

Crime

Pangolin peddler caught near Secunda, gets 10 years in prison

The animal had been slowly starved and dehydrated over a period of time until it died from multiple organ failure.

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Arisja Misselhorn 3 minutes read



A member of the national counter poaching unit holds a rescued pangolin. (Photo: Francois Meyer of the African Pangolin Working Group)

A wildlife trafficker softly cried upon being sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for illegal possession of and trying to sell a pangolin.

Zimbabwean national Tichaona Chifamba (41) appeared and pleaded guilty before Regional Magistrate Victor Ball in the Secunda Regional Court on Thursday, March 24.

He was caught in an intelligence-driven operation on August 3 last year while peddling a Temminck's pangolin in the parking lot of A & E Hyperworld in Trichardt.

The Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) and the police worked together to nab Chifamba who asked for a large amount of money for the pangolin.

He has been in police custody since his arrest.



Tichaona Chifamba listens as Prof Ray Jansen (founder of the African Pangolin Working Group) testifies in court.

The small sub-adult male pangolin was kept in a bag and was in a haggard condition when the police found it.

It is presumed that the animal had been poached in Zimbabwe and kept in this bag for about three weeks.

Despite the rescue efforts, the pangolin died en route to the ICU ward of the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital.

Prosecutor Bimla Pillay read in court the autopsy findings of Dr Karin Lourens from the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital.

Dr Lourens stated that this was one of the worst cases of cruelty to animals she had seen in her 20 year-long career.

The animal had been slowly starved and dehydrated over a period of time until it died from multiple organ failure.

She described the pangolin's extreme and prolonged stress and suffering as monstrous.



Tichaona Chifamba tries to hide his face from the media.

The state also called to the stand Prof Raymond Jansen, a world-renowned specialist in pangolins and founder of the [African Pangolin Working Group](#), the first international non-profit organisation focusing on the hands-on conservation of pangolins.

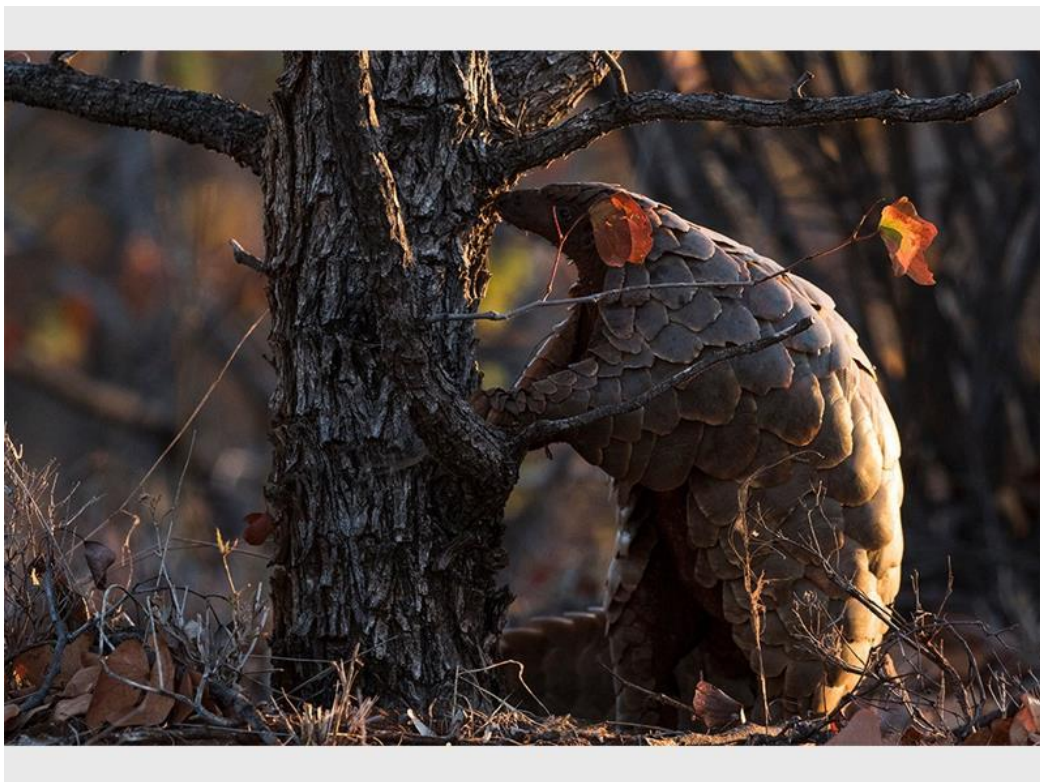
He testified about the severity of the wildlife trade of pangolins.

Jansen said pangolins are critically endangered animals and will be extinct within the next 20 years due to the illegal trade if urgent conservation action is not taken.

According to him, the poaching of pangolins is a thousand times worse than rhinos.

“Pangolins are the most illegally traded mammals on earth. They have no natural predators, except for man.”

Prof Jansen explained that in 2019 he tracked 97 tons of pangolin scales traded from Africa and set to be exported to Asia. About 150 000 pangolins had been poached in this collective trade spanning one year for this shipment.



Pangolins are the most illegally traded mammals on earth. They have no natural predators, except for man. (Photo: Francois Meyer of the African Pangolin Working Group)

The [African Pangolin Working Group](#) is globally acknowledged and works closely with the police and the wildlife authorities.

Prof Jansen said from his experience, most smugglers are Zimbabweans and the wildlife trade is often linked to organised crime.

Chifamba's legal representative asked that the court takes into account as mitigating factors, that Chifamba is a first-time offender, has a wife and two children in Zimbabwe who depend on him and that he also acknowledged his guilt.

Magistrate Ball found Chifamba guilty on charges of the illegal possession of an endangered species without a permit, for which he received a 10 year jail sentence, and being in South Africa illegally, for which he received an 18 month sentence.

Both sentences will run concurrently.

He will be deported back to Zimbabwe after he has served out the sentence.



A scared and stressed smuggled pangolin. This animal was rescued during another operation and survived the ordeal. The one in Trichardt did not. (Photo: African Pangolin Working Group)

Drawing a comparison to the scorch of rhino poaching in South Africa, Ball said the responsibility to the society outweighs Chifamba's mitigating factors and that a united stance against poaching proved to be effective.

"A clear message must be sent out that this conduct that threatens our wildlife and biodiversity in general will not be tolerated.

"We have a duty to society and future generations to ensure our wildlife diversity is preserved," Ball said.

Chifamba's final instruction to his lawyer was to apply for leave to appeal. This will be heard on April 26.

After the court adjourned, an elated Jansen told *Ridge Times* this sentence is a victory in the enormous battle to save the pangolin.

"Pangolins are amazing creatures with the intelligence level equivalent to that of a border collie.

"Can you imagine what anguish this poor animal had to endure while being kept in a bag for three weeks?"



Pangolins are the most illegally traded mammals on earth. They have no natural predators, except for man. (Photo: Francois Meyer of the African Pangolin Working Group)

He also explained that pangolin scales are ground into powder for traditional medicine in Asia.

“The demand stems from exorbitant use of pangolin scale powder used as part of a remedy in 60 different commercial pharmaceutical products, from treatment of both spiritual and medical ailments.

“As keratin protein is the fundamental basic ingredient of pangolin scales, there is no scientific evidence to suggest these remedies work at all,” he said.