

# Book Review- Ivory: Power and Poaching in Africa by Keith Somerville

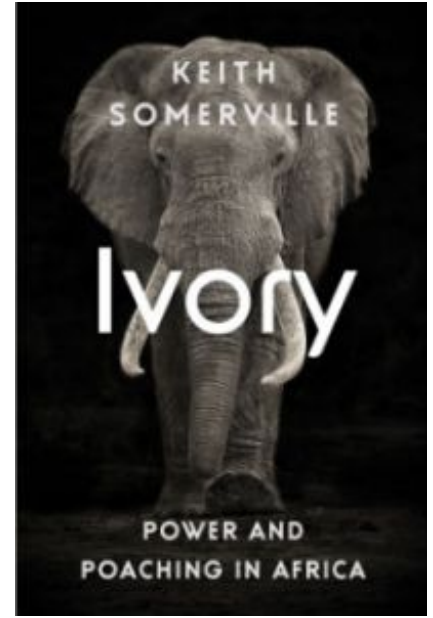
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LSE's Joanna Lewis describes this book as the best academic account to date of the history of the supply side of ivory trade.

Anyone who believes that China's recent pledge to ban the ivory trade by the end of 2017 will make a difference to the threat hanging over African elephants will have a rude awakening after reading Keith Somerville's devastating and majestic history of the supply chain from Africa. *Ivory: Power and Poaching in Africa* is a gripping, bloody and scholarly narrative dedicated to two groups of brave people: those who risk their lives to save elephants; and those who argue that banning the ivory trade is not the answer.

Somerville is a highly-respected journalist, writer and academic who has spent nearly 40 years focusing on Africa, much of that time, broadcasting for the BBC World Service. He began researching the history of the ivory trade as far back as 1981. In the course of his meticulous work on field trips and radio assignments, he has interviewed many people on the ground to understand the complex issues surrounding the trade which threatens some of Africa's most iconic and sacred wildlife.



Thanks to his extensive knowledge of the continent, Somerville has produced the best academic account to date of the history of the supply side of this catastrophic trade. Beginning with the ancient Egyptians, he gets into his stride with a fascinating chapter on the nineteenth century, followed by the history of the trade during colonial rule. These periods, that saw modernity and globalisation start to roll out into the interior, are crucial to understanding the scale of what was to come. The next two chapters take a regional perspective on the matter: *Conservation, Corruption, Crime and Conflict in East Africa* and *The Killing Fields of Central and Southern Africa*. He then looks at the contentious history of international agreements aimed at banning the trade. He brings the story up to date with a final chapter on *Resurgent Poaching: Soaring Chinese Demand and Developing Insurgency Discourse*.

Somerville's story and conclusion is as much about the history of Africa as it is about the history of some of this planet's most awesome creatures. To understand his position, one has to accept his broad definition of poaching, which encompasses a brutal and evil trade at one end, and traditional practices and survival strategies on the other. He passionately believes it is misleading to fixate on banning the trade and to blame local insurgents, for using the sale of ivory to fund their wars. Instead, he argues, that it is more the petty, everyday reality of corruption, crime and politics, which enables illegal poaching to survive (and even surge) when there is any kind of international push for a more extensive ban on the trade. The logic then is that hunting and therefore the trade should be regulated.



Lone elephant. Photo credit: sama093 via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/2iWucOI>) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

For me, as a passionate animal lover, reared on David Attenborough documentaries and books about Elsa the Lioness like many in the West; who still remembers the exact spine-tingling moment I saw an elephant for the first time in Tsavo West, Kenya; who cannot forget the sight of orphaned baby elephants crying into the arms of their African foster parents, this makes for uncomfortable reading.

But when the argument comes from Somerville, the heart has to yield to the head. For at the crux of his position is reality: “a gate-keeper state” run by corrupt politicians, with wildlife policy too heavily influenced by “prima-bwanas” – heads of international NGOS. Local people get left out. Poorer, marginal communities’ land and grazing rights get nibbled away. They have lived alongside elephants for centuries but are being neglected and excluded. Vulnerable, they succumb to the offer of money so they can live. Supporting and strengthening communities so they can manage wildlife responsibly from the bottom up, with some controlled hunting, is an argument that many wildlife experts have come to see is the only long term viable solution.

Still, what a deterrent it could be that, if caught, those men who organise the hunting and butchering of elephants for pleasure and for their tusks, also have something they hold dear cut off...

**[Ivory: Power and Poaching in Africa](#). Keith Somerville. Hurst Publishers. 2016.**

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**

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