

# **Night-time, Daytime: Is stereotypic behaviour in African elephants related to levels of tourist interaction?**

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## **Abstract**

The visitor effect hypothesis (Hediger 1970) predicts that the presence of human visitors is a stressor for wild animals in captivity. Different studies have found both support for and challenges to this theory, but a very limited range of species have been studied and almost all have been in a zoo environment. In the present study, eight human-habituated African elephants living in a free-range captive environment in South Africa were observed, and the direct interactions they had with tourists throughout the day were recorded. At night, when the elephants were stabled, their levels of stereotypic behaviour were monitored.

The study found a significant positive correlation between the total human interactions an elephant received and its stereotypic behaviour, both overall across the study period and a short-term effect (interactions from each daytime significantly predicted that elephant's stereotypies the same night). Two types of interaction - the number of touches an elephant received and the number of times it took food offered by a tourist - were also significant predictors, as was the age of the elephant. Some possible interpretations are suggested, together with proposals for future work to investigate the relationship more closely. This study probes several neglected areas of research and finds the first evidence for a short-term link between tourist contact and stereotypic behaviour.