

Kasbe, J. (dir.). 2018. *When lambs become lions*. 79 minute documentary film. USA: Kasbe Films / The Documentary Group. www.whenlambs.com Clip <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfMP05FZScg>

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The documentary film *When lambs become lions* is an important contribution in the growing field of nature conservation documentaries, specifically those on wildlife crime. As such, it is relevant to many political ecologists working in these fields. The strength of *Lambs* is that it nuances the general (social) media and NGO outcries about poaching by showing that there is another side to poaching. And whereas many political ecologists working in these fields *know about* this other side, we hardly get to *see* it, and this gap is, as far as possible in 79 minutes, what *Lambs* contributes to.

Generally, poaching is presented as a problem in need of a (mainly policy-oriented and technical) solution: the problem is that 'bad' people kill helpless, 'good', animals, and the solution is to catch, or even torture and kill, these 'bad' poachers (Büscher 2016; Lunstrum 2016), an important task for 'good' rangers. In this simplified and overtly problematic dominant discourse, the stories revolve around the dead animals and (mostly white) conservation heroes, although at times (mostly black) rangers are also championed as conservation heroes. Interestingly, both dead animals and conservation heroes are fully absent in *Lambs*. Instead, we follow three men for three years: a park ranger (Asan), a poacher (Lucas) and an ivory dealer (X) and we get a feeling of the different strategies, incentives, dangers, problems, concerns and their lives more generally. What the film makes abundantly clear, is that those people who are often depicted as 'bad' in mainstream conservation discourse, are people who struggle to survive, and just as anyone else they use their agency to make their lives meaningful on an everyday basis. Poaching and jobs in nature conservation are means to these ends.

Lambs plays out in northern Kenya, in a small town bordering a game reserve (Figure 1). At first, ivory dealer X seems to make good money; he can celebrate with a few drinks, enjoy his social status in the neighborhood and buy a bicycle for his son. X does not do the poaching himself; he only trades the ivory (poached by Lucas) with the people higher up in the syndicate, whom X is on the telephone with regularly. Moreover, we get to see the life of Asan, X's younger cousin who struggles in his job as a game ranger, for example because he has not been paid for a few months and has to stay away from home for long periods of time.

Such is the starting point of the film, but as it continues we see how, due to changing circumstances, these three men's roles change and at the end of the film all three take up different positions. When Asan, himself a former poacher, has not been paid for two months, he complains about this together with his fellow rangers, but the answer they receive from their superior is basically a threat: "This is just how it is. If you can't handle it, someone else will take your place." Moreover, we see the funeral of a ranger who had been killed in an ambush by poachers and Asan receives a second child. This is important contextualization to be able to understand why, as the film continues, Asan in the end gives in to X to use his inside ranger knowledge to support X's and Lucas' next poaching trip (after several attempts by X had first failed because Asan wanted to stay loyal to nature conservation). Asan then points out to X and Lucas where he has recently seen a large herd of elephants. After the consequent poaching trip does not work out well—they get dangerously close to rangers—Lucas starts to feel the pressure of getting caught or being killed in this dangerous activity and he quits poaching. This leaves X without any ivory to trade. Lucas' choice makes lots of sense; it is well-known that the increasing militarization of nature conservation brings serious danger for rangers and poachers, as well as long-term consequences that are often not in favor of nature conservation (see, for example, Annecke and Masubelele 2016; Duffy *et al.* 2015; Lunstrum 2014). In what follows, X struggles to survive and in the end he cannot keep up dealing ivory, making him look for other jobs. Moreover, Asan decides to quit his unfulfilling job as a ranger.



Figure 1: Ivory dealer "X" and wildlife ranger Asan. From *When lambs become lions*, directed by Jon Kasbe. Courtesy of Kasbe Films / The Documentary Group. Photo credit: Alex Pritz. Source: Press kit, <http://www.whenlambs.com>

The strength of *Lambs* comes for a large part from the chosen methodology, which has strong ethnographic elements. Director Jon Kasbe lived with his film's subjects for over a three-year period and by doing so created a high level of trust and access. This way, Kasbe has become a part of their everyday lives and was therefore able to film in places that are generally inaccessible for outsiders like filmmakers and researchers. For example, Kasbe has been able to film how X trades his tusks with another (unidentified) person in a car, he filmed the intimate funeral of a dead ranger and the mourning family members, he filmed how Asan's frustration grows and how this affects his relationship with his wife, he filmed how X explains that his father who was a poacher died when he was very young because he had been ambushed by rangers, and he even filmed during a (failed and dangerous) poaching trip by X and Lucas. It makes the film an intimate portrait of the people at the heart of the conservation divide. As Kasbe would explain, "I wanted to explore their complexity and remain open to understanding things that were much easier to hate. The only way to do that—for an outsider like myself—was to become part of their lives without judgement" (Kasbe 2018: 3). This strategy has worked out very well; *Lambs* provides insight to a space that is generally very hard to enter, either by researchers, journalists or documentary makers, and therefore the film should be seen as an important addition to existing documentaries on nature conservation and wildlife crime, and to the public debates on these issues.

Although *Lambs* is a 'local' story, it shows the importance of positioning the problem of wildlife crime and poaching within a larger political ecological context. The film reveals some important drivers of people to start poaching in the first place, and why they would or would not become a ranger. It then becomes painfully clear how out of place global media outcries against poaching at times can be (cf. Büscher 2016; Lunstrum 2016). One such example is also given in *Lambs*, namely the burning of ivory in Kenya in 2016, which was the biggest destruction of ivory ever and which was done to attract global attention to the problem of elephant poaching and to deter poachers (whether or not this truly works, remains debatable). However, it is doubtful if such symbolic activities are truly a concern for X and Lucas when they watch this on TV and when the President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, declares: "To all the poachers, to all the buyers, your days are numbered." To me it seemed as if X's bigger concern is not to let his buyer wait for too long, when he is put under pressure again on the phone to deliver.

If there is one critical note about *Lambs* it is the title; *When lambs become lions* does not capture or explain what we get to see in the film and I think it does not immediately speak to the larger public. Having that said, I truly recommend *Lambs* for anybody interested in political ecology, particularly nature conservation and wildlife crime, including academics and scholars.

References

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