

## The plight of the Namibian pangolin

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**BETWEEN 1 January and 31 December 2019, 155 suspects were arrested for being found in possession of pangolins or their parts, attempting to trade these, or aiding and abetting those charged with possession or trafficking.**

During the same year, law enforcement officers in Namibia confiscated 121 pangolins. About 60% of the pangolins were dead. Most of the animals seized alive could be rehabilitated and released back into the wild.

There are currently no estimates of the number of Namibian pangolins that might have been smuggled out of the country. Seizures of staggering numbers of pangolins in Asia each year – the destination of most poached pangolins – give some indication of the impact of this illegal trade.

In November 2019, a Namibian man was fined N\$40 000 or three years in jail for being in possession of one pangolin skin. The perpetrator could not pay the fine and was sent to prison.

This is the highest punishment thus far handed down in Namibia for infringements related to pangolins. It is an important increase from previous fines. In the eight years between the beginning of 2012 and the end of 2019, close to 400 suspects have been arrested in connection with pangolin poaching and trafficking in Namibia and 86% of these were Namibians.

The arrests appear to be having little effect in slowing down the local trade – a sign that it is already deeply entrenched. That pangolins are currently considered the most-trafficked animals in the world has received broad media coverage. The impact this has on pangolin populations has not been adequately researched.

Of the four species of pangolins that occur in Africa, only Temminck's ground pangolin is found in Namibia (another four pangolin species occur in Asia). The status of the Namibian population is poorly known.

Pangolins are small, secretive and nocturnal mammals. They are very rarely seen and little is known about their habits. Pangolin poaching is believed to be carried out opportunistically by rural community members who spend a lot of time 'in the bush', as well as through chance encounters on roads at night.

The severe drought that has ravaged Namibia for several years has led to pangolins being forced to become increasingly day-active to find enough food. During 2019 numerous sightings of pangolins were reported during daylight in various parts of the country.

They were reported from the outskirts of Windhoek, and one even from a suburb. Numerous sightings have been reported from some of their apparent strongholds around the country. This increase in sightings can give the wrong impression that the population is doing well, when in fact drought-stressed animals are foraging during the day.

The Namibian Chamber of Environment has been extremely active in promoting awareness of the plight of the pangolin in Namibia – and providing direct incentives to counter the illegal trade in their parts.

A reward scheme was initiated in late 2017, for information leading to the arrest of suspects collecting or trafficking pangolins. Unfortunately, media coverage and awareness campaigns have an unwanted side effect – they also raise awareness of the illegal value of wildlife products, which can stimulate poaching. It's a catch-22 situation with no options other than to up the ante.

Pangolins face significant threats other than poaching. Electric fences have become extremely popular among Namibian sheep farmers, as well as some game ranchers. The standard practice, especially by sheep farmers, is to string an electric strand close to the ground to stop jackals and caracals from crawling under fences.

Preliminary studies from South Africa indicate that one pangolin is killed along every 11 kilometres of low-

strung electric fence per year. Anecdotal evidence from some sheep-farming areas in Namibia indicates that mortalities may be significantly higher here.

The information also suggests that electric fences may lead to a rapid pangolin population crash within the enclosed areas. Pangolins are largely bi-pedal – they spend much of their time walking on their hind legs. When they attempt to navigate a fence, they tend to touch the electric wire with their unprotected underside. Their defensive mechanism of curling into a tight ball of scales then becomes their doom – they wrap themselves around the electric wire and are killed by a series of shocks.

The number of pangolins killed each year by electric fences in Namibia is difficult to estimate without dedicated research, but could be high in the hundreds. Combined with poaching and other causes of mortalities such as roadkills, human impacts could be rapidly decimating the Namibian pangolin population.

Pangolins are also extremely useful to farmers. The value of pangolins in controlling the impact of termite on grasslands and infrastructure such as fence poles etc. cannot be overstated. Pangolins feed exclusively on termites and ants.

A single pangolin can eat billions of termites each year. Pangolins, and other insectivores such as armadillo and armadillos, are vital components of a balanced ecosystem. Urgent action is needed to ensure their survival.

Research into the status of the Namibian pangolin population is crucial to facilitate pragmatic action. As is the case with countering most wildlife crimes, protecting pangolins is about much more than saving an endearing animal.

Sound conservation measures, effective anti-poaching activities and counter-trafficking operations (i.e. law enforcement and prosecution) all need to work together to ensure that our environments – and the economies and livelihoods that depend on them – remain healthy.