

**Attendance, Composition and Health Status of Captive Elephants
(*Elephas maximus*) at the Annual Sonpur Livestock Fair, Bihar, India**
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ABSTRACT

Attendance, husbandry practices and demographics of elephants attending Sonpur Mela, the largest livestock fair in Asia, is compiled and compared based on the 15 years of data collected from 2001-15. At each health camp organized by Wildlife Trust of India, elephants were assessed for clinical parameters like general body condition, vision impairment, and presence of wounds especially on the foot. Non-clinical parameters recorded included husbandry practices, mode of acquisition of elephants, state of origin, ownership details, distance travelled to the Mela and their previous visitation to the fair.

The health camp team recorded 806 cases, with many of these being repeated cases as elephants often attend more than one fair. The sex ratio of male and female elephants was near equal (51:49), with about 77% of the males being tusked. A sizeable proportion of the elephants (18%) were calves, suggesting that not all of them could be considered born to captive males. Majority of the elephants attending the Mela traveled from nearby districts of Bihar (200 to 400 km), followed by Uttar Pradesh (500 to 1000 km). Almost 43% of the cases showed evidences of improper foot care (over grown toenails, cracks, worn out footpads). Unilateral or bilateral corneal opacity was not uncommon, occurring in 14% of elephants. The condition of elephants that come to Sonpur Mela is a good reflection of the health status of captive elephants in the country.

Annual attendance at Sonpur has been on the decline from 92 in 2001 to only 14 in 2015. This decline of around 84% in 14 years is attributed to: 1) Restrictions on elephant keeping without ownership certificate; 2) Complete ban on elephant trade since 2002; and 3) Non issuance of interstate transit permits by Forest Departments. If the current rate of decline in attendance is an evidence to go by, there may not be any elephants at Sonpur Fair by 2020.