Dramatic rescues of pangolins and other rare wildlife can start with a single message

Southeast Asia is a hotspot for illegal wildlife trade. Nonprofits with hotlines to report trafficking produce an outsized impact in saving animals.

Animal care staff members at Free the Bears in Laos were having a normal busy Friday, overseeing 150 bears and other wildlife, when an email arrived with the subject "URGENT – Live pangolin being transported in minivan." The message landed with a receptive audience—the nonprofit conservation and animal welfare group specializes in rehabilitating wildlife rescued from the illegal trade.

"It was quite lucky that we saw the email immediately," says Brian Crudge, Free the Bear's Southeast Asia regional director and a National Geographic Explorer. "Pangolins are a critically endangered species, so it's very important for us to help with rescues if we can."

Pangolins, which are also known as scaly anteaters, have the unfortunate distinction of being the world's most trafficked mammal. Millions of pangolins are caught up in the illegal wildlife trade each year, and for the vast majority, the journey ends in death. But in

rare cases, they are rescued and rehabilitated by nonprofit groups like Free the Bears—and the tips that lead to their rescue often come from members of the public.

The pangolin tip email came from Jon Hernandez, a Spanish tourist visiting the small Southeast Asian nation adjacent to Vietnam and Thailand. He sensed something amiss in the backseat of a minivan that was making its way from Vang Vieng, a riverside town popular with backpackers, to Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage-listed city famous for its ornate Buddhist temples. Normally, the five-hour trip between those two major Lao tourist destinations is straightforward. On this particular afternoon, however, the bus made a surprise detour to a house "in the middle of the jungle," where someone gave the driver money and a cardboard box, Hernandez wrote in the email.

The driver slid the box into the van, right next to Hernandez. Seeing it up close, he noticed breathing holes punched into the cardboard. His curiosity got the better of him; he peeked inside and saw a curled-up animal tightly bound in a net. Immediately, he recognized it as a pangolin.

Hernandez searched the internet for wildlife rescue groups in the area and decided to email Free the Bears. "I wanted to inform your organization immediately in case this information can help protect the animal," he wrote.

(*As times and tastes change, Vietnam's bear bile industry is fading away*)

What's your emergency?

Southeast Asia is a hotspot for illegal wildlife trade, yet few organizations exist to assist with the rescue and rehabilitation of live animals that are seized from poachers and traffickers. The ones that do operate there have an outsized impact, though, especially given their limited staff and resources.

Millions of pangolins illegally traded each year. In rare cases, they are rescued and rehabilitated by nonprofit groups like Save Vietnam's Wildlife, another Vietnam-based group.
Brent Stirton, Nat Geo Image Collection

Nonprofit organizations do not have the authority to stop vehicles or seize wildlife. But they play an important role in supplying the information needed for local officials or law enforcement officers to intervene. Many wildlife rescues result from undercover intelligence that nonprofits gather themselves. But members of the public, like Hernandez, also play an important role in reporting trafficking incidents they witness. Free the Bears sometimes fields emails and social media messages about cases, while several other groups have dedicated hotlines that anyone can use to file a report.

The volume of tips can be staggering. Since 2021, for example, a hotline operated by Education for Nature-Vietnam—the only such service in Vietnam—has resulted in the seizure of nearly 52,000 animals. Around 35,000 of them were tropical fish. The nearly 17,000 others ranged across almost 200 species, including otters, owls, slow lorises, water dragons, sea turtles and tigers. About 60 percent of tips the group receives result in seizures of live animals, says Doug Hendrie, director of counter-wildlife trafficking at Education for Nature-Vietnam.

The Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife operates a similar hotline for all of Laos. In 2025, three staff members fielded 99 tips—mostly submitted through WhatsApp or Facebook—for 176 individual animals of 81 species. The Lao authorities' follow-through is significantly lower than in Vietnam, however. According to Jeremy Phan, director of Lao Conservation Trust for Wildlife, just 7.5 percent of cases in 2025 resulted in a seizure. The organization is also required to pay a per diem to Lao officials for the time they spend on wildlife seizures, Phan adds—which sometimes means spending more than $500 on government fees to rescue a single animal.

Despite these obstacles, Phan and his colleagues were still able to assist in 99 rescues last year from tip-offs and other sources, like people surrendering exotic pets. The data they collect from the hotline also give a valuable snapshot of wildlife trafficking trends in the country, Phan says.

Professional intervention depends on the public playing its part correctly, though. Experts urge tourists and residents not to purchase animals they see for sale in an attempt to rescue them. Doing so rewards the seller and perpetuates the trade. Instead, well-meaning individuals should follow Hernandez's example by reporting wildlife trafficking to organizations equipped to respond responsibly.

There's another potential downside even if the animal in question is adaptable and survives: it could become an invasive species with potentially dire consequences for native flora and fauna, if it does not belong in the local ecosystem. Inappropriate releases still happen, though. Hendrie, for example, once witnessed authorities dumping hundreds of snail-eating turtles in the karst mountains of northern Vietnam, almost 850 miles from the species' native habitat in the Mekong River Delta. Taking a species that inhabits marshes and wetlands and depositing it in a forest hundreds of miles away is a sure death sentence, Hendrie says.

Oftentimes, rescued animals require veterinary attention to help them recover from their ordeal and many also need specialized care to survive in captivity. Pangolins, for example, require a strict diet of ants and termites, and are extremely sensitive to stress. "In Laos, the government doesn't have the resources to provide this care," Crudge says. To improve animals' chances of reaching professional help, Free the Bears has trained law enforcement officers to safely confiscate wildlife and provide emergency treatment until the animals can be transferred to appropriate facilities.

Some species are better suited for return to the wild than others. Free the Bears has had good luck releasing confiscated leopard cats, for example. "Like [domestic] cats, they can go feral pretty easily," Crudge says. Tortoises and turtles are also good candidates for release, as are pangolins—so long as they survive the stress of capture and captivity.

Others are more difficult to rehabilitate, Phan says, especially animals that develop psychological problems during captivity. Time spent in a cage can lead to zoochosis—a condition of distress marked by stereotypic behaviors such as head-bobbing, pacing and swaying. Captured animals may also lose their natural fear of people. In 2013, for example, after group of formerly captive macaques were released in a national park in Vietnam, "they descended on the park headquarters, hung out at the canteen and stole things from tourists," Hendrie says. "Eventually they had to be euthanized because they were too dangerous."

The female pangolin recently rescued by Free the Bears gets a health check.
Courtesy Free the Bears

The female pangolin and her unborn baby get a second shot at life.
Courtesy Free the Bears

Some animals, once taken into captivity, can never be released. This applies to most bears. They are typically captured as cubs and kept as pets until they grow too large to stay in

the house, and then are sold into the bear bile trade. The luckiest rescues end up in the permanent care of groups like Free the Bears, which currently looks after 312 bears across Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Some were rescued thanks to public tips. Two moon bears named Momo and Winnie Skylark, for example, had been kept as cubs at a bus station, where tourists spotted them in 2015. They now reside at Free the Bears' sanctuary in Luang Prabang, where they could live to be over 30 years old. "Certainly, most of the bears currently in our care will be with us for life," Crudge says. "It's a big commitment."

For the pangolin rescued in March, there will be another shot at life in the wild in more ways than one. During the animal's medical exam, staff were surprised and delighted to find that she was pregnant, Vongsay says. She recovered well, he adds, and was released at the end of April in a protected area in Laos. The hope, Vongsay says, is that she and her future offspring will live out their lives there in peace.

"Every pangolin matters, so returning one to the wild is always amazing," Vongsay says. "But to be able to send her back to the forest knowing she'll now have her baby where she belongs is extra special."

■