

## Pangolin remains a threatened species

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**INTERNATIONAL Pangolin Day is celebrated on the third Saturday of February every year and it falls on the 16th of February this year.**

The use of the word celebration is somewhat inaccurate for a family of animals that are the target of an enormous amount of illegal trafficking. And attached to poaching there are of course some serious allegations on the shocking conditions concerning the welfare of these timid and harmless yet useful animals.

Namibia recorded a number of transgressions concerning pangolins over the past year including confiscation by authorities and rescues of pangolin escapees found in urban environments. When considering the illegal activities occurring globally and whether local incidents are linked to larger trafficking networks or not, the authorities need to be on high alert.

Namibia is host to only one of four pangolin species in Africa, one of eight in the world. *Smutsia temminckii*, the African ground pangolin, occurs across a number of African countries, and for that reason the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has listed this animal as an Appendix 1 'least concern'.

This listing allows some trade of skins or scales under CITES (Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species) export and import licences, though nearly all the African countries where pangolins occur have national laws, regulations and policies that would deny permits for any and all trade.

The IUCN listing can create problems of control, because permits are much more readily and easily falsified when authentic copies are permissible.

The extent of illegal trafficking in wildlife species is realised by authorities worldwide. Enormous consignments, up to 23 tons, of whole frozen pangolins, skins and scales were uncovered in a number of incidents in Asia in recent years. These consignments of mostly Asian pangolin species including two listed as endangered under CITES, were en route to markets in China.

But of concern are recent consignments found with African pangolins or pangolin parts, though these could be from any of the four African species. The warning signs are there, human populations are increasing, natural habitats are being reduced and if trade goes on unchecked the African pangolin species will no doubt land in the same endangered category as their Asian counterparts.

International concern for the health of wildlife populations has been dominated by the shocking events of rhino poaching, especially in southern Africa, including one known recent incident in Namibia.

Although overshadowed by the more conspicuous species, the plight of Asian pangolins and the extent of the illegal trade is critical. Africa needs to take heed and be sure that not only advocacy but information on policies concerning illegal hunting, trade and animal welfare are in place. Our concern and support must be given to port and border authorities who require the capacity to fully investigate all consignments leaving Namibia. The pangolin's plight has been taken up by a Species Specialist Group, mandated under CITES, of which Namibia is a ratified member, but we need all citizens to actively engage in halting activities that threaten our heritage.

Advocacy needs to define strong deterrents for any pangolin use. Information needs to go to civil society especially farmers and to public officers including officers from the police and the ministries of Environment and Tourism,

Agriculture Water and Forestry and Health and Social Services.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry because it is mandated to monitor developments in bush clearing for charcoal production and thus can facilitate the identification of persons who scour areas of Namibian land and must be finding all sorts of wildlife, including pangolins.

The Ministry of Health and Social Services is mandated with the registration and perhaps to some extent control of traditional healers in Namibia, who use pangolin parts in unverified cures as well as simply for luck.

Africa and Namibia in particular have to deal with multicultural value systems. With the rapid increase in global trade and the influx of foreign nationals, a number of extra protective measures will need to be put in place in order to guarantee the safety of national standards, resources and heritage.

February 16 is International Pangolin Day, but protection is needed every day from illegal and unethical poaching and trade of these vulnerable animals.

To date Namibia has little information on both the distribution and the density of our pangolin population. A database on sightings of pangolin in Namibia would be useful to feed to a larger regional group of pangolin scientists and conservationists.