



Hope for the pangolin

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Although pangolins are already protected in Namibia, the Cites decision will raise awareness of this critically endangered animal.

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While national statistics on pangolin populations and crimes remain scarce, a recent vote to outlaw global trade of all eight pangolin species could bolster local awareness and boost interventions against illegal activities in Namibia in line with rhino and elephant protective measures.

One of the key votes at the recently closed 17th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (CoP17) to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) was to up-list pangolins from Appendix II to Appendix I, the highest level of protection afforded by the treaty and a recognition that the species is faced with the threat of extinction.

Wildlife conservationists are hopeful that the upgrade in their status will improve attention to their plight, including boosting funding for conservation and research and ultimately their security too.

The pangolin has gained the dubious distinction in recent years as the most commonly smuggled wild animal in the world.

They are poached for their meat, which is eaten as a luxury dish, and their scales, which are used in traditional Asian medicine.

It is estimated that 100 000 pangolins are captured every year from across Africa and Asia. As a result, all eight species of pangolin now feature on the IUCN Red List of animals threatened with extinction.

The Ministry of Environment and Tourism said in a recent statement that pangolins, under domestic legislation, are already afforded a very high level of protection.

As such, the listing has little impact on Namibia's national conservation programmes.

Angus Middleton, director of the Namibia Nature Foundation, said the Namibian species, the ground pangolin (*Smutsia temminckii*), is protected under the Nature Conservation Ordinance of 1975, but the climb up the rank of the CITES listing does raise the issue of pangolin conservation.

He said until now, the threats faced by pangolins have not received the same publicity as the less endangered lion or elephant.

Data on poaching and smuggling statistics in Namibia is not available.

Despite the threat of extinction, researchers say that pangolin conservation efforts and scientific research lag behind for numerous reasons, including the animal's lack of photogenic features, its shy demeanour and the difficulty of keeping them alive in captivity.

"The pangolin has none of the physical qualities that attract attention and donations. No fur, big eyes, baby face, sweet cuddly character," Maria Diekmann, the founder and director of the Rare and Endangered Species Trust (REST), said recently.



(<https://d3rp5jat0m3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets-for-the-pangolin-2016-10-110.jpg>)

SAVE US: Pangolins face a serious uphill battle for survival, in Namibia and around the world.

PHOTO: NAMPA

After many years spent rescuing and rehabilitating pangolins, Diekmann is one of a handful of researchers who has been able to document their behaviour in an effort to increase knowledge of the animals.

A growing number of people have become aware of the threats faced by the species, many of whom were introduced through regular updates featuring videos, photos and stories shared by Diekmann on social media sites. She describes the mammals as "very smart and very endearing."

Diekmann says the recent CITES up-listing could improve law enforcement measures against pangolin poachers and help broaden awareness of the plight of the animals, locally and globally.

She said currently poachers face maximum fines of only N\$500 when caught smuggling pangolins, which is "disheartening" to law enforcers.

Diekmann says that in Namibia "authorities are starting to hit end traders hard and arrests are increasing".

"The pangolin is piggybacking on the same trade as ivory and rhino horn, so each arrest there helps the pangolin too."

Moreover, researchers and conservationists will benefit from the CITES up-listing by qualifying for various grants and attracting larger groups of research students to assist in the work.