

The Tragic Plight of Pangolins and the Poaching of the Endangered species

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The Pangolin, a small, shy creature sometimes known as a scaly anteater, is the world's most trafficked animal (Conciatore). Despite international pangolin trade being banned in 2016 at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, illegal trafficking of pangolins has continued (Pangolins). In the 13-year span of 2000-2013, it is estimated that one-million pangolins were poached (Bale). That is an average of about 76,923 pangolins poached a year. At this rate, the condition of the pangolin's survival is in grave danger. The brutal mistreatment of this endangered animal must stop before the pangolin becomes forever extinct.

Pangolins are Asian and African mammals that are completely covered in scales, made from keratin (Conciatore). Their long nose and tongue, used to eat ants within their nest, bears a resemblance to the anteater, giving them the nickname "scaly anteater". When the pangolin is threatened by a predator, it will defend itself by curling up into a small ball covered in scales. This is where the name "pangolin" comes from, deriving from the Malay word "penggulung", meaning one that rolls up. The scaly ball they create is extremely strong and protects them from the majority of predators. There are eight pangolin species, all of whom are threatened with extinction, with the Chinese, Sunda, and Philippine pangolin species critically endangered (Dallas). Pangolins are also a very unique species. Despite looking like an anteater, pangolins are actually closer related to the dog and bear. Pangolins are so special that they make up their own order of taxonomy and sadly if they become extinct, we will never see anything like them again (Bale).

The pangolin trade is a worldwide concern and it is estimated that at least 67 countries along with territories on six continents participate (Dallas). Over the last several decades, the pangolin population has rapidly decreased. Along with losing their natural habitats to humans, they are also being exploited and poached for their bushmeat, considered a delicacy, and scales, which are used for traditional medicine typically in China. The demand of their scales is incredibly high and the main cause of their endangerment (Bale).

Fortunately, there have been worldwide efforts to save the pangolin. Along with several conservation laws being put in place, there have also been attempts to put pangolins in captivity to successfully breed and increase their diminishing population. However, successfully breeding and keeping pangolins alive in captivity has proven to be a difficult task. First of all, pangolins have a large and unique diet. Pangolins consume mostly ants and termites and eat around 20,000 ants a day per pangolin. Their mental health is also an important factor and can greatly affect their physical health. Pangolins become stressed very easily, which can lead to pneumonia and stomach ulcers. Being in captivity can actually be very dangerous for pangolins and most cannot even survive 200 days, even without the struggles of mating and giving birth. Most efforts to save these endangered animals have unfortunately been unsuccessful. For example, “Six zoos and a nonprofit in the United States imported 46 pangolins from Togo in 2016, aiming to study the animals under controlled conditions and establish a self-sustaining population. As of early March, 16 had died” (Bale). To make matters worse, there are some organizations that are putting these pangolins in even more danger by placing pangolins in captivity for the wrong reasons. Many Chinese businesses have attempted to illegally traffick pangolins under fake names such as the Olsen East Africa International Investment Co. or the Asia-Africa Pangolin

Breeding Research Centre. Both companies in Kampala, Uganda were able to receive permits from the Ugandan Authorities, under the false pretense that they were legally captive breeding pangolins. Both companies were later raided in 2016 and 2017 for trafficking and illegally trading pangolins.

Finally, there could be big consequences to the environment if we allow the pangolin to become extinct. As we know, all animals have an impact on their environment. Whether they supply food to their predator or become the predator to prevent overpopulation, every animal is critical to the survival of the next. The pangolin is no exception. Because of their large insect-based appetite, pangolins help to control pests in their habitats in Asia and Africa (Howells). If the pangolin becomes extinct, this could mean trouble for not only the animal itself but its environment as well.

Reading about the devastating reality of the pangolin, I have done some research on what efforts are being made to trap these evil poachers. I myself am very interested in the STEM field and I one day want to go into the medical field. Being interested in STEM, this year I was apart of my school's TSA team. TSA (Technology Student Association) is a STEM-based academic competition that features many varying events. This year I competed in the "Forensic Science" event and I found interest in forensics as well. As I was researching, I discovered that forensics is actually being used to help identify the poachers who have illegally hunted pangolins. The Zoological Society of London along with the University of Portsmouth have developed a new way to trap pangolin poachers. "This new method uses gelatine lifters with a low-adhesive gelatine layer on one side" (University). While this method is typically used for fingerprinting and lifting footprints, this new application could mean great things for finding those responsible

for the pangolin's dwindling population. This technique has also proven itself to be useful in the actual setting. In a preliminary trial, the gelatine lifters were tested on 10 actual pangolin scales touched by five people. After applying the lifters and scanning the prints, they tested them for accuracy. "89 percent of the visualized gelatine lifts examined produced clear ridge detail" (University), meaning that the technique could be used in the proper setting. This surprisingly quick and easy method is now being sent to Wildlife Rangers in Cameroon and Kenya, with the hope of catching pangolin hunters. I would like to continue researching about this forensic innovation as well as its progress in other countries that are riddled with pangolin poachers.

In conclusion, we must become aware of the sad reality of the endangered pangolin. Despite being the most trafficked animal in the entire world (Conciatore), few know about pangolin poaching or even about the pangolin itself. "In a survey of 2000 people in the UK, only 8 percent of participants were able to identify pangolins when shown pictures of them" (Gabbatiss). I was completely shocked by this and I decided to do an unscientific study myself about how many people even know what a pangolin is. I asked eight of my friends if they knew what a pangolin was without looking it up. Only three, or about 38%, knew of the endangered animal. The pangolin must become a household name before it is too late. Without further intervention, the unique pangolin may one day become forever extinct, leaving us to wonder what else we could have done. Now is the time to step in, raise awareness, and urge our world to take action regarding this heinous crime.

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