

ISS TODAY OP-ED

Can South Africa contain pangolin trafficking?



Pangolin Reintroduction Project. (Photo: © &Beyond)



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There are worrying signs that the illegal trade is becoming more organised, with professionals and government officials involved.

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When asked about his favourite pangolin story, Francois Meyer, a pangolin release specialist, tells the [story](#) of Ally. After being rescued from the illegal trade, Ally – an expectant female Temminck's ground pangolin – was reintroduced into the wild and gave birth to her pup, Pod.

The following year she had her second pup, Ray, named after pangolin expert Professor Ray Jansen from South Africa's Tshwane University of Technology and the International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission Pangolin Specialist Group.

Temminck's ground pangolin, South Africa's only indigenous species, is globally classified as [vulnerable](#) to extinction. These gentle, elusive creatures are hard to study, but research indicates that their numbers are declining, primarily due to illegal international trade. They are also threatened by habitat destruction and electric fences.

The unsustainable consumption of Asian pangolins is likely to have resulted in the increased sourcing of African species.

Pangolins have historically served as bushmeat in some African countries, with limited use of their scales for traditional cultural practices. Jansen says the cultural use of pangolins in South Africa is considered sustainable. The existential threat stems from the illegal trade that supplies Asian [demand](#) for pangolin scales used in traditional Chinese medicine.



A rescued pangolin forages for food in Limpopo. (Photo: Shiraaz Mohamed)

International trade in pangolins and their derivatives, like scales, is globally [prohibited](#). Pangolins are protected under South African law, which bans hunting, catching, transporting, selling, buying, importing, exporting and being in possession of one without a permit.

However, prohibition has done little to mitigate the trade globally. The unsustainable consumption of Asian pangolins is likely to have resulted in the increased sourcing of African species. Most shipments seized in Asia originate from Africa – particularly central and western Africa. After being killed, pangolins are stripped of their scales, which are [shipped](#) primarily from Nigerian ports, mainly [destined](#) for China and Vietnam. Seizures containing whole pangolins from Africa are rare, even though their meat is considered a delicacy in Asia.

South Africa is an outlier in this global trade due to limited pangolin seizures. Jansen told the ENACT organised crime project that from January to August 2023, about 30 pangolins were seized in the country – on par with [previous](#) years' numbers.

Most of these confiscations were of live pangolins and were led by a task [team](#) comprising different law enforcement entities, often based on information received from the public. Seizures were largely carried out in Limpopo, where pangolins are often sourced. In some cases they were brought across the border from Mozambique, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

Jansen says the motivation for this cross-border movement could be to escape strictly imposed penalties in neighbouring countries, or due to the perception that South Africa has more buyers. That explains why many seizures have been made in economic hubs like Gauteng. Most arrests are of foreigners from countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Worrying change in trends

Although these isolated incidents are incomparable to the multi-tonne seizures of containerised pangolin scales from central and west Africa, experts say changing trends in South Africa may be cause for concern.

Jansen and Meyer agree that pangolin sales were initially largely opportunistic, carried out by impoverished people trying to make fast money. Now, however, suspects often own businesses and vehicles and trade in other illegal commodities. Police and [government](#) officials have also been arrested. Another emerging trend is the increased seizure of pangolins and skins from the Northern Cape and [Namibia](#).



A rescued pangolin about to be transported to the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital after members of the Johannesburg Tactical Response Team and Criminal Intelligence units received information of suspected poachers in Cosmos City, Johannesburg. Three suspects were arrested. (Photo: Shiraaz Mohamed)

Rescuing pangolins from traffickers is only the first step in a series of efforts to care for seized pangolins and get them back into the wild. Pangolins are sensitive to stress during capture and trafficking, and they often suffer psychological effects and illnesses far worse than physical injuries.

If the trade is indeed becoming more organised, with professionals and government officials involved, it opens the door for corruption, as happened in the rhino horn and abalone trades.

After being confiscated by police, nongovernmental organisations typically take over their care, which includes veterinary treatment and rehabilitation for those who survive. They then enter a period of facilitated, monitored release until they are completely rewilded.

Meyer says that through trial and error a group of passionate pangolin rescuers have developed best practices to get the animals from the trade back into the veld. They have trained counterparts, resulting in multiple institutions being able to care for rescued pangolins.

Since awareness of this illegal trade has grown, heavier [sentences](#) are increasingly being handed down. And while the number of [seizures](#) is stable, this was once the case for rhinos before illegal harvesting rapidly escalated. While most law enforcement efforts focus on seizing individual pangolins, it is possible that the animals are being transported, undetected, from South Africa on a larger scale.

South Africa already serves as an exit point for large shipments of wildlife commodities such as ivory and abalone. But – as is typical of organised crime investigations – Jansen notes the difficulty in infiltrating the criminal networks responsible for large export operations.

If the trade is indeed becoming more organised, with professionals and government officials involved, it opens the door for corruption, as happened in the rhino horn and abalone trades. That could see pangolin smuggling growing and becoming entrenched in South Africa. Since the global illegal trade shows no indication of slowing down, the country should be prepared to prevent this expansion.

Meyer and Jansen highlight the urgency of teaching people about unique species like pangolins – keeping them alive in popular culture so that South Africa does not sell its natural resources to other countries before realising what has been lost.



A Temminck's ground pangolin, found primarily in sub-saharan and southern Africa, is often sold alive. (Photo: Francois Meyer)

There are effective informal working relationships between the various entities tackling the illicit trade and caring for pangolins. However, South Africa needs an intervention similar to the National Response [Strategy](#) to combat the booming illegal succulent trade. This would coordinate state and non-state actors' activities and deal holistically with the pangolin trade, its causes and effects. **DM**

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