

How fluctuating levels of tourist interactions affect the sleeping behaviours of African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*)

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Abstract

The visitor effect, as summarised by Hediger (1970) states that visitors will have either a positive, negative, or null effect of captive animal welfare. Various studies have found evidence to support all of these theories, however, until now, no research has been done on whether there is a significant effect of visitors on the sleep behaviours of captive African elephants. It was thought that should there be an effect, this may be an indicator that stress from interactions with visitors during the day has an impact on sleep patterns.

Over the course of 9 weeks a study, the first of its kind, was carried out at Knysna Elephant Park, South Africa, to determine whether this is the case. Results showed that while there was an effect on some areas of sleep, these changes in patterns are likely the cause of foods received rather than an indicator of stress. There were two areas which could not be explained in this manner, however, further studies into the sleep patterns and behaviours of captive elephants are required before an accurate conclusion can be drawn.

Overall, welfare levels at the park should be considered to be high, with the best interests of the elephants there being the priority of the staff.