


SATURDAY STAR / NEWS

Four pangolins rescued in a week from illegal trade

By Sheree Bega  21h ago

In just over a week, Ray Jansen and his team have recovered four trafficked pangolins - three of them pregnant - in sting operations from the illicit trade in various parts of South Africa.

In total, 11 people were arrested by a team of dedicated and specialised law enforcement officers. The operations are a sign, says Jansen, of the African Pangolin Working Group, that pangolin poaching has resumed under Level 3 lockdown restrictions.

"It's just gone mad. The lockdown at the end of March shut all borders, people's movements and poachers couldn't move animals over the border from Zimbabwe or wherever. The risk being associated with moving a poached protected species was a hell of a lot higher with all the road blocks and army blocks.

"So it literally collapsed up and when we moved from Level 4 to Level 3 to three, it just went bang and opened the trade all over again. We've seen an increase in normal poaching as people have gotten laid off, companies close and work opportunities crash. Rural communities are really in huge trouble and local poaching of porcupines and antelope have skyrocketed as people don't have money to feed their families."

Pangolins are the most heavily trafficked mammal on the planet and rank among the most trafficked wildlife species on the continent.

The demand largely for their keratinous scales, used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and for their meat in south-east Asia has created a lucrative illicit market run by transnational criminal syndicates.

In SA, around 16 pangolins have been intercepted in the illicit trade this year. While the international trade has crashed under Covid-19 lockdowns, Jansen says he expects a "huge increase again as ports start opening and the economies starts to open.

"I have good intelligence that in the DRC, Vietnam and Nigeria, they're stockpiling scales and I think once the ports open we're going to see a huge movement of the illegal wildlife trade products again."

So far this year, around 10 tons of scales have been intercepted in Africa - last year this time it was around 70 tons. "I don't think the trade stopped, I do think it's being stockpiled."

Last year, authorities intercepted more than 97 tons of scales from Africa representing over 150 000 animals. But the real poaching onslaught is far higher - only 10% of the illicit trade is intercepted, says Jansen.



A pangolin retrieved from the illegal trade last week in a sting operation on the N4

In June, the Chinese government outlawed pangolin scales as a raw ingredient in TCM. However, the Environmental Investigation Agency found pangolin scales are still listed as an ingredient in

patent medicine formulae found in the official reference book, meaning they can still be legally traded and used.

"The ban is the best news for pangolins I've heard in the past 10 years I've been working on this order. It's a massive and monumental step forward for the conservation of a multitude of endangered species including pangolins.

"The loophole is a huge problem because everyone is just going to go and patent their products. But the large majority of commercially available remedies in China are effectively banned, which is huge. I do think China will rule to outlaw it completely and I look forward to that day."

Jansen is optimistic this will "eventually trickle down to the guys on the ground doing the poaching, that it's not lucrative anymore and it's time to do other things.

"This lag period between banning it and removing it out of the trade and taking it from the financial reward, it may take up to a year," he said.

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