



NEWS ENVIRONMENT

LOOK: 'A pangolin is poached roughly every 5 minutes'



Pangolins are now the world's most illegally traded wild mammal with more than a million poached over the past decade. Picture: Alexis Kriel/Supplied

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Written by

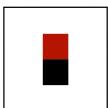
Dominic Naidoo

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This Saturday marks World Pangolin Day. Observed annually on the third Saturday of February since 2012, the day brings together people from around the world to celebrate one of the underdogs of the animal kingdom, the pangolin.

According to [World Pangolin Day.org](http://WorldPangolinDay.org), the high demand for pangolins originates predominantly from China, where pangolin scales are believed to be a cure for all types of illness and disease with pangolin flesh being considered a sought-after delicacy.

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“In Vietnam, pangolins are frequently offered at restaurants catering to wealthy patrons who want to eat rare and endangered wildlife. There is no evidence to support claims regarding medicinal properties of pangolin scales or any other part of the pangolin,” says the organisation.

There are eight species of pangolin worldwide. There are four pangolin species native to Asia. These are the Chinese pangolin, the Sunda or Malayan pangolin, the Philippine pangolin, and the Indian or thick-tailed pangolin.

The four African species are the Cape or Temminck’s pangolin, the giant ground or giant pangolin, the tree or African, white-bellied Pangolin, and the long-tailed or black-bellied pangolin.

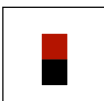
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Also known as scaly anteaters, pangolins are the only truly scaly mammal. The word "pangolin" comes from the Malay word "pengguling", meaning "something that rolls up." Pangolins roll up into a scaly ball when threatened by a predator or startled. Unfortunately, this defence mechanism is ineffective against poachers.

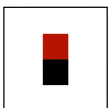
Adapted to eating ants and termites, pangolins have long, sticky tongues, which are about 70% the length of their bodies. Powerful claws are perfect for burrowing and ripping apart ant and termite nests and for defending themselves when needed.

Pangolins are now the world's most illegally traded wild mammal with more than a million poached over the past decade. combined. To put in perspective, a par according to the ZSL.

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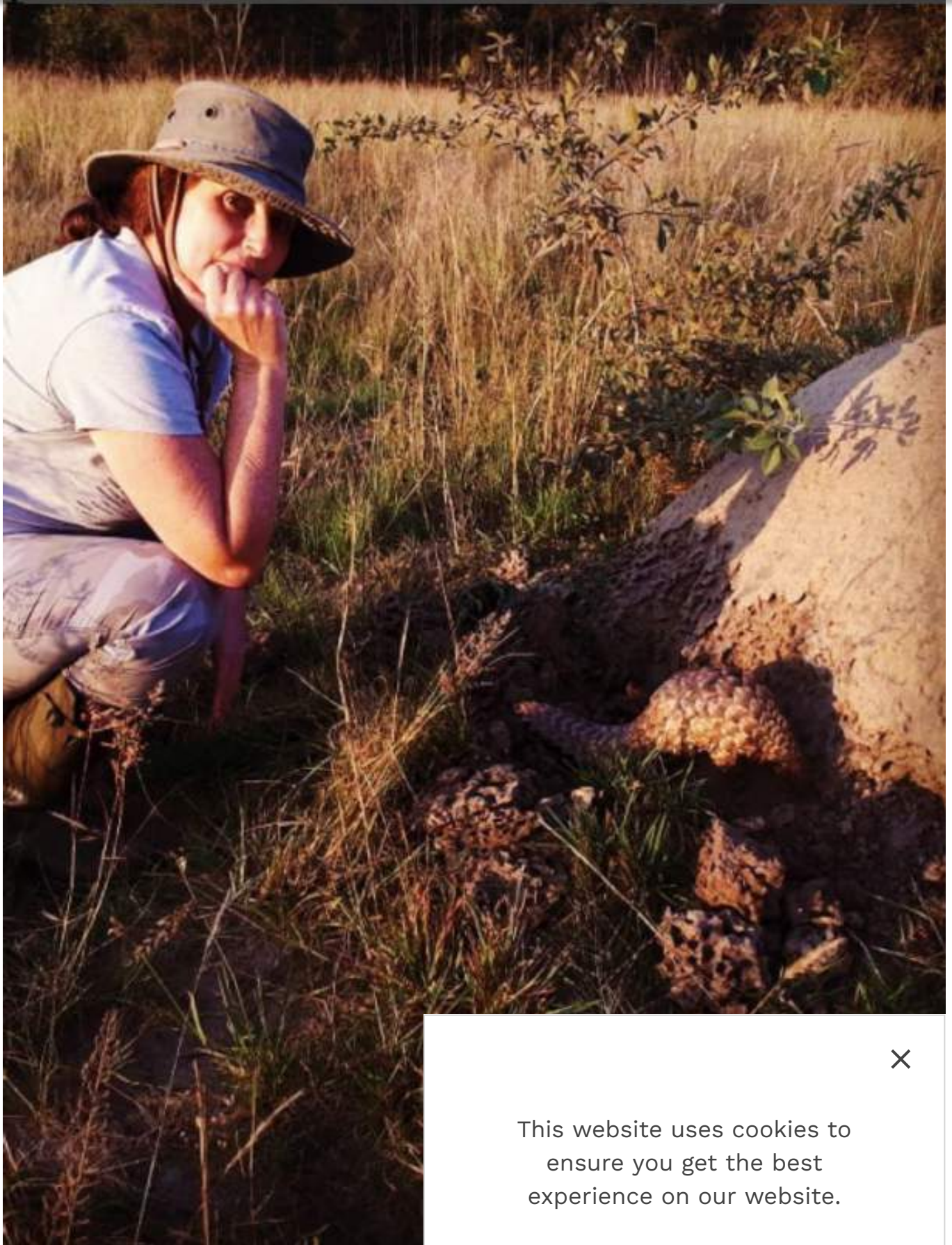
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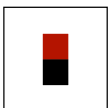
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The Temminck’s pangolin is the only African species native to South Africa and is currently listed as vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

While widely distributed across the savannah regions of South Africa, the Temminck’s pangolin are severely threatened by electrified fencing which kills an estimated 377–1 028 individuals each year, the local and international bushmeat and traditional medicine trade and road collisions which kill an estimated 280 per year according to the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

I caught up with Alexis Kriel, co-chair of the [African Pangolin Working Group \(APWG\)](#) and member of the IUCN’s SSC Pangolin Specialist Group, to tell me more about the plight of South Africa’s Temminck’s pangolin.

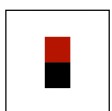
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“Pangolins are impossible to count, they are solitary, nocturnal, well camouflaged and incredibly quiet. We do know that the current illegal trade is unsustainable,” said Kriel.

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Wildlife trafficking: Pangolins under pressure

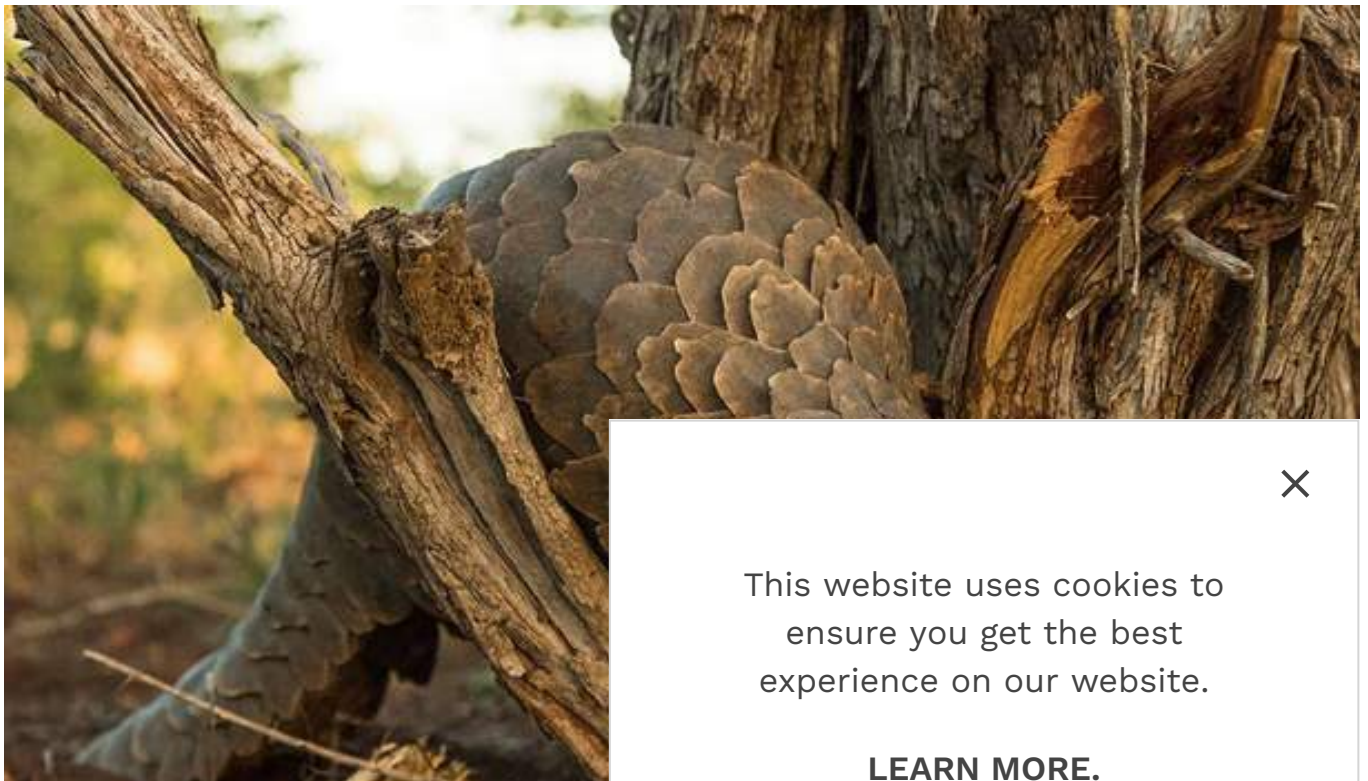


Wildlife trafficking: Pangolins under pressure

According to the African Pangolin Working Group, there were 159 pangolins rescued from the illegal wildlife trade between November 2017 and December 2021. Of those, 81 were released back into the wild, 52 died due to their injuries, 10 of these were whole pangolin skins and a confidential number of pangolins are still in rehabilitation or on a soft release.

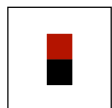
A soft release involves the supported introduction, and eventually, the release, of pangolins into an appropriate wildlife area, over time, to give them the opportunity to acquire skills needed for survival in the wild which would help make the transition from their ordeal as smooth as possible.

“The interception of pangolins from the illegal trade is probably only 10% of the actual trade,” continued Kriel. “The rest goes undetected. In South Africa, what used to be a more opportunistic type of illegal trade, has now become more organised with poaching increasing across borders, especially between South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique.”



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“Live animals still constitute most of the illegal trade in South Africa, but scales and skins have started to show up in confiscations, which is a worrying development.

“The appalling illegal harvesting of scales in pangolin ranges, elsewhere in Africa, will eventually move south and into South Africa when their resource of pangolins diminishes. This is why it is so vital that we protect our current populations. It is urgent and the situation is grave,” said Kriel.

The African Pangolin Working Group is currently holding workshops for law enforcement, customs, border authorities and prosecutors in the Greater Limpopo Transfrontier Conservation Area, Limpopo being the province where the majority of confiscations of pangolins takes place. This is funded by USAID who are committed to supporting the intervention of illegal wildlife trafficking in Africa, through grants to organisations like the APWG.

The use of pangolin derivatives in Chinese Traditional Medicine is the main driving force behind the illegal trade, worldwide, and with a population of 1.4 billion people as potential consumers, there is little hope that this species can avoid extinction without a change in the current status quo.

Kriel strongly believes that China needs to ban the use of pangolins and their derivatives across the board, which includes the use of these products in their patented, legal medicines.

“Pangolin scales were still present in eight patent medicines in China’s 2020 pharmacopoeia, a reference book for TCM practitioners, although scales had been removed from the list of raw ingredients.

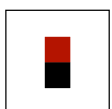
“The meat is still being consumed as a delicacy and the animal is still being traded in wet markets. The idea that we consume today, without a thought for tomorrow, is a hugely problematic mindset, given that natural resources are limited,” said Kriel.

“It is a moral imperative that as human beings we should not be walking on the edge of extinction with a species that has lived on this planet for 85 million years is a real-life

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The screening of Eye of the Pangolin documentary at a makeshift cinema at Singlee's home. Picture: Alexis Kriel/Supplied

How do we get the knowledge of the plight of the pangolin and other species which are teetering on the edge, out into our communities? Eemaan Singlee, a young multimedia journalist and filmmaker, from Cape Town is doing just that.

Singlee initiated a pangolin awareness campaign on the Cape Flats. It started with the screening of Eye of the Pangolin, an acclaimed documentary on illegal trade in this endangered animal. The screening was hosted at her home, in a double garage turned temporary movie venue.

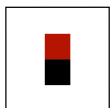
“Education is such a valuable tool,” says Singlee, “especially as a means to assist in many of the world's environmental issues. Pangolins are majestic but often mysterious creatures, and unless you are aware of their plight, there is not much you can do. Thus, broader education regarding these amazing creatures which hold immense value should take precedence amongst other conservation efforts.”

Singlee invited youth from across the Cape Mitchell’s Plain for a screening of the documentary. “I left the screening inspired to become an environmentalist in my communities,” said Singlee. Singlee’s initiative

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and should not be disturbed. Every time we bludgeon the natural world, we are opening a Pandora's box of possibilities, disturbing the parity of the natural order. The power of nature is a primal force, whatever is in balance will evolve as a mutation if we disturb it. Pangolins are one story in a myriad of manufactured disasters," concluded Kriel.

Overall, there are hundreds of species of animals that face a bleak future if we do not act now. Share this article, follow local and national conservation groups on social media, talk about it to your friends and family, sign online petitions, donate to animal rescue organisations, and make conservation mainstream.

We may have time, but many animals do not.

Eye of the Pangolin trailer

Pangolin Africa Trailer: The Eye of the Pangolin
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Here is a short trailer for the upcoming film The Eye of the Pangolin which will be available in full online next May! Here is a sneak preview. please watch and share with your friends and family. Visit <https://www.pangolin.africa/eye-of-the-pangolin> to help us make the film.

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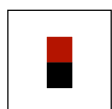


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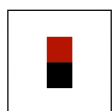
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