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POWER

Two pangolin traffickers in South Africa sentenced to eight years in prison

📅 June 10, 2026 📍 Mahikeng, South Africa



8 Years each

Prison Sentence Imposed

6 Of 8 species

Pangolin Species Endangered Or Critically Endangered

3 Years duration

Days From Arrest To Court Judgment

4 individuals

Suspects Initially Arrested

6 Of 8 Pangolin Species

Endangered Species

On May 26, 2026, the Molopo Regional Court in Mahikeng, South Africa, sentenced two wildlife traffickers to eight years in prison, marking a landmark victory in the fight against illegal pangolin trafficking. Edward Motlatsi Phiri, 46, and Tlhoriso France Ralph, 51, were convicted of smuggling an endangered Temminck's pangolin—a vulnerable species native to Southern and Eastern Africa—that they had attempted to sell for profit.

The case began three years earlier when law enforcement officers acting on a tip intercepted a vehicle on June 2, 2023, and seized a live female pangolin intended for sale. Four suspects were arrested that day, though charges against two were later withdrawn. Only Phiri and Ralph faced conviction in the lengthy judicial process that followed.

Pangolins rank among the world's most trafficked mammals, hunted primarily for their scales, which fetch thousands of dollars on the black market. In East Asia, they are falsely believed to possess medicinal properties, driving relentless demand that has devastated wild populations. Today, six of the eight pangolin species worldwide are classified as either endangered or critically endangered. Beyond international trafficking networks, pangolins also face pressure from bushmeat hunting in parts of Africa. The damage is measured not just in decimated populations but in individual suffering—a suffering Naledi, the seized female, knew intimately.

When authorities brought the pregnant pangolin to the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital for emergency care, staff discovered she was in catastrophic condition: severely dehydrated, starving, emaciated, and already in kidney failure. Despite the medical team's best efforts, both Naledi and her unborn offspring died. In a statement that captured the human cost of wildlife crime, the hospital wrote: "An entire future generation, gone forever because of greed and the illegal wildlife trade."

The conviction carries profound meaning beyond the prison terms imposed. As Bitsa Lenkopane, speaking for the North West province's Economic Development, Environment, Conservation and Tourism division, stated: "This sentence sends a strong message that wildlife crime is a serious offense with devastating environmental consequences." The provincial environment agency emphasized that every investigation, prosecution, and successful conviction strengthens collective resistance to trafficking

networks that exploit regional vulnerabilities—particularly South Africa's proximity to Botswana and the porous nature of its borders.

Pangolins are protected under South African law, which prohibits their possession, sale, display, and transportation. Their international commercial trade is banned under CITES, the global wildlife trade agreement. Yet enforcement remains an ongoing challenge, requiring not just stricter law enforcement and intelligence-led operations to dismantle trafficking networks, but also increased community participation. The North West province is now urging citizens to report suspicious activities linked to wildlife trafficking, illegal hunting, and unlawful trade in protected species.

While illegal trade in pangolin scales appears to have slowed in recent years, poaching continues. Experts warn that lasting progress demands sustained commitment: stronger deterrents, smarter investigations, and more prosecutions like this one that hold traffickers accountable. The eight-year sentence for Phiri and Ralph stands as evidence that justice for wildlife crime is possible—and a reminder of the cost of inaction.

Summarised from reporting by **Mongabay**

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