

WORLD PANGOLIN DAY

Pangolins a victim of the pandemic

PANGOLINS, or scaly anteaters, are mammals of the Manidae family, comprising eight extant species found in Asia and Africa.

Native Asian species include the Malayan or Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*), the thick-tailed pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*), Philippine pangolin (*Manis culionensis*) and Chinese pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*).

African species include the black-bellied pangolin (*Uromanis tetradactyla*), African white-bellied pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*), giant ground pangolin (*Smutsia gigantea*) and Temminck's ground pangolin (*Smutsia temminckii*).

In Malaysia, the Malayan pangolin is the only species reported in the wild, which is known as *tenggiling*. Pangolins are unique as they are the only mammal with scales that curl itself into a ball as a defensive instinct, hence the name *pengguling*, which in Malay refers to "an animal that rolls up".

As with other wildlife, pangolins have been traditionally used in food, medicine and local customary practices.

Currently, all eight pangolin species are threatened by extinction after facing drastic population decline due to habitat loss and extensive poaching.

The illegal harvesting and trading of pangolin scales and meat,



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which are often confiscated in tonnes, have led to a status upgrade of all species to Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora in 2016. Wildlife listed in the appendix are not allowed to be traded worldwide.

Additionally, governments are also recognising the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species. Of the four African pangolin species, two are listed as "vulnerable" and "endangered", while three Asiatic species are "critically endangered" and one is "endangered".

Pangolins are the poster child for the illegal wildlife trade as they are the most heavily trafficked mammal and have high demand. For many decades, the illegal trade of pangolins have vastly outnumbered trade of other threatened species, like tigers, rhinoceroses, snakes and elephants, with an estimated one million pangolins

trafficked in the last decade alone.

In 2020, with the emergence of Covid-19, researchers at the South China Agricultural University had proposed that the Malayan pangolin — widely sold and consumed in Wuhan, China, where the disease was first reported — could be an intermediate host for the deadly novel coronavirus.

There was concern among conservationists that the study could cause a backlash against the already vulnerable animal, which has been painted as a harbinger of the pandemic.

Fortunately, other studies did not support this idea, and bats were later identified as the reservoir species of the coronavirus.

However, this does not mean the consumption of pangolin meat is safe for humans. Despite the scare, there is little to indicate that the fear of catching Covid-19 from pangolins has deterred poachers and wildlife traffickers from continuing their heinous crimes. The illegal trade continues to flourish unabated across Southeast Asia and Nigeria.

Some countries, such as Vietnam and China, have passed legislation to curb local appetite for wildlife products to mitigate the risk of contracting Covid-19, which in turn has supported conservation efforts by reducing the demand for animal parts worldwide.

China has also banned the con-



A pangolin rescued by the Wildlife and National Parks Department in 2015. The illegal pangolin trade continues to flourish unabated across Southeast Asia and Nigeria. FILE PIC

sumption of wildlife caught in agricultural fields or those bred in captivity, besides upgrading pangolins to Category 1 in its first-class protected animals list.

As the pandemic continues to rage on, animals have paid a heavy price for human fear and paranoia. Many countries have begun paying close attention to zoonotic diseases, with drastic measures to contain them.

A notable example is Denmark, where the government decided to cull 17 million minks raised in the country's farms in November 2020 after just 12 animals were diagnosed with mink-specific mutations of SARS-CoV-2.

In Hong Kong, more than 2,000 hamsters were culled last month after some animals tested positive for Covid-19 in a pet shop.

Interestingly, there is speculation that a ninth pangolin species is on the cusp of discovery. Unfortunately, with the ever-increasing threat of poaching and demand for pangolin parts, it is very

possible this soon-to-be-discovered species may go the way of the dodo even before scientists have the chance to study it.

As such, wildlife authorities have to be more vigilant and take the plight of pangolins earnestly in their conservation efforts.

Encouraging collaborative efforts in research and sharing of expertise, including providing more research funding, are critically needed as we try to resume our lives and gradually adapt to the pandemic.

As we observe the 10th World Pangolin Day today, it is with anticipation that the tide has finally turned for the plight of pangolins as more attention is given to these enigmatic animals.

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