

A moment to celebrate the secretive night crawler

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TRACKING PANGOLINS ... Researchers of AfriCat Foundation Namibia track pangolins. This one is fitted with a high-frequency tag, while cameras are sometimes placed in burrows to monitor the animals' activities. Photo: Nacso Namibia/ AfriCat Foundation



THE plight of the pangolin has been featured prominently in the media.

The scaly creature is among the most-trafficked group of wild animals on earth.

The small mammal, named after the Malaysian word 'penggulong', which means 'roller', is an endangered and relatively unknown species.

Pangolins everywhere are relentlessly collected in the wild and trafficked to markets in Asia, where they are served as a delicacy in restaurants, and their scales are used in medicinal products.

It's this consumption at end markets that drives the trade.

Tomorrow marks the 10th instalment of World Pangolin Day.

The day has boosted growing awareness of the shy, nocturnal mammal, but the question remains: Will it make a difference?

There are eight species of pangolin, four of which are found in Asia and the other four in Africa.

One, the Temminck's ground pangolin, is found in Namibia.

Namibia's pangolins have not received the same attention or funding as the country's other high-value poaching targets, namely rhinos and elephants.

Pangolin researchers struggle to secure funding for their work.

Some funds have been spent on awareness creation and a reward scheme, some on the rehabilitation of pangolins seized alive from traffickers. No funds are currently spent directly on pangolin protection, because of a looming problem – there is no simple way to protect these animals.

Pangolins are small, active at night and secretive. They are rarely seen and thus no substantive data exists on how many there are in Namibia, how healthy the population is, or how it is distributed.

What is known, however, are some of the areas with a high pangolin density, but these are outside national parks.

The country has little idea of how many pangolins are protected in Namibia's state-protected areas.

Pangolins are collected opportunistically, mostly by rural residents who come across them in the veld. Word has gotten around that pangolins are valuable. The allure of quick cash in hard times is difficult to resist, so people pick them up and try to sell them.

Pangolin seizures have risen dramatically over the past five years, although 2020 has seen a significant reduction.

Most pangolins are confiscated during sting operations, when people offer them to undercover police.

Last year 100 people were arrested on charges of possessing and trafficking pangolins or their parts, and 72 pangolins were seized (compared to 123 in 2019).

It is not known how many pangolins have been smuggled out of the country.

Coincidental seizures at border posts or police checkpoints are rare. Yet, there is no doubt that the population is under pressure.

This is compounded by incidental pangolin deaths caused by other human activities.

Studies from South Africa and anecdotal evidence from small-stock farming areas in Namibia indicate that pangolin deaths caused by electrocution are considerable.

Low-strung electric fences kill pangolins when the animals curl themselves around the wire in their typical defensive mechanism of rolling into a tight ball.

This combination of mortalities puts pangolins in a dire position in many parts of the country.

A considerable number of pangolins seized from traffickers are alive. Yet, it has been found that rehabilitation and release of these animals are difficult. Most suffer from stress, dehydration and starvation, and some have serious injuries.

Rehabilitation is often unsuccessful.

A first responder's manual has been produced by the Namibia Animal Rehabilitation, Research and Education Centre.

This helps law-enforcement officers to immediately initiate rehabilitation.

Last year, the Namibian Pangolin Working Group was formed to help coordinate pangolin protection efforts.

The group consists of representatives from the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, non-governmental conservation organisations, rehabilitation centres and pangolin researchers.