



Nigeria: Breaking Yoke Of Illegal Wildlife Trafficking

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By Bayo Akomolafe, New Telegraph

Despite huge seizures, Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) is still battling smugglers from China, Vietnam and some South East Asian countries using Nigerian ports and porous borders as transit hub for the transshipment of pangolin scales and ivory, BAYO AKOMOLAFE reports

Shipments of pangolin scales intercepted and reported by Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) between 2010 and September 2021 has been put at 190,407 kilogrammes. It was gathered that some seizures in ports of Hong Kong,

China, Vietnam and other parts of South East Asia valued at \$1.5 billion were traced to Nigeria. Since 2010, average mass of reported Nigeria-linked seizures increased steadily before jumping sharply around 2017.

Illegal trade

It was learnt that the scales of pangolin are prized \$3,000 per kilogramme, while the meat is \$300 per kilogramme; live pangolin attracts \$1,000 based on current black market prize. For instance, a report sponsored by the Chinese Government in 2017 revealed that the domestic wildlife trade employed one million people and was worth over \$74 billion.

Seizures

Worried by the trend of smuggling of wide life from Nigeria, the National Public Relations Officer of NCS, Deputy Comptroller Timi Bomodi, explained that Customs had collaborated with Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC) to curb the Asian smugglers from the illicit trafficking. He said that through the joint efforts, Customs recently intercepted 397 kilogrammes of pangolin scales and arrested eight smugglers.

He noted that three of the arrested suspects were identified as Vietnamese. They were involved in the attempted trafficking of large amounts of pangolin scales and ivories through Nigerian ports. According to him, preliminary investigation revealed the Vietnamese nationals as high-ranking members of a major organised crime group involved in the trafficking of ivory, pangolin scales, rhino horns and lion bones from Mozambique and South Africa through Nigeria to Vietnam.

Bomodi noted: "The three suspects were arrested while sourcing for pangolin scales in Nigeria, 397.5kg of which were found in their possession. It is important to note that the Wildlife Justice Commission is an international body, which works to disrupt and dismantle networks of illegal wildlife trade. "Through an intelligence-led operation, the collaboration between NCS and WJC led to the confiscation of 400kg of pangolin scales put up for sale on the illegal network.

The two organisations were able to identify other members of the criminal syndicate for arrest." To further put a stop to the environmental destruction posed by these unscrupulous elements, Bomodi also explained that the



arrested suspects had been charged to court on various counts bordering on the illegal trade in wildlife, noting that the arrests came as part of a proactive enforcement operation targeting the top echelon of wildlife traffickers worldwide and were assessed to have caused unprecedented disruptions to organised global wildlife trafficking network. He stressed: "This is the fourth major illegal wildlife arrest in one year resulting from the strategic partnership between the Customs, WJC and other foreign governments. It demonstrates the commitment of the Nigeria Customs Service as a formidable ally in the fight against wildlife trafficking. "Initial crackdowns in 2021 had resulted in discoveries of 7.1 tonnes of pangolin scales and 850 kgs of ivory, all of which were seized by NCS.

The Comptroller- General of Customs, Col. Hameed Ibrahim Ali (rtd), assured the public that the service would leave no stone unturned in its efforts to support the rest of the world in protecting endangered species and prevent deforestation. Nigeria Customs Service would never allow perpetrators of these crimes to profit from it or escape the wrath of the law." Bomodi noted that in 2021, Ali showcased a seizure of pangolin scales and elephant tusks worth N22.6 billion in Lagos, adding that the achievement was widely acknowledged as a major boost to the fight against the extinction of endangered wildlife species in Nigeria.

Enforcement

He said that Customs would continue to enforce schedule 6 of the Common External Tariff, which identified endangered species as absolute prohibition for export. As a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of fauna and flora (CITES), the service would not relent in its enforcement responsibilities by suppressing to the barest minimum the unsustainable and unethical exploitation of the nation's fragile ecosystem and its biodiversity.

History

While delivering a paper on "History of Confiscation, Current Challenges and Opportunities in Combating Pangolin Trafficking in Nigeria," during the 2019 World Pangolin Day organised by the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, Lekki, Lagos and Pangolin Conservation Guild Nigeria, the Assistant Comptroller at the Federal Operations Unit, Zone A, Ikeja, Mutalib Sule, also



explained that the seizure in Nigeria was the highest in the world, while Japan came a distant second, having made a seizure of 7.100 kilogrammes of pangolin in the same year. The assistant comptroller said that people engage in illicit trade of pangolins because of the benefits. Sule recalled: "On February 12, 2018, the FOU patrol team went to a building located along Allen Avenue and confiscated 54 sacks of pangolin scale and 218 pieces of elephant tusks.

The pangolin weighed 2001 kilogrammes, while the elephant gave us 343 kilogramme; a Chinese citizen was apprehended in connection with it and taken to court by Customs for prosecution. "On March 3, another Chinese was arrested at a location off Toyin Street; 329 sacks of pangolin was discovered and evacuated; the sacks gave us 8.492 metric tonnes. A second visit there gave us 78 sacks of pangolin of 1,771 metric tonnes. Also on July 22, 2018, around Lekki in Lagos, 21 sacks of pangolin and four pieces of elephant tusks were found stashed in a shop. "On August 11 of the same year, we swooped on the den of some Chinese nationals suspected to be engaging in the illicit trade; 10 sacks of pangolin were found and evacuated; these gave us give us 738 metric tonnes."

For Customs to curb the use of Nigerian ports as a transit point for smuggling of pangolin scales and ivories, there should be unbroken arrests, prosecutions, sanction of culprits.

