

ENVIRONMENT

Pangolins pushed to the brink of extinction

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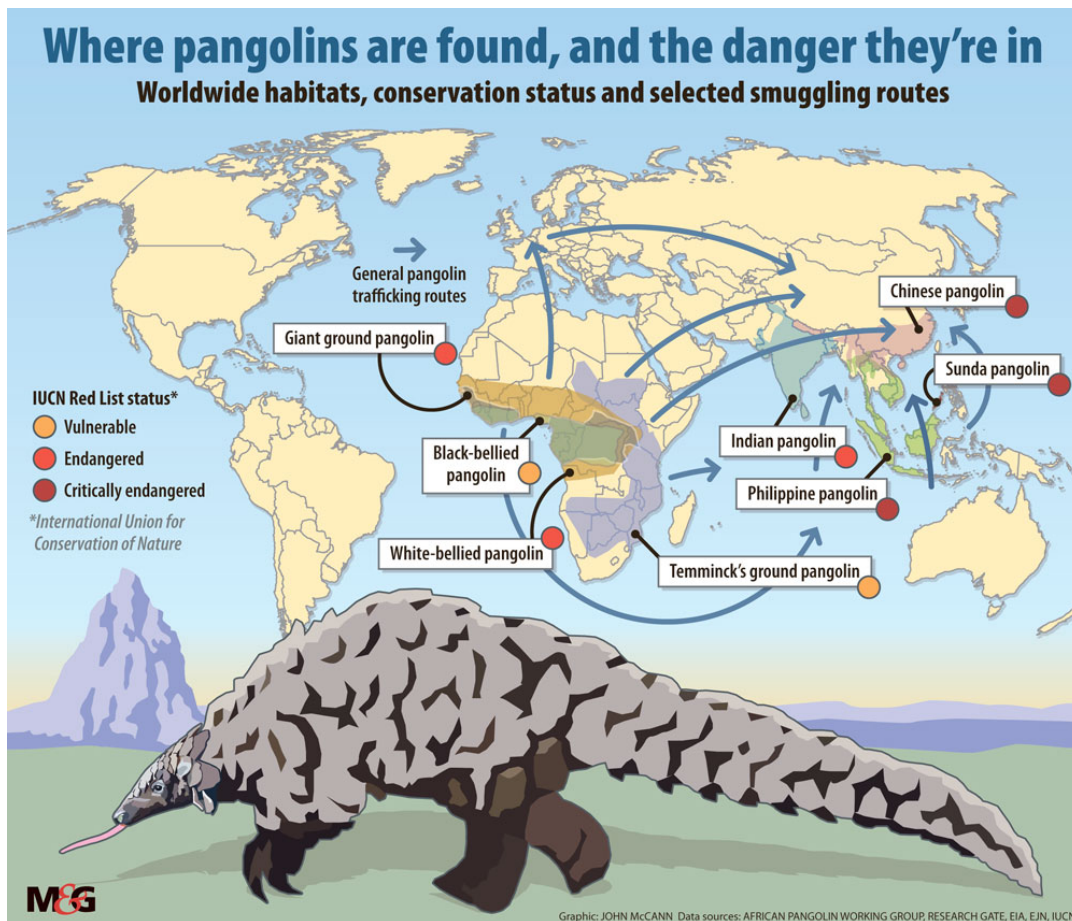
A pangolin skin is displayed amongst other exotic and illegal animal parts at a stall on February 17, 2016 in Mong La, Myanmar. Mong La, the capital of Myanmar's Special Region No. 4, is a mostly lawless area where Chinese tourists are able to cross the border for exotic poached animals, gambling, and prostitution. (Photo by Taylor Weidman/Getty Images)

Time is running out to save the imperilled and enigmatic pangolin from certain extinction.

“If something isn’t done within the very small window we have right now, I think all species are going to be faced with a certain level of extinction,” said Ray Jansen, the founder and chairperson of the [African Pangolin Working Group](#). He estimates that only about 20 years remain to safeguard them.

Pangolins are poached, mostly for their scales, which is used in a number of traditional Chinese medicines. Pangolin meat, too, is regarded as a delicacy in China and Vietnam.

More than a million pangolins are estimated to have been slaughtered or trafficked between 2000 to 2013.



Reeling in pangolin poachers in South Africa has become something of an art for Jansen in recent years.

It's about building trust with those illegally trading in the elusive, mysterious species, he explained.

"This leads to setting a time and a date" for sting operations, he said.

He spoke at a webinar titled Pangolins in Peril, **USAID's** Vuka Now initiative to combat wildlife crime.

"We don't really like to talk too much about money and the promise of money [to the poachers]. We communicate that we'd like to see the animal alive and that we're interested in its welfare. Obviously, they just want to sell it for a quick buck," he said.

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Last year, the working group, in collaboration with the police, the Environmental Management Inspectorate (or **Green Scorpions**), provincial nature conservation authorities and other law enforcement agencies, retrieved 38 starving, dehydrated and sickly pangolins from the illegal trade following these intelligence-led operations.

Why pangolins matter

Pangolins, which have existed for 84-million years, have been described as miniature dinosaurs, or "artichokes with legs".

To defend themselves from predators, they curl into an impenetrable, armoured ball — but poachers simply pick them up.

They are the most-trafficked non-human mammal on the planet, but until last year, few people had ever heard of the secretive and elusive scaly mammals, which are rarely seen in the wild.

This was when pangolins, or scaly anteaters, became headline news because of “persistent speculation” about their relationship to the origins of Covid-19, according to the [Wildlife Justice Commission](#).

The commission said in a statement that pangolin products remained an appealing commodity for wildlife criminals, with its investigators being offered staggering quantities of pangolin scales, “outnumbering the offers of ivory across all our investigations for the first time” last year.

The planet’s eight species of pangolin — four in Africa and four in Asia — are all experiencing catastrophic levels of poaching, with all species listed as threatened or endangered from the illegal trade in their body parts, said Julian Rademeyer, the director for east and southern Africa at the [Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime](#).

An international [ban on commercial trade](#), which came into effect in 2017, has failed to stem the killings, with the trade appearing to be growing at an alarming rate, he said.

Pangolin seizures

Between 2016 and 2019, about 228 tonnes of pangolin scales were seized globally, with nearly two-thirds of seizures taking place between 2018 and 2019, he said.

The average weight of seizures has escalated from 2.4 tonnes in 2016 to 6.8 tonnes in 2019.

For most people, it’s difficult to contemplate what a tonne of scales equates to.

“By some estimates, around a tonne of scales would indicate that poachers have killed 1 900 animals. So for 228 tonnes, you’re looking at more than 430 000 poached animals,” said Rademeyer.

Meanwhile, the Commission said the trafficking of pangolin scales globally has transformed from a somewhat “niche” wildlife crime to a significant transnational problem with official law enforcement seizures just a drop in the ocean of trafficked pangolin scales.

“This is sustained by the [recent seizure](#) of more than 854 tonnes of mixed endangered wildlife products, including 8.8 tonnes of pangolin scales, in Nigeria in January of this year.

“The trafficking of pangolin scales is an organised crime and should be tackled in the same manner as other forms of serious and organised crime. It’s crucial to remove the incentive to become involved in, or to continue, trafficking pangolin scales,” the commission stated.

Organised crime, poverty

Most of those arrested for pangolin trafficking in South Africa are destitute people, often from neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique and Namibia, where job opportunities are rare, Jansen said.

“Pangolin crime is now perceived to have a high value, financially speaking, and they get involved in the smuggling and selling of pangolin, often just to feed their families.

Pangolins aren't sold per kilogram but like rhino horn, per gram — an indication of their value...

“We frequently see that word is put out into rural communities that they’re looking for pangolins, and then when the pangolins are brought in, [the poachers are] offered what we call a small reward, but to them, it’s a large reward. That’s how the pangolins move into the [illegal] trade,” he said.

Investigators have retrieved mobile phone footage from individuals revealing how family dogs had been trained to sniff out pangolins in their burrows.

“So there are ways and means to source these animals if the demand is high enough,” Jansen said.

Pangolins, he added, aren’t sold per kilogram anymore, but much like rhino horn, per gram — an indication of their value.

“As the animals become rarer, it becomes more attractive to organised criminal syndicates. As soon as you drive something underground, it becomes rarer, and the price goes up, just like drugs.”

High success

“I don’t see trends within the pangolin trade reducing to any extent in the near future, although our success has been relatively high. The word out there is that we are starting to lock people up and that there are jail terms,” said Jansen.

Devhandran Pillay, the criminal investigative specialist at the [US department of homeland security](#), told how last year it had helped rescue eight pangolins in South Africa, with 28 arrests, as well as five seizures of pangolin scales.

The US department is working with law enforcement agencies in South Africa to combat pangolin trafficking. This work involves the directorate of priority crime investigation, the stock theft and endangered species unit, crime intelligence, the SAPS canine unit as well as the department of environment, forestry and fisheries.

“During the course of last year, four suspects were arrested in the Midrand area, and a pangolin was rescued. During the trial, charges were going to be withdrawn against three of them,” said Pillay.

“The department was requested to assist with digital forensic analysis on the cellphones of the four suspects. This was done, and the four were linked in the commission of the crime.”

The focus, said Pillay, was on catching exporters as well as international receivers and buyers.

Tackling demand crucial

Dealing with the demand for pangolin products in Asia is critical, said Jansen. He said the four Asian species of pangolins have dropped significantly to close-to-extinction levels. Poachers are now sourcing African pangolins to meet their cultural demands.

Jansen said about 60 different commercial medicines list pangolin scales as a small ingredient in China, with these manufactured on an industrial scale.

“You can process a tonne of pangolin in a morning in a pharmaceutical laboratory in China, and then it goes out to commercial pharmacies.”

The Chinese government has given pangolins the highest level of protection and removed them from the country’s official list of ingredients approved for use in traditional Chinese medicine, though **loopholes** remain, according to Jansen.

Hongxiang Huang of the NGO **China House** points out less than 1% of China’s population consumes pangolins. He said demand-reduction programmes had to engage Chinese communities more in Africa “for them to understand more about pangolins and care about them”.
