



No pangolins, no grass

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Unless the serious threat of pangolin extinction in Namibia is addressed, the country could likely see a critical reduction in the carrying capacity of rangeland for domestic stock and wildlife.

Pangolins play a crucial role in maintaining the nutrient quality of soils and aid the decomposition cycle, providing a healthy substrate for the growth of vegetation.

But, in recent years, Namibia has witnessed a severe spike of illegal trade in pangolins for the Asian market.

Globally, all eight species of pangolin face extinction, including the only species of pangolin that occurs in Namibia - the Temminck's ground pangolin *Smutsia temminckii*, also known as the Cape pangolin or scaly anteater.

While research into population numbers is scant in Namibia and elsewhere, many worry about the impact of their loss on the environment.

In response, a public-private initiative to raise awareness of pangolin poaching and their ecological value was launched in July 2017.

Partners of the outreach programme include the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, the Namibia Chamber of Environment (NCE), and the Wildcat Foundation.

In addition, a police and defence force offensive was launched to curb trafficking.

Threat to species, threat to farming

"Pangolins are far more valuable in our environment than killed for illegal Asian markets," says Dr Chris Brown of NCE.

Pangolins eat billions of ants and termites thereby minimising the impact of these insects on grasslands and crops, as well as on fence poles, homesteads and other infrastructure.

Brown says research has shown that one pangolin can consume around 70 million termites per year.

Without pangolins, those 70 million termites are estimated to consume 7 000 kilogrammes of grass annually.

"That is equivalent to the amount of grass that two beef cows would consume in a year. So, a farm with 10 pangolins could run 20 more cows more than a farm where the pangolins have been removed."

The value of the additional cows would be around N\$200 000, Brown estimates.

"Extrapolated to the central and north-eastern regions of Namibia where pangolins are most common, the national impact could be at least N\$600 million in reduced production by the agricultural and wildlife sectors."



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets/pangolins-no-grass2018-02-210.jpg>)

HORRIFIC: Authorities in Namibia have rescued several pangolins, which are often severely traumatised and need various health checks before they can be released into the wild.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

Brown points out that these are preliminary figures and that more detailed research is needed to better understand the economic impact of killing pangolins.

The NCE has teamed up with the Namibian University of Science and Technology (NUST) to study pangolin biology.

But quantitative assessments of the ecosystem services provided by pangolins are urgent, as is an in-depth analysis of the economic implications of extinction or a severe population reduction.

"It is a general trend, however, that we significantly underestimate the role that individual species play and only appreciate the extent of the impact of their loss after they have gone," Brown says.

Police work pays off

An anonymous 24/7 hotline and SMS service (081 413 2214 or 081 423 2231), launched six months ago, have led to more smugglers being arrested and more live pangolin being rescued.

Compared to past years in which an average three to five cases of pangolin smuggling per year were reported, 37 cases of pangolin trafficking have been reported in the Kavango East and West, Khomas, Zambezi, Otjozondjupa and Oshana regions in recent months.

A total of 81 suspects were arrested and 20 live pangolins were seized and released at safe sites.

The animals are usually kept in atrocious conditions by poachers and must be rehabilitated and monitored prior to release.

Thirty-four pangolin skins have been confiscated.

A number of investigations into wildlife crime syndicates, international links and trade routes are ongoing.

Posters and information cards advertising the pangolin hotline (call or SMS 081 413 2214) have been distributed widely among rural communities, especially in north-eastern Namibia, backed up by radio discussions in local languages and articles in the print media.

Serious threat

Pangolin populations across the globe have been decimated by poaching and illegal trafficking.

All eight species are categorised as threatened in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red Data lists.

Pangolins are killed for similar reasons in Namibia and Asia: meat, traditional potions, ornaments and good-luck charms.

The surge in pangolin trafficking in Namibia has been linked primarily to the high demand in Asia.

The pangolin is the most trafficked wild mammal in the world, with an average of 20 tonnes of pangolins and pangolin parts being trafficked each year.

Pangolin scales have no proven medicinal properties.

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