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(review)

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Ivory: Power and poaching in Africa

By Keith Somerville. London: Hurst & Company, 2016.

For people who do not live or work in Africa, or have no direct or ongoing connection to the work of international conservation organizations trying to conserve African wildlife, stories about the steady and perhaps inexorable decline of large mammal populations, and most especially of the iconic African elephant, are bound to seem puzzling. On the face of it, the treatment meted out to African elephants, most especially since the European colonization of Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the advent of powerful firearms, has been positively Hobbesian: nasty, brutish, and short. Things always seem to get worse, never better, to the point that the extinction by human agency, aided by environmental factors such as habitat loss, of at least some African elephant populations no longer appears to be a remote possibility. That is, on the face of it and for most people around the world, an awful prospect.

But, if it happens, who or what will be at fault?

That is the question around which Keith Somerville skates in this tremendously appealing and useful book—a book which I think every serious student of African elephant conservation ought to read.

The book is not primarily for academic readers and makes no explicit claim to be a work of serious historical scholarship. Somerville worked in Africa as a career journalist for the BBC. This made him a direct observer of some of the events he describes in this book. He is and has also been for a long time well-connected to many of the principals involved in efforts to conserve African elephants. And he has read and makes good use of most of the major book-length studies of elephant conservation and the ivory trade. All these resources are used to good advantage in his book, with the result being a very well-informed, suitably nuanced, and considerate analysis of the processes by which and the reasons why the conservation of African elephants has proven over many decades to be so frustrating and disappointing. The book takes the long view historically (Chapters One through Three) and is careful to pay attention to the complex geography of elephant conservation in Africa (Chapters Four, Five and

Seven). Indeed, one of the great strengths of the book is the assiduousness with which Somerville differentiates the dynamics of the ivory trade and its impacts on elephant populations among the major regions of Africa, and within regions by country. Thus, the reader comes away with a clear sense not only of why elephant conservation is a different problem in southern Africa than it is in East Africa but also why the approach to the problem differs within regions by country. For someone approaching the subject for the first time I know of no other book that serves as such a comprehensive introduction.

More importantly, in my view, this is the first book to shine a bright light on the critical role played by the domestic politics of African states in the abject failure of those states to accomplish effective conservation outcomes for elephants since the publication of Clark Gibson's *Politics and Poachers: The political economy of wildlife policy in Africa* (1999)¹ and Rosaleen Duffy's *Killing for Conservation: Wildlife policy in Zimbabwe* (2000).² Duffy focused on the post-independence politics of wildlife policy in Zimbabwe. Gibson enlarged the view by looking in addition at Zambia and Kenya. Both books clearly established that post-independence wildlife management agencies were poorly equipped to manage the resources entrusted to their care. Both books made it clear that sensible conservation policy was frustrated by corruption reaching all the way from the bottom to the top of the political system. And both books established beyond any doubt that politicians and bureaucrats were much more interested in using wildlife policy to meet their own distributional goals than in following best conservation practices. Somerville, in addition to revisiting the Zimbabwe, Zambia and Kenya cases, looks in some detail at Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, Zaire, the Central African Republic, Burundi, Botswana, South Africa, and to lesser extent but still informatively at Chad, Somalia, Gabon, Mozambique, Namibia and several countries in West Africa. And across these countries and regions he brings the earlier, landmark contributions by Gibson and Duffy up to date by unravelling the story of how the ivory trade became entangled with insurgencies and terrorism in some African states and how that in turn led to the militarization of conservation.³

So, to repeat the earlier question, who or what is most at fault if the status of elephant populations in Africa continues to deteriorate? Somerville takes the view that, ever since ivory acquired value several hundred years ago as something other than a

pleasing by-product of hunting, the African ivory trade has been inexorably driven by external demand, initially in the developing empires of Asia and Europe and more recently in a rapidly industrializing and increasingly prosperous China (Chapter 7). The satisfaction of this demand, which is his focus in this book, rather than demand suppression, has enriched a succession of middlemen or gatekeepers, people able to negotiate transactions between those in Africa who can garner a supply of ivory, whether legally or illegally, and those outside Africa willing to pay for it.

The wealth created by the trade has therefore never been perceived as, and has never become a basis for, domestic economic development. Such a notion was foreign to the pre-territorial African tribes and states that were first drawn into the trade. In the colonial territories ivory was sometimes taxed to subsidize colonial administration, hunting by Africans was criminalized, and legal hunting by permit became a privilege for non-African hunters, settlers and administrators—but a privilege easily abused to amass great personal wealth by illegal hunting in the face of weak law enforcement. And after independence, “[t]he ability to use office or networks of allies and friends within the colonial system to accumulate wealth through illegal hunting [became the] forerunner of the corrupt systems of clients and patronage networks that are at the heart of contemporary poaching and smuggling networks in east and central Africa” (41).

As he surveys these developments, Somerville repeatedly emphasizes the alienation of African peoples from their natural resources that was imposed on them as a concomitant of colonialism and has never since been properly confronted. The key aspect of elephant hunting for ivory towards the end of the nineteenth century, after colonization started, he writes at one point,

was the progressive exclusion of local communities from hunting at the expense of settlers, professional European hunters and visiting sport hunters, and the growing criminalization of indigenous hunting. This set the pattern for the rise of what was labelled as poaching – hunting by communities, on the land they had occupied for countless centuries, became illegal, and indigenous peoples were alienated from wildlife, which was reserved first for European hunting and then for conservation, as dictated by the colonial authorities. (26–27)

An arrangement, we might add, that rent-seeking post-independence authorities have done remarkably little to modify.

Although several antidotes to this alienation have been tried under the color of both domestic and international law and policy, the latter in the form of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES),⁴ nothing has worked. And in Somerville's view nothing can and will work unless and until there is a powerful African constituency for managing elephants as a sustainable resource, primarily for the economic benefit of the Africans who live in Africa with the elephants. The middlemen and gatekeepers of the illegal trade have no interest in such an outcome. The NGOs in the international conservation movement are compromised in many cases in their support of such a program by their reluctance to see elephants killed for human use—a reluctance to endorse consumptive uses of a globally iconic species that increases as elephant numbers dwindle even further. And African range state governments cannot be expected to be enthusiastic about abandoning a key distributional element of the political economy that keeps them in power.

So why haven't the domestic constituencies for change that Somerville imagines already materialized in post-independence African states, assuming Africans can readily appreciate the benefits of having effective control over their own resources, and might they emerge before all the elephants are gone? Let us hope that that is the next book Somerville writes.

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Notes

¹ Clark Gibson, *Politicians and Poachers: The political economy of wildlife policy in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² Rosaleen Duffy, *Killing for Conservation: Wildlife policy in Zimbabwe* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

³ Rosaleen Duffy, "Waging a War to Save Biodiversity: The rise of militarized conservation," *International Affairs* 90/4 (July 2014): 819–34.

⁴ Somerville (ch. 6) has little good to say about CITES or about the motives and tactics of the international conservation NGOs, and other interests, that have tugged CITES in and out of often bitter and protracted controversies about whether to try to ban international trade in elephants and elephant parts, or not, or only partially, for many years, without any clear resolution that improves the status of elephant populations. Somerville's summary of this story is useful for someone coming to this subject for the first time, although the links to colonial history are explored more deeply in Rachelle Adam, *Elephant Treaties: The colonial legacy of the biodiversity crisis* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2014). But Somerville pays almost no attention to the question of whether sanctions against illegal trade in elephants are imposed or enforced under domestic wildlife and environmental conservation laws in domestic courts in African states. See Geoffrey Wandesforde-Smith, "Looking for Law in All the Wrong Places? Dying elephants, evolving treaties, and empty threats," *Journal of International Wildlife Law & Policy* 19/4 (Dec. 2016): 365–81.