Africa's Threatened Rhinos, a history of exploitation and conservation

Keith Somerville

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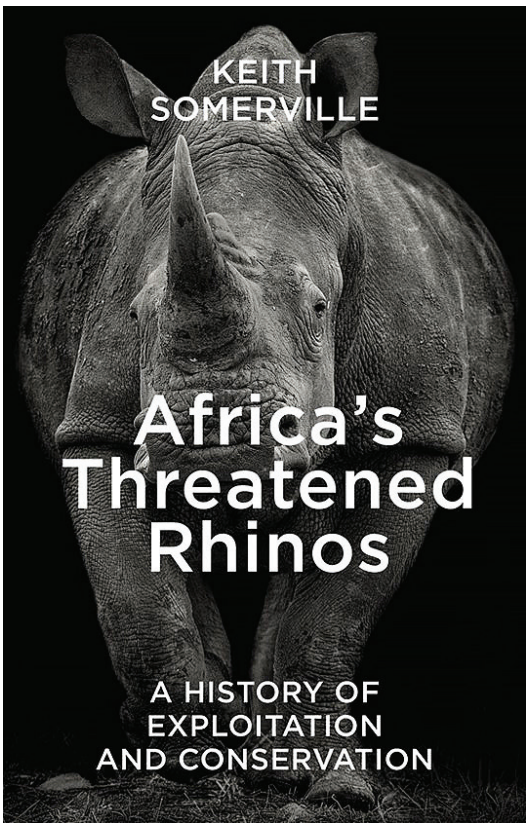

Figure 1. Front and back cover

Keith Somerville undertook a challenging task in documenting the long history of Africa's enigmatic and threatened rhino species, the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) and white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*). This book provides an essential and detailed review explaining why rhino numbers have dropped and the efforts to protect them in Africa. The book documents 3,000 years of rhino exploitation, investigating the history, politics, economics and cultural aspects of human-rhino conflict and coexistence. Somerville also explores what can be done to aid the further recovery of Africa's black and white rhinos, both now and in the future.

Keith Somerville, never one to shy away from complex and contentious subjects, wrote *Ivory: Power and Poaching in Africa*, published in 2017, another fascinating book for *Pachyderm* readers and many others. Similarly, in this new book, Somerville tackles the subject head-on, without emotion, presenting the facts clearly, which are well-sourced, and distilling a mass of historical and academic literature. He has written a clear narrative that addresses the challenges involved in conserving rhinos in their natural landscapes.

Somerville dedicates the book to murdered Esmond Bradley Martin who was on the editorial board of *Pachyderm* for many years, Vice Chair of the IUCN SSC African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group from 1982–1991, and member of both groups when they formed two, and also to murdered Anton Mzimba, who gave his life to protecting rhinos in South Africa. It is sad indeed that Keith Somerville died before seeing his book published; it is a great legacy.

Somerville's introduction explains that rhinos are not only a continuation of a major evolutionary heritage, but they are also symbols for the protection of African savannahs, as well as the more arid and forested areas that rhinos inhabit. His chronological account adeptly synthesizes historical reports and scientific knowledge using peer-reviewed papers from a range of disciplines.

In chapter 1: evolution, status and behaviour, Somerville launches us into the distant past, when more than 142 rhino species existed 55–60 million years ago. By the end of the Pleistocene 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, only five extant species remained in Africa and Eurasia. He compiles in chapter 2, information about rhinos and early *homo sapiens* from 20,000 BCE to the European penetration of Africa. Herding of cattle

spread up the Nile to Sudan about 6,000 years ago, and to West and East Africa 1,000 to 2,000 years later. Human societies and their continued conversion of natural habitat for cultivation, livestock husbandry and settlements gradually pushed out wildlife from the affected areas. There were other threats. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written by a Greek merchant in the 1st century CE, documents the export of rhino horn and ivory from Eritrea across the Indian Ocean as important merchandise. The ancient Romans captured rhinos for their entertainment. Arab merchants traded goods from East Africa, obtaining rhino horn, also from the 1st century CE onwards. Hunter-gatherers killed rhinos for their meat, hide and horns. The Portuguese and Gujarati Indians established trading posts along the East African coast from 1600 to 1800, thereby encouraging increased international commerce.

Chapter 3 examines the period of major European penetration and occupation of Africa. Improved firearms in the 19th century made hunting much more efficient and easier. Between 1849 and 1895, 11,000 kg of rhino horn annually (from about 170,000 rhinos during that time) were said to be exported from East Africa. This continued legally with licences obtained for guns as the weapon of choice, and illegally by traditional means. Many rhino and elephant poachers were apprehended in the Tsavo area in the 1950s. "African hunters were effectively criminalized, as were their hunting methods". Rhino and elephant numbers rebounded, but by cruel irony, as Somerville says, droughts in the early 1960s and again in the early 1970s wiped out thousands from starvation.

Chapter 4 describes how rhino populations were decimated by the arrival of Europeans in southern Africa, who used firearms to clear land for livestock farming and rhino products in many areas of Angola, Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Somerville, in chapter 5, then provides details of the modern trade in rhino horn from 1960 to the present, both legal and illegal. CITES was established in 1973, and by 1977, parties had banned rhino products in international trade amongst member states from the world's five species. Somerville relates the struggle CITES has faced ever since trying to enforce this ban globally, with valuable rhino horn still being trafficked to Asia.

Chapter 6 examines the period of post-independence in Africa to 2005. Somerville describes how wars in much of Africa, "greedy and incompetent governments intent on personal enrichment of leaders and their cronies" and "unequal international terms of trade" created conditions in which poverty remained a fact of life for tens of millions. As Somerville says, this provided a fertile breeding ground for illegal hunting and the smuggling of wildlife commodities.

The success of South African rhino conservation, in contrast, was recognized in 1994 when the 9th CITES CoP voted to transfer South African white rhinos to CITES Appendix II, allowing white rhino trophy hunting and trophy export as well as trade in live white rhinos from South Africa to CITES parties. White rhino numbers increased in South Africa, with these incentives. Many people were converting their agricultural land back to natural habitat for both rhino species and other wildlife, with ownership and sustainable utilization encouraged.

Meanwhile, in Kenya, after independence, Somerville explains that some political, public service and business elites, while publicly promoting conservation and wildlife-based tourism were covertly benefiting from poaching in the 1970s and 1980s. With rising global prices of rhino horn and ivory matching an escalating demand, rhinos were nearly wiped out of the region. He goes on to describe Kenya's determined progress of black rhino recovery, initially translocating the country's few surviving rhinos to well-guarded sanctuaries, consolidating their numbers to help breeding. Somerville relates similar poaching crises in much of Africa, with most rhinos gone by the early 1990s, and various rescue attempts in the region. As with all chapters, he manages to synthesize a huge amount of information, carefully and succinctly.

Chapter 7 covers the challenges in southern Africa from the 1960s to 2005, with armed conflict in Angola and Mozambique witnessing the eradication of rhinos, as well as elsewhere. Somerville describes rhino crime across the region. In contrast, the persistent dedication of those protecting rhinos, despite limited funds, is notable. In Chapter 8 the author examines rhino conservation challenges in eastern and central Africa from 2006 to 2024, and the translocation of rhinos into certain areas where they had all been rendered extinct in Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, Chad and DRC. Chapter 9 focuses on the 'rhino poaching

storm' in southern Africa that erupted from 2009, especially threatening the large populations of white rhino in South Africa.

Throughout the book, Somerville recounts a desperately repetitive and yet brave story of efforts to weather these challenges to save Africa's rhinos, despite substantial financial constraints and the high prices paid for rhino horn on the black market. Chapter 10, 'What next?' concludes the book by presenting a toolkit of conservation measures available, according to the needs of the areas or circumstances. These range from captive breeding, establishing new populations, dehorning, and demand-reduction campaigns (he asks why campaigns had less impact than NGOs hoped). He debates the controversy of legalizing some form of international trade to provide much-needed funding, trophy hunting as a conservation strategy, and considers other financial models. He stresses that community empowerment is key to wildlife conservation.

Somerville has done an incredible job of selecting the salient points from a wide array of published sources, as well as from his own experiences in Africa, compiling a wealth of evidence-based information. The book is indeed an excellent and comprehensive compilation of many facts about the near obliteration of Africa's rhinos and their slow recovery.

Pelagic Publishing, London, 2025
352 pages, 584 g, Price: 30 pounds sterling

www.pelagicpublishing.com

https://doi.org/10.54061/TCFB1570

ISBN 978-1-78427-454-2 Hbk; ISBN 978-1-78427-455-9 ePub; ISBN 978-78427-456-6 PDF
Typeset in Minion Pro by S4Carlise Publishing Services, Chennai, India