

***Ivory's Ghosts: The white gold of history and the fate of elephants*, by John Frederick Walker**

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This book shows how the history of mankind and ivory are intricately interwoven, and how this history has impacted severely on that magnificent animal that has had the misfortune to be cursed with bearing white gold.

What did we use before plastic was invented for buttons, combs, pistol grips and piano keys? Ivory, is the answer. Long before ivory was industrialized in Europe and America, the earliest *Homo sapiens* in Europe used tusks from the mammoth to fashion fertility figurines and spear points. After the mammoth became extinct, early civilizations in China, India, the Middle East, Egypt, Europe and Africa used elephant ivory as a luxury commodity to produce beautiful works of art, utilitarian objects and furnishings. It is astonishing how many things ivory was used for. The author of this fascinating treatment of ivory and elephants presents a comprehensive history of the early use and trade of ivory in Part 1 of the book.

In Part 2 Walker guides the reader through the tragic history of the ivory trade's development in Africa from the early 19th to the mid 20th century, recounting the exploits of hunters and traders. Industrialization—first, the invention by the American Phineas Pratt of a machine that could mass-produce ivory combs—and later the machine-manufacturing of piano keys, billiard balls, buttons, dice, paper knives and myriad other objects spelled hard times ahead for the jumbo. In 1922 alone some 4000 elephants were killed to produce billiard balls! One learns that ivory was actually vital, because of its unique properties, in the development of the piano and other musical instruments and in the game of billiards.

The average weight of tusks shipped out of East Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was (to use a singularly appropriate adjective) mammoth—nearly 30 kg each. There probably are not ten tuskers left today in East Africa that carry 60 kg of ivory.

Elephants lived mainly in the hinterlands of Africa, which meant that the heavy tusks needed to be transported out of the continent. Because of the tsetse fly and sleeping sickness, pack animals could not be used, which shifted the burden, literally, to the backs of African slaves. The ivory industry and the slave trade were interdependent. Ironically, Phineas Pratt and his colleagues were slavery abolitionists.

We can thank Pratt and the other New England ivory manufacturers as well as the European ivory industry that developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, for the great decrease in average tusk weight that occurred in African exports. The majestic tuskers were being annihilated. One might have thought that the development of plastics and other synthetic materials in the 1950s and 1960s would have saved the elephant, but economic development in ivory loving Japan and later Hong Kong shifted exports to those two destinations. By the 1970s they were importing 75% of the world's ivory. Together they imported an average of 730 tonnes annually from 1979 to 1982. By the early 1980s, Japan was thought to import 40% of the world's ivory, much of it used to produce *hanko*, cylindrical seals that the Japanese use to make signatures. *Hanko* were the new piano key in terms of massive ivory consumption.

Walker tells us that average tusk weight exported from Africa in 1979 had dropped to less than 10 kg and in the mid-1980s to little over 5 kg. This meant that few old bulls remained and that females and juveniles were being targeted. CITES, initiated in 1976, was supposed to be controlling the ivory trade, but the system obviously was not working. Poachers were still wiping out elephants.

Part 3 delves into the issues of interest to elephant conservationists, mainly the question of whether or not selling legal ivory is in the long-term interest of elephants, and what to do about the problem of human-elephant conflict. The CITES international ivory trade

ban of 1989, which was intended to stop the elephant holocaust caused by failed regulation of the trade, sparked the debate that is still with us. Walker travelled to South Africa and Kenya to interview some of the principle people involved in the debate, and he poured over many of the dry CITES reports on the issue. He examines in detail the arguments and evidence for and against a legal trade. One quote from a 2005 CITES report made by a team investigating China particularly informed his final conclusions.

‘CITES was very aware that the long-term success of what has been established in China, and the enthusiasm and compliance that is being shown by the accredited traders, depends upon fresh stocks of legal ivory becoming available. If they do not, the system is likely to collapse and it is hard to imagine that illicit trade would not then gain ground.’

China has the largest ivory market in the world and is the destination of most of the tusks poached in Africa and Asia. Walker realizes that as long as there are elephants, there will be ivory, and surmises that it would be much more sensible, as well as feasible, to allow a legal ivory trade. The alternative is the situation currently, in which ivory must be obtained

illegally to supply legal domestic ivory markets in China and elsewhere.

An epilogue deals with the controversy surrounding the 2007 CITES Conference of the Parties and the debate on future ivory sales. The author points out that mainstream conservation organizations such as WWF, IUCN and the African Wildlife Foundation support sustainable use of ivory as a way to increase the value of elephants in the eyes of Africans and to provide funds for conservation and community development. A legal ivory trade could work in favour of elephant conservation. Opposing this view are the animal welfare organizations such as the International Fund for Animal Welfare and the Born Free Foundation that, in the author’s words, ‘are distinctly less sympathetic to development and poverty concerns in the elephant’s range states.’

After a 250+ page journey through the complex and enthralling ancient and current world of ivory and elephants, the author finally concludes that the future of ivory should be treated as a self-renewing resource that funds the conservation of the animal that is its source—through a legal trade.