

Namibia's Pangolins – What do we Actually Know?

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IN LAST LIGHT ... A Temminck's pangolin emerges to forage for ants and termites.



KELSEY Prediger walks into the bush in the darkness of early evening. She is armed with only a small torch, telemetry equipment, a mobile phone and a belt pouch with small research tools.

Although the grass is hip high in places, Kelsey appears unfazed by the possibility of encountering a snake, a leopard or another potentially dangerous creature.

She's accompanied by her assistant Sakeus Joseph, who carries a red spotlight that doesn't disturb wildlife. After close to two years of gathering data at a private nature reserve, American-born Kelsey is as comfortable in the Namibian veld as others are in their urban office buildings.

She's tracking tagged Temminck's ground pangolins to gather baseline data on one of Namibia's most valuable, yet least-known wild mammals. This is the first detailed, systematic pangolin research carried out in this country. It's being done under the auspices of the AfriCat Foundation and the Namibian University of Science and Technology (NUST).

Some scientific information on the distribution and habits of pangolins in Namibia has been published for almost a century. Early treatises included aspects such as the animal's diet of ants and termites, and sparse notes on distribution, habitat preferences and behaviour.

More recently, preliminary research done at a private reserve in the Otavi mountains by Bruno Nebe, Paul Rankin and Debbie Shaw provided some insights into pangolin movements. Yet none of the available information is detailed enough to allow an assessment of the health of the

national pangolin population.

Pangolins are one of the most-targeted high-value species for poachers in Namibia (the others being elephant and rhinos). During 2019, law-enforcement officers seized a total of 123 pangolins from poachers and dealers (49 alive; 74 dead).

No reliable estimates of the number of pangolins that have been trafficked out of the country exist.

Next to poaching, low-strung electric fences pose the biggest human threat to pangolins. Anecdotal evidence indicates high pangolin mortalities where electric fences are used to protect small stock against jackal and caracal.

Very rough extrapolations of the impacts of poaching and electric fences on a conservative national population estimate that in a worst-case scenario, significantly more pangolins are being killed by people than can be compensated for by natural population growth.

Kelsey Prediger's research has also shown that pangolins are very susceptible to severe drought, with high mortalities among adults and extreme mortalities among pups. The combined effects of the recent drought and human influences may thus be putting Namibia's pangolin population under enormous pressure. To avoid a population crash, some urgent measures are needed.

Kelsey is not only gathering baseline data on home ranges, habitat and diet requirements. She is actively involved in improving technologies and methods for monitoring pangolin movements and behaviour.

The aim is to expand the research to priority sites around the country. This will include monitoring the release of rehabilitated pangolins seized from poachers and dealers, as well as studying the impacts of electric fences and other human influences.

Animal Rehabilitation, Research and Education Centre has done extremely valuable work to maximise the rehabilitation success of the 49 pangolins rescued in 2019.

This includes the creation of a first responders manual, and practical tools such as travel crates. Maria Diekmann of the Rare and Endangered Species Trust has also done important work on pangolin rehabilitation.

This is a vital aspect, as research in South Africa and Namibia has shown that a high number of pangolins die, if rehabilitation and release are not carefully managed. This should also serve as a caution to well-meaning hobby conservationists – picking up pangolins to take them to 'a safer place' is a very bad idea. The best strategy is to leave pangolins in peace. If that is simply not an option, contact NARREC, REST, or the national wildlife crime hotline: 55 555.

A broader framework of pangolin conservation structures is now being created.

This includes a Namibian Pangolin Working Group, a long-running pangolin-awareness campaign, a national pangolin management plan, and national-level research.

The Namibian Chamber of Environment has initiated an awareness campaign. Research is being coordinated by Morgan Hauptfleisch of the Biodiversity Research Centre of Nust, while the overall management and conservation of the pangolin falls under the mandate of Kenneth /Uiseb at the Ministry of Environment and Tourism.

Further training of law enforcement officers handling pangolins is also planned for this year. In order to improve the success rate of releases, seized animals need to be fastidiously rehabilitated, potential release sites must be carefully assessed, and released animals need to be monitored using remote tracking technology. Close collaboration between the ministry of environment, the Blue Rhino Task Team, rehabilitation centres and research initiatives will enable this.

Working together is once again central to success and the various stakeholders must ensure an effective national network. This requires adequate funding. A number of local and international agencies have already been very supportive, especially regarding research. With localised initiatives quickly expanding into a national approach, more input will be needed.

In the meantime, Kelsey Prediger still heads out every evening to monitor the behaviour of her research subjects.

The true value of what she records will lie in the way that the data, the technologies and the practical experience will be applied to better manage pangolin conservation at a national level.

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