REVIEW

Ivory: Power and Poaching in Africa

Keith Somerville

Reviewed by John Frederick Walker

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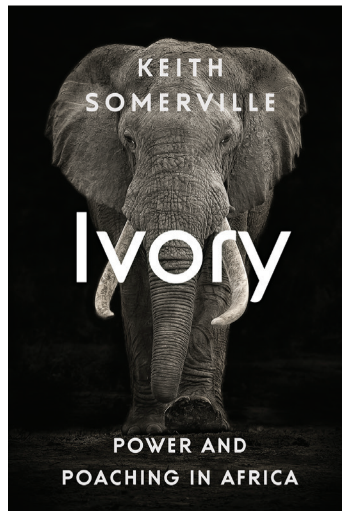
This is an important book, but it's not an easy read. In densely written, fact-crammed chapters, Keith Somerville's *Ivory* lays out a grim, detailed chronicle of the exploitation of elephants and disempowered Africans.



Somerville, a veteran of numerous assignments in Africa during his career with the BBC, is the author of a well-regarded history of the continent. Now a professor at the University of Kent (UK), he brings his journalistic skills to a study of the ivory trade that focuses on African issues.

Along the way, he layers in interviews with prominent ivory trade researchers, from Ian Parker to Iain Douglas-Hamilton, Daniel Stiles to Mary Rice. And he contrasts their highly divergent views to give a wide-ranging account of contemporary elephant conservation debates, ivory burnings and bans.

But he cautions readers that this book is limited and purposely one-sided. It is not a history of ivory, or for that matter, of elephants or conservation; instead it is a history of the development of the poaching and corruption that still feeds the modern ivory trade. "The evolution of the African side of the trade," he states, "is the sole focus of the book."

This means Somerville skips almost all coverage of the external demand side of the trade that has always driven exploitation of African elephants and peoples. There's nothing, for example, on how ivory's allure explains long-standing global interest. Ivory is not simply an attractive, scarce luxury product; its properties as a carving material alone resulted in a vast range of culturally important sculpture, a huge global patrimony. Nor does he address the related and troubling issue of whether bona fide pre-ban ivory carvings should remain objects of trade.

Moreover, Somerville doesn't detail the drivers of habitat loss—the often violent competition for space between growing human populations in Africa and the continent's remaining elephants. Despite efforts to mitigate this impact, from planting chili fences around crops to building highway underpasses, habitat loss continues to grow, inexorably driving down elephant numbers. From that perspective, current poaching losses are simply accelerating inevitable decline.

What Somerville leaves out, however, is compensated by the new material he includes.

The first three chapters offer a highly compressed account of the "bloody and brutal" ivory trade up and through the end of the colonial period. They trace its long alliance with the slave trade and catalog the astonishing numbers of elephant killings in the 19th century needed to sustain foreign demand. But the author also focuses on the colonial separation of African peoples from the wildlife they had long utilized and the problematic criminalization of their hunting practices.

For almost all its history ivory was just another commodity, no more regulated than any other trade. As

Somerville explains, it only gradually came under a degree of control in regions of Africa where colonial powers embraced the trade, as long as they could profit from it by imposing their own regulations, licensing and taxation. They used the revenues to support wildlife management, the creation of parks (devoid of their former inhabitants) and vast game blocks for colonists, safari companies and foreign hunters. They were undeterred by the contradictions. "Game wardens protecting elephants in a reserve," Somerville points out, "could profit by killing elephants on license, while local people were banned."

In succeeding chapters, the author moves from familiar history to issues routinely ignored in conservation circles. He spotlights rampant corruption in newly independent African states, which allowed underground trade in illegal ivory to co-exist with then legal trade structures. Somerville also makes a strong case that influential conservation groups and NGOs failed to encourage wildlife policies Africans needed to take charge of their own natural resources, and benefit from them in a sustainable fashion.

He tracks how the vast human cost of wars for independence, civil conflicts and power struggles in various African nations hid a huge amount of elephant poaching. His dry recitation of damning statistics is sobering. In Angola's protracted civil war, to take one example, the collateral damage to wildlife was staggering: it's long been thought that some 90% of the country's large animals were shot out by the soldiers of both sides, as food, target practice or in the case of the slaughter of 100,000 ivory-bearing elephants by the rebel movement UNITA, so that their tusks could be trafficked to feed its war coffers. Somerville does a careful, trenchant assessment of the apartheid-era South African Defense Force's sorry role in this carnage.

Somerville excels in his analysis of the current overblown "ivory-insurgency" nexus. He explains he was inspired to write the book when this new narrative linking ivory with insurgency emerged. The idea quickly morphed into claims that ivory poaching was underwriting terrorism, which enflamed elephant advocates. In 2013 Interpol's executive director Jean Michel Louboutin said he had no direct evidence of it, but that didn't stop think-tank pundits from calling for the U.S. military to "explicitly include poaching in Africa and illegal trafficking of wildlife as new 'fronts' in the war on terror."

That same year Somerville reported on how poaching in Central Africa was apparently fueling the Lord's Resistance Army and Janjaweed, but when he later "put the evidence, particularly on Al Shabaab, under the microscope," the narrative became far less compelling. His subsequent forensic analysis, detailed here, of Elephant Action League's report, *Africa's White Gold of Jihad*, shows how thin the evidence for the connection actually was.

In his later chapters, Somerville assembles mounting evidence that "burnings and bans" haven't ended poaching and probably won't, but he doesn't always clearly draw out the implications. The 1989 ban was intended as a moratorium to facilitate development of a new trade system, not initiate the permanent proscription of ivory commerce. Now, more than 25 years after it went into effect, there's little interest in developing a workable, transparent legal ivory trade confined to natural mortality and PAC ivory plus bona fide ivory antiques, one that could fund elephant conservation and community support in range states.

That's partly because mainstream conservation groups have grown skittish over openly supporting sustainable wildlife trade policies. That Africans need to benefit economically from sharing habitat with elephants, so they aren't tempted to poach them as a way out of desperate poverty or forced to kill them for their own survival when their crops are consumed or their cows (or families) gored, fails to resonate with first world wildlife supporters.

Unfortunately, anxious to show that they, too, care deeply about elephants, even prominent science-based conservation organizations have joined openly with a long list of animal agenda groups not only in crusading against trafficking in illegal ivory, but in promoting the end of all trade as a foregone conclusion. The zealous embrace of ivory prohibition at all levels—not just international trade but domestic trade as well—would turn over all ivory commerce to criminals. What happens if poaching still continues? As Daniel Stiles has put it, what's Plan B? Take trade in any form off the table, and there's not much left other than draconian enforcement (and its ominous level of extra-judicial killings) to combat poaching.

In his conclusion, Somerville doesn't spell out what could reduce poaching if burnings and bans don't, though he shares his doubts about the uncertain future that lies ahead for elephants and the African peoples that share their habitats. Ivory demand reduction may help, he says, "but ultimately, aligning survival of elephants with workable, locally-acceptable forms of sustainable use is likely to be the only answer that combines conservation of the elephant population with the needs and interests of the human populations in range states."

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