

Ontogeny of the ovarian follicular reserve of the  
African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*)

By

FIONA JANE STANSFIELD

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## List of Abbreviations

2n2c	Two chromosomes, 2 DNA strands, the genetic constitution of oogonia
2n4c	Two chromosomes, 4 DNA strands, the genetic constitution of primary oocytes
3 $\beta$ -HSD	3 $\beta$ -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase
5 $\alpha$ -DHP	5 $\alpha$ -dihydroprogesterone
AMH	anti-mullerian hormone
Ap	Area associated with a point
BCL	B cell lymphoma/leukemia
BV	Biological variation
CE	Coefficient of error
CITES	The Convention in International Trade in Endangered Species
CL	One corpus luteum or more corpora lutea, as would be clear from the context
CN	Corpora nigra
CRL	Crown rump length
CV	Coefficient of variation
D	Dimension, eg. 0–D or 3–D
D1	Diameter 1
D2	Diameter 2
E	For example, E80, embryonic day 80
eIPL	Elephant placental lactogen
EP	Early primary follicle, early primary follicles, or the early primary stage of development of a follicle, as would be clear from the context
FGF	Fibroblast-like growth factor
Fig	Factor in germline
FOV	Fields of view
FOX	Forkhead box



FSH	Follicle stimulating hormone
GDF	Growth differentiation factor
GSC	Germline stem cells
H&E	Haematoxylin and Eosin
HEC	Human elephant conflict
IMS	Industrial methylated spirits
KIT	Tyrosine protein kinase
LH	Luteinising hormone
LIF	Leucocyte inhibitory factor
M	Molar tooth eg MII or MVI
min	Minutes
n	Number of a sample
NGF	Non-growing follicle
NP	National Park
Nv	Number in volume
Oct4	Octamer binding transcription factor 4
OSE	Ovarian surface epithelium
PAC	Problem animal control
pZP	Porcine zona pellucida
P	Value of statistical significance
P13k	Phosphatidylinositol 3 kinase
PGC	Primordial germ cell
sec	Seconds
SF	Small follicle or small follicles, as would be clear from the context
SVC	Savé Valley Conservancy
$\Sigma$	Sum of
t <sup>-</sup>	Segment thickness

TGF	Transforming growth factor
TP	True primary follicle, true primary follicles or a follicle that is at the true primary stage of development, as would be clear from the context
TPM	True primordial follicle, true primordial follicles, or a follicle that is at the true primordial stage of development, as would be clear from the context
UCF	Unbiased counting frame
Vol.dis	Volume of disector
Vref	Reference volume

SUMMARY

Ontogeny of the ovarian follicular reserve of the  
African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*)

By

FIONA JANE STANSFIELD

Promoter: Professor J O Nöthling

Co-promoter: Professor J Soley

Department: Production Animal Studies

Degree: PhD

The aim of this study was to define the ovarian follicular reserve of wild African elephants in terms of its type of small follicles (SF), its establishment and distribution throughout the ovaries, and the change in numbers of SF in the embryo and fetus as well as throughout prepubertal and adult life.

The large elephant population in Zimbabwe provided the opportunity to collect ovaries from elephants culled for management reasons and hunted professionally. In total, gross morphological and histological studies were done on the gonadal ridges from 5 embryos (76–96 days post conception) and ovaries from 11 fetuses (4.8–22.2 months), 29 prepubertal females (2 months–10 years), 24 adult females (11–55 years) and 7 aged females (56–70 years). Specimens were fixed in 4% buffered formalin before a series of 25 µm thick sections were cut and examined using stereological protocols to count SF numbers in each section and thereby calculate the follicle reserve of the whole ovary. Prior to counting SF numbers, their distribution throughout the ovary was studied and the repeatability of counts was validated.

Numbers of SF were highest in mid-term fetuses, lower in fetuses during the second half of gestation, even lower in calves younger than 4½ years, whereas the numbers in calves aged 4½–9 years were significantly higher than those in younger calves, and similar to

what they were in late-term fetuses. The numbers of SF were substantially and highly significantly lower in elephant 10–15 years in age compared to calves aged 4½–9 years, suggesting a reduction around puberty. Thereafter the ovarian reserve fell steadily until depletion around the age of 70 years. During adult life the ovarian reserve was composed of early-primary (EP) and true-primary (TP) follicles. By 45 years of age only TP follicles remained although these enabled oestrous cyclical activity for many more years; of 7 sets of ovaries recovered from females aged 57–70 years, 6 showed evidence of cyclical activity or pregnancy within the preceding 6 years.

The study shows that EP and TP form the follicular reserve from before birth until 45 years, with TP forming the reserve thereafter, which depletes in some old elephants and persists to maximum life span in others.