (in this case, the tourist facility). Overall, reviewers recognized the role of consumer and tourist as interconnected within the ethics of the kopi luwak industry. Where one reviewer suggested a particular
farm should be avoided “until they stop caging civets for kopi luwak production,” another wrote “please do not support animal cruelty by buying luwak coffee,” illustrating both tourism and consumerism have a part to play in civet livelihood. In this sense, it is not to say that tourists who visited such facilities physically suffered from their experience, but that the emotional suffering felt in response to the vivid awareness of civet suffering was strong enough for tourists to write a plea for civets on the world’s most popular tourist review site.

The perceived violation of civet dignity, in contrast, was exacerbated by the purpose of the civet’s capture, the commodification of their feces. The recognition of the absurdity of kopi luwak production was ironically highlighted by the following reviewer who wrote: “While looking at these depressed looking cat things crapping out coffee beans it reminded me of what my face must look like while I am going to work on Monday morning.” The comparison made here further demonstrates that the caged civet is an evocative reminder of the unequal power dynamics inherent to the human labor forces which prop up capitalist systems across the world. Where a tourist can appreciate their own figurative bondage to such systems, the civet’s literal captivity is a depressing reminder of the status quo. In this sense, shared suffering is felt by way of recognition of the role of living beings in exploitative capitalist systems, a recognition enabled by encounter. According to Wilson (2019), an encounter need not be experienced by both parties. In fact, only one of 3,364 reviewers recounted what Gaita (2016) defines as a “true animal encounter,” an encounter wherein both the human and animal are participant and actor: “It was brown in color, & looked at us intently, scrutinizing us as much as we were scrutinizing it. Funny creature!” Although encounters with animals through passive viewing can be educational and viewed positively (Wineman et al., 1996), true animal encounters in the form of physical interaction and inter-recognition have been shown to heighten the rates of visitor attention and satisfaction within zoological collections (Semeniuk et al., 2009).

Despite the cage itself being a physical barrier to two-way interaction, the civets’ nocturnal and solitary nature is also a significant factor that limits the ability for tourists to experience true animal encounters. On the one hand, the civets’ nocturnal nature and subsequent inactivity in the day significantly reduces interactive opportunities with tourists. The sleeping civet simply blends into the scenery, a cog in the coffee machine that goes relatively unnoticed. On the other hand, where civets were observed awake during daylight hours, their behavior actively contributed to negative tourist perceptions. Stereotypic behaviors, described as unnatural repetitive behaviors without obvious function or goal (Mason & Latham, 2004), were often reported by reviewers in claims that the animals were either “mad” or “going out of their mind”. One review read:
They are nocturnal and need somewhere dark to sleep during the day. Instead, they were madly pacing up and down on bare boards. It was depressing to see. Don't contribute to this industry. Avoid this place.

Reviewer, TripAdvisor

Similar findings have been reported for zoological collections, as visitors are less likely to view their experience positively when stereotypic behaviors are observed (Godinez et al., 2013). Not only does stereotypic behavior imply negative welfare to viewers (Godinez & Fernandez, 2019; Miller, 2012), such abnormal behavior patterns further prevent true animal encounters. The civets either ignored human presence or reacted aggressively to interruption, causing a bite hazard to visitors. Again, stereotypic behavior of civets in kopi luwak tourist sites were previously reported by Carder et al. (2016) in their initial investigation, confirming that the civets’ psychological wellbeing continues to be at risk within kopi luwak agrotourism. In attempts to secure a sense of true encounter for tourists, tour guides and tourists were reported by reviewers to attempt to gain the civets attention in numerous ways. Where some reviewers claimed to have been able to feed the civets coffee beans by hand, others reported stronger measures of human disturbance:

2 luwaks kept in cages near the roasting area & clearly stressed & bored … The guide poked with a stick but they’re nocturnal & felt the need to sleep.

Reviewer, TripAdvisor

**Encounters with Sleeping Animals**

In early 2017, reviews across several tourist plantations depicted a shift towards increased opportunity for a closer human-animal encounter as tourists began reporting civets housed “free” within kopi luwak agrotourism. Photographs uploaded alongside reviews showed a range of scenarios, from civets sleeping on display plinths and coffee tables to tourists holding civets (kittens and adults). It is worth noting that there was no evidence to support the idea that civets were routinely captive bred for the purpose of tourism. Rather, several reviews reported tour guides had claimed they sourced civets from animal markets or directly from trappers for less than $15 USD.

Reviewer perceptions of civets as photo props varied. Several reviewers claimed close contact interactions were the “highlight” of the trip, as they were able to “cuddle,” “hold,” and “pet” a baby civet, albeit at an additional cost. Thus human-animal interaction became exclusive, as demonstrated by the following review: “[the] highlight was Momo the baby civet my little boy got to
cuddle much to the dismay of the 200 other tourists wanting to do the same.” For some, the ability to personally interact with the “star of the show” was worthy of additional payment.

Although it may at first appear to be positive to have fewer caged animals on display, inclusion of civets as close contact photo props provides further economic incentive to retain live civets as part of the tourist attraction. It is also plausible that the “cute” nature of infant civets combined with sharing of images on social media may increase the demand for civets as pets, as has been observed previously for other wild species such as the slow loris (Nekaris et al., 2013). Demand for wild animals as pets carries detrimental welfare and conservation implications. Furthermore, in removing the cage the civet risks being enrolled in a new form of cruelty, both TripAdvisor reviews and photos indicated that civets may be being drugged for safe handling by tourists (see Figure 3). Therefore, the civets’ nocturnal nature has become another exploitable feature, provided as justification for the animals’ sedentary appearance:

Wild animals kept in cages, and one of them put on a table for people to pet it and take photos with it. Most likely it was drugged as it didn’t move at all. I asked why and they just said that it is awake at night. The four ones in cages were oddly enough very active during the daytime.

Reviewer, TripAdvisor

The drugging of animals within wildlife tourism is no new phenomenon. The Tiger Temple in Kanchanaburi Province, Thailand, is one prominent example that has secured global acknowledgment for its controversial animal management practices. Presented as a Buddhist animal sanctuary, the Tiger Temple purveys a narrative of “Buddhist compassion” whereby the tigers are tamed for free-contact tourist interaction. Despite adamantly refuting the claim of physical violence and the use of drugs to maintain tourist safety, abusive coercion and bodily control have been reported by visitors and academics alike (Cohen, 2012). Similar to the symbolic power status of tigers, civets are also portrayed as dangerous animals. Guides often warn visitors not to come into close proximity with caged civets, and large statues of red eyed, sharp toothed civets line the most popular kopi luwak attractions. Yet although their tendency for physical aggression is promoted, their bodily processes are heavily controlled.

Just as Foucault described biopolitics as the act of state control over human bodily processes, so too is it the case for civets embroiled in the kopi luwak industry. State control of the civet is exerted by the Indonesian government, which issues permits for wild harvesting, captive husbandry, and home food
production certificates to regulate the caged production of kopi luwak (Cahill, 2017); where the civets’ bodies are mechanized as part of a mouth to anus production line.

Whether it be for production or tourism purposes, civets use their bodies in protest. In what Guenther (2020) calls “animal resistance” – the showcasing
of behaviors such as heightened or human-directed aggression in response to confinement – civets resist captivity through the expression of abnormal repetitive behavior and biting. Within the tourist setting, civet resistance is countered through further bodily control as reflexive bodily reactions are halted by drugs to enable safe human proximity, a process which also allows the body to be digitally consumed as a tourist’s photographic souvenir. Already stripped from their ability to select their own food and express species-typical behaviors, the liberation from a cage into the realms of unconsciousness simply reshapes the cage from one that is literal to one that is figurative as they become trapped in their own bodies, dispossessed of control.

For some tourists, the caging and suspected drugging of civets in kopi luwak agrotourism only served as another trigger towards ‘response-ability,’ a term denoted by Haraway (2008, p. 88) as the act of responding to the exploited Other with respect, viewing passive observation as active participation in the suffering of others. Such concerns were often expressed in a call to action to prevent ongoing suffering; for example, one reviewer wrote:

Would not recommend this place solely on the fact that they had a luwak which was tranquilized at the shop for people to touch. Was just lying there like he was dead.

Reviewer, Trip Advisor

Yet while there was evidence that tourists were able to identify signs of poor welfare, other tourists misidentified civets as “lemurs” or “monkeys” and in one instance as “meerkats,” showing a lack of prior species or coffee knowledge. Given the high emphasis towards civets as kopi luwak producers during these tourist activities, it is unlikely that the civet as a distinct species was not named during plantation tours; therefore, a general disinterest in the animals can be assumed for these reviewers. Additionally, lack of prior knowledge or interest in animals may be a contributing factor towards the relatively low number of reviews that included a concern for animal welfare along with the high number of users that omitted civets from their review entirely.

Users who ranked their experience as above average despite having raised welfare concerns often opted for passive language such as “poor civets,” “sad looking,” and “bored” – language indicative of a noncommittal approach to ethical concern. Another common theme was the disregard for animal welfare due to the perception that trying kopi luwak was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: “I was reluctant due to how much I read about civet cruelty but went with the flow – when in Rome.” For others, circumvention of animal suffering was achieved through describing civets as kopi luwak “helpers” and “workers.” Such anthropomorphic interpretation of the civets’ role in kopi luwak production
implies that civets volunteer to abide by a metaphorical contract as they enter a mutualistic interspecies business relationship. The coffee beans become currency in such interpretations:

I guess they ‘employ’ the cats instead. So the cats get all the free beans while they save on human labor. It’s a win-win situation ... He said that there were 7 (or 8) civets altogether producing the coffee.

The ability for consumers to recognize yet fail to act in relation to moral concern (a denial of response-ability) for animals has been observed elsewhere with regards to animals as consumable goods. One well established example is that of the “meat paradox,” the claim by those who eat meat to love animals. Rothgerber (2014) claims the meat paradox is perpetuated by socialization practices which encourage children to believe farm animals are happy and treated well. Similar findings were observed here, as many reviewers claimed their civet welfare concerns were abated by their tour guides who assured them that the kopi luwak on sale was either not produced by caged animals (claiming the civets were only held for short periods, e.g., “they are only held for a day before release”), or that while in captivity to produce the kopi luwak, the civets on site were well cared for (claiming the civets were free to roam the grounds at night). Many stated that the civets on display were rescued from wildlife markets, saved from being killed by farmers, would be later returned to the wild, or were already free to come and go as they please, despite no evidence to support such declarations. In some cases, welfare concerns were placated by the suggestion that civets actively choose to return to confinement for tourists to see them when they are set free:

The manager said the civet is released at night and roams freely before returning to the cage at day so the visitors can see it.

Whether reviews which alluded to the assured welfare of display civets were generated out of naivety, cognitive dissonance, or passive indifference is difficult to surmise from reviews alone. Passivity towards animal suffering has been noted by Rose (2011) to be “best understood as the refusal of relationship, the refusal of an ethical call” (p. 98). The similar findings of passivity towards civet wellbeing observed in user reviews may explain the relative low number of concerns towards civet welfare. In this sense, a true animal encounter for these individuals may not be a phenomenon of interest; instead, an anthropocentric stance prevails as the desires of humans are granted more weight than those of the animals servicing the human experience. Kopi luwak is viewed as a unique
experience, one in which the tourist is entitled to partake. In truth, the display of live civets within kopi luwak tourist attractions further resonates with Pachirat (2011), who cautions as to the “Politics of Sight,” or the assumption that to grant systemic violence a veil of transparency is enough to transform such practices. In his seminal ethnographic work on US slaughterhouse practice, Pachirat (2011) uncovers the limitations of such claims, instead positing that sight alone is not enough to instill moral obligation and enact societal change. Unfortunately for the civet, so too might this be the case for those held captive for kopi luwak tourism.

Conclusion

In all, this study has shown the continued popularity of kopi luwak agrotourism since the industry’s emergence, as sites dominate the main tourist route through central Bali. Results here indicate that captive civet housing remains similar to those reported by Carder et al. (2016), as tourists consistently described barren cages unfit for meeting basic civet needs. Overall, most tourists viewed their experience positively, and scenic beauty and coffee were the most cited aspects of the tour. In comparison, caged civets negatively impacted tourist perceptions, resulting in negative TripAdvisor reviews and calls for boycotts. Tourists also reported concerns regarding the suspected drugging of civets to allow for safe public handling. Thus, analysis of reviews has highlighted the possibility of new emergent forms of civet exploitation as photo prop animals.

Overall, TripAdvisor is a useful resource for virtual ethnography, particularly during times of limited global travel such as has been experienced due to the current covid-19 pandemic. Future investigation into the personality types of reviewers would be worth investigating to assess the potential biases within the available dataset for analysis. It is possible that those most deeply affected by viewing animal cruelty elect not to relive the experience through written description. Furthermore, refraining from leaving a review could also act to maintain cognitive dissonance by refusing to admit personal contribution to an industry accused by other reviewers of animal cruelty. Similarly, several reviews analyzed here directed aggression towards tourists who sympathized with civets, and such remarks may deter those with similar concerns for animals from leaving a review. Most limiting, however, is the lack of voice offered to those working in the kopi luwak tourist industry, who were unable to be represented in this study. It would be highly advantageous, therefore, for further research into the kopi luwak tourism industry to involve...
participant interviews with staff and immersive longitudinal ethnographic investigation.

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References


