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## Pangolin poacher slapped with maximum sentence

It's estimated that at least 38 pangolins were poached during the pandemic as people become more desperate to make money.

by **Nidha Narrandes** — 2021-05-26 18:25 in [Environment](#), [News](#), [South Africa](#)



A 2019 sting operation to trap a suspected pangolin smuggler has finally snared its intended victims, with the harshest sentence ever handed out in South Africa.

South African Orateng Mekwe received a 10-year sentence for trading in pangolins, while his accomplice Jealous Rungano a Zimbabwe citizen, received three months in prison and deportation after he serves his sentence.

Mekwe's sentence is the toughest one yet meted out for pangolin trading in South Africa and comes as a warning to smuggling syndicates to trade in the highly endangered mammals.

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**Pangolins are hunted** for a number of reasons, namely medicine and luxury goods, with the greatest demand coming from China and Vietnam. Their scales are dried, powdered and sold as medicine in the East. The medicine is believed to treat stomach aches, menstruation pain, and arthritis, and said to spur lactation, but there is no scientific evidence to support these beliefs.

In 2019, members of the Cullinan Stock Theft and Endangered Species Unit, the South African Police Service, the Green Scorpions, and members of the African Pangolin Working Group set up a sting operation in which a pangolin was offered for sale.

Mekwe, Rungano and two other suspects walked right into the trap and were arrested on the spot, however, the two other accomplices were released due to a lack of evidence.

According to South African law, trafficking in endangered wildlife such as pangolins carries a penalty of 10 years in prison or a R10 million fine, but up until now, no judge has thrown the book at pangolin poachers. Mekwe will spend the next decade in prison, while Rungano will be deported back to Zimbabwe.

Professor Ray Jansen, chairperson and founder of the African Pangolin Working Group, praised the court's sentence, telling Timeslive: "It is a groundbreaking sentence that sets a precedent not only for SA but also for Africa."

It's estimated that at least 38 pangolins were poached during the pandemic as people become more desperate to make money. "The pandemic has had a real knock-on effect with poaching," he said. However, Jansen is concerned that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

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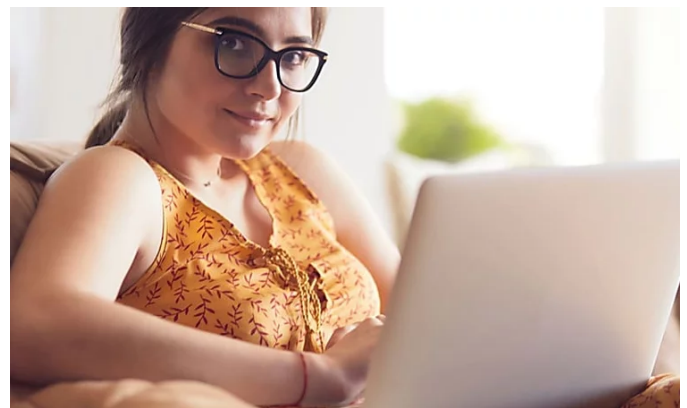
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