

# To save pangolins, we need to change the narrative (commentary)

- *A new Netflix documentary about pangolins, the world's most heavily trafficked mammal, is a powerful example of what can happen when media companies highlight the plight of lesser-known species.*
- *Most conservation dollars are directed at animals that already get attention and funding, like lions or elephants, while species like pangolins — which also have important ecological roles — receive comparatively little, so the narrative needs to change, a new op-ed argues.*
- *“We need to promote the visibility of lesser-known threatened species as part of their protection [and] broaden the conservation narrative beyond the most recognizable animals and give the same care and attention to the ones that are less familiar, but still at risk,” the author writes.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily of Mongabay.*

Despite being the world's most heavily trafficked mammal — more than elephants, rhinos and tigers combined — pangolins remain virtually unknown to the public. These shy, scaly creatures are primarily hunted for their scales, which are frequently used in traditional Asian medicines. Despite international protections, illegal trafficking of these animals continues, and with it, the quiet collapse of wild pangolin populations across Asia and Africa.

Part of conservationists' challenge is increasing the visibility of the threats these species face. [Pangolins](#) don't have the public profile of elephants or lions and aren't instantly recognizable to the general public. They're not often visible to safari tourists, rarely show up in children's books or blockbuster nature documentaries, and, until recently, they rarely made headlines. In a media environment that often elevates the largest or most brightly colored animals, pangolins have been left out of the conservation spotlight.

But that's starting to change, and one reason for that is storytelling. The new Netflix documentary [Pangolin: Kulu's Journey](#) is a powerful example of what can happen when the media shines a light on a lesser-known species.



Through the lens of a rescued pangolin and the conservationists working to protect him, the film gives audiences a window into a crisis that has long flown under the radar, and highlights the intelligence of these often-forgotten creatures. Perhaps more importantly, it shows that these animals are worth knowing, worth protecting, and still have a chance to thrive in the wild if given an appropriate amount of attention and resources.

This kind of storytelling allows us to turn an abstract crisis into something tangible. It makes the issue personal, memorable and urgent in ways that statistics and policy papers can't. It helps people connect to a species they've never heard of, and that connection can drive real action.

At the Wildlife Conservation Network's [Pangolin Crisis Fund](#), we support frontline efforts to stop the killing, trafficking and consumer demand for these mammals. As part of that mission, we partnered with award-winning filmmaker Pippa Ehrlich on *Kulu's Journey* to drive viewership, raise awareness and channel donations to on-the-ground conservation organizations like the African Pangolin Working Group in South Africa. Through supporting our grantees across Africa and Asia, we're working to eliminate the crisis that threatens all eight pangolin species with extinction.

However, pangolins aren't only important because they're at risk — they also play a crucial ecological role that's often overlooked. In fact, [recent research](#) published in *Global Ecology and Conservation* found that pangolins serve an important ecological role as ecosystem engineers. Their burrows help damaged forests recover by creating shelter for other species, and their termite-heavy diet supports tree growth by keeping these insects' populations in check.

Still, we know that progress doesn't arise from scientific findings and conservation action alone. Much of it lies in raising the profile of pangolins, and thus increasing support for their protection. The species that get attention are often the ones that are already receiving funding, public pressure and political support. For too long, pangolins have been left out of that equation.



Pangolin at the Lilongwe Wildlife Centre in 2022: the center's work includes rehabilitating animals rescued from the illegal wildlife trade. Image by Araluen Schunmann via Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

*Kulu's Journey* is a promising example of the media investing in thoughtful, character-driven conservation stories, particularly for lesser-known species. It also highlights a broader opportunity to rethink how we communicate about threatened species, and who we tell.

We've seen how effective this work can be. *Blackfish*, for example, transformed public opinion about orca captivity. *My Octopus Teacher*, an award-winning film created by the same filmmaker as *Pangolin: Kulu's Journey*, helped people see marine life through a more empathetic lens. These stories didn't just entertain — they changed minds, sparked movements and influenced policy.

The same can happen for pangolins and other overlooked species if the right stories are widely shared and inspire audiences to take action, whether that means donating to conservation funds, researching the threats these animals face, speaking out on social media, or urging decision-makers to prioritize their protection.

There's a role for all of us, not just filmmakers and journalists, but also conservation organizations, funders and streaming platforms. We need to promote the visibility of lesser-known threatened species as part of their protection. We need to broaden the conservation narrative beyond the most recognizable animals and give the same care and attention to the ones that are less familiar, but still at risk.

While not every species will get a Netflix feature, we can still utilize storytelling and media to drive awareness, empathy and support. This strategy can turn an unfamiliar animal into a symbol of what's at stake in the fight against extinction and shift the way people perceive what's worth protecting.

Pangolins may be the world's most trafficked mammal, but they don't have to be its most forgotten. We know what's driving the crisis — and we know what can help solve it. Now it's up to all of us to spread the word, carry this knowledge forward, and encourage conservation support.

*Araluen Schunmann is the director of the Pangolin Crisis Fund at the Wildlife Conservation Network.*

**Banner image:** A critically endangered Philippine pangolin and its pup. The demand for their scales has resulted in pangolins being the most trafficked mammals. Image by Shukran888 via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

**Related audio from Mongabay's podcast:** An interview with Wildlife Conservation Network director JG Collomb on how his organization works like a venture capital firm for community conservation projects like Pangolin Crisis Fund, [listen here](#):

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