

BOOK REVIEW

Keith Somerville. *Ivory Power and Poaching in Africa*. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017. 368 pp. Maps. Charts. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9781849046763.

People are the primary predators of elephants. Six thousand years ago, elephants roamed Syria, Tunisia, and China. In our modern era, African elephants survive only south of the Sahara. The African elephant population has dropped so much over two centuries we hear claims they are near extinction. A recent email from avaaz.org reads: “In our lifetime, we could live in a world with no elephants, rhinos, or gorillas.”

Keith Somerville analyzes available data about elephants and ivory, past and present, in *Ivory Power and Poaching in Africa*. There are no moral lectures here, no gory description of slaughter. Calmly, coolly, he writes: “In 2013, a new form of poaching developed . . . cyanide poisoning . . . at least 100 elephants died when industrial-grade cyanide was put in watering holes along well-used elephant trails” (213). Outlining conflict between fact and political claims, between rival NGOs, between data and propaganda, Somerville helps us appraise the likely outcome. He does not harangue. He postulates only with sufficient evidence.

Long before European incursion, Africans hunted elephants for meat, hides, and to protect farms. Ivory remained a minor factor in most areas. In early urban cultures, however, ivory came to be valued for its decorative utility. Early trade was disorganized, moving across the Mediterranean or Indian Ocean, or along the Nile. Somerville explains: “Ivory’s allure was such that potentates from as far apart as the Egyptian, Chinese, Greek, Roman, European baroque and Tsarist Russian empires and, currently the emerging Chinese business elite, valued it as a symbol of wealth, beauty and status” (15).

Somerville outlines the modern history of man and African elephant. It involves ivory trade, elephant hunting, colonization, increasingly deadly weapons, human population growth, expanding agriculture, corrupt governments, and political folly. Efficient guns and shipping enabled market-driven elephant killing for profit. Ivory became “white gold,” much of it smuggled. One enterprising American invented a machine to carve ivory into buttons. Ivory was also used for billiard balls and piano keys.

In the nineteenth century, European empires dominated. Somerville explains how colonial governments outlawed hunting elephants for all or most Africans. This was to control and tax ivory, but it brought unintended consequences. Poaching increased; corruption, bribery, and illegal hunting were rampant. Global shipping carried ivory to Europe, North America, and Asia. Often police, army, and colonial officials profited. After World War II, European empires were disassembled; the new national governments rarely supported conservation. Corruption, poaching, and haphazard policing continued. Ivory was still used for political patronage. People living near elephants were often ignored or prevented from hunting. Elephants might devastate farms, but compensation was rare. Somerville concludes that income from ecotourism and hunting must be shared with indigenous people to protect elephants.

To the extent possible, Somerville grounds his message in data. However, that data is sometimes scarce, often fragmented. Before airplanes, elephant counts were rough estimates. Even with the help of planes, forest elephant counts are notoriously incomplete, trees blocking sight from above. Often surveyors skewed data to fit a desired conclusion. This book's population charts make grim reading. A repeating pattern emerges as Somerville recounts trends of the past 200 years: national laws ban or curtail elephant hunting, ivory prices rise, corruption persists, elephant populations decrease.

After World War II, international NGOs dominated funding for wildlife protection in Africa, alienating indigenous populations and manipulating African governments. Human population increased, and farming expanded into elephant habitat. Somerville describes droughts hurting farms, elephants, and habitat. He does not mention either "global warming" or "climate change." However, my surmise is the effects will be severe.

Wars and insurrections can make wildlife protection impractical. However, Somerville doubts a politically popular post-9/11 narrative: terrorist or insurrection groups are to blame for much poaching.

Somerville describes two nations effectively protecting elephants, successfully increasing the population: Botswana and Gabon, which has significant petroleum-based wealth. Some NGOs can work with local rangers and residents who live near elephants. This is a tactic now seen in several African nations. International agencies are working to decrease ivory demand in richer nations.

Somerville reports: "John Scanlon said in March 2016 that, for the fourth year running, data...showed that as a result of poaching, more elephants were being killed than being born each year" (324). Today's ivory market is strong in China and other parts of eastern Asia, but change could be afoot. In March 2018, China began closing down legal ivory markets and carving. The U.S. bans importation of all new ivory unless it was collected by legal trophy hunting.

Somerville concludes with a call for "community-based conservation projects empowering people in areas where elephants survive in substantial

numbers, and continuing efforts to drive down demand by attaching a stigma to buying ivory . . . aligning survival of elephants with workable, locally-acceptable forms of sustainable use is likely to be the only answer” (325).

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Bond, Jennifer, and Kennedy Mkutu. 2018. “Exploring the Hidden Costs of Human–Wildlife Conflict in Northern Kenya.” *African Studies Review* 61 (1): 33–54. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.134.
- Garland, Elizabeth. 2008. “The Elephant in the Room: Confronting the Colonial Character of Wildlife Conservation in Africa.” *African Studies Review* 51 (3): 51–74. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0095.
- Schroeder, Richard A. 2018. “Moving Targets: The ‘Canned’ Hunting of Captive-Bred Lions in South Africa.” *African Studies Review* 61 (1): 8–32. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.94.