

Pangolins in Peril

By Sharon Guynup

July 30, 2008: In a mid-morning raid, 20 police officers stormed a nondescript nut-packaging plant in the port city of Palembang, Sumatra, in western Indonesia. A tip from wildlife agencies proved accurate: In the back room, endangered pangolins—scaly, armored mammals native to Southeast Asia and parts of Africa—were being “processed.” The armadillo-like animals were skinned; their valuable scales removed; organs, blood and fetuses separated out; and the remaining meat boiled.

Officers ultimately apprehended 14 suspects and confiscated more than 30,000 pounds of frozen and dried pangolin parts, which had been concealed in shipping containers beneath layers of fish destined for China and Vietnam. The 30- to 40-pound animal is coveted for its meat and used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat poor circulation, swelling, lactation problems, and to boost virility.

This sting was not an isolated incident. “There are regular seizures of pangolin reported across Southeast Asia,”

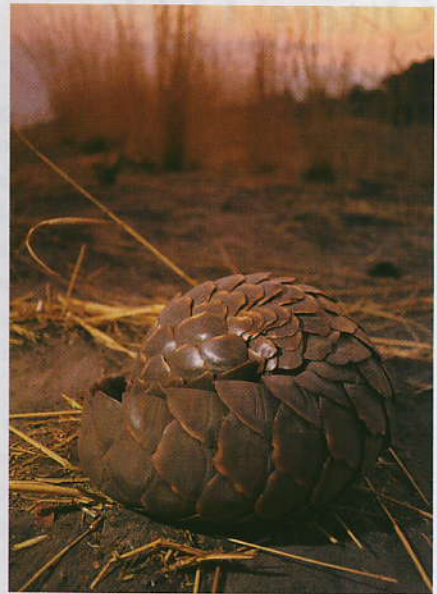
says Sandrine Pantel, projects officer with TRAFFIC, an international wildlife trade monitoring agency that has dubbed pangolin smuggling “Asia’s forgotten extinction crisis.”

Despite a 2002 trade ban under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, pangolins are the most-trafficked mammal on the illegal wildlife black market. They are smuggled live or slaughtered and frozen, often hidden amid other cargo with falsified customs declarations. “The number and size of the seizures and their geographic scale indicates that this organized, commercialized trade is being conducted at an alarming scale and is growing,” says Michael Zwirn, U.S. director of Wildlife Alliance, an international conservation organization.

In 2008, more than 220,000 pounds of pangolin meat were intercepted by government officials across Southeast Asia—an estimated 10 to 20 percent of the total trade. It is a multi-million-dollar international business, with the price of scales alone skyrocketing from \$10 per kilo in 1990 to between \$160 and \$250 today. When served at a restaurant, pangolin fetches a whopping \$70 a pound.

Growing demand has sparked such widespread poaching that all four Asian species are in precipitous decline, a slide that is compounded by habitat loss in a part of the world where human populations are exploding. The creature’s demise has been so rapid that in 2008, the status of both the Chinese pangolin and the Malayan pangolin was amended by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature from near-threatened to endangered. They have almost disappeared from large swaths of Southeast Asia, and there is virtually no information on how many remain.

The animals’ method of self-defense makes them easy prey for poachers. The



© PETE OXFORD/NATUREPL.COM

word “pangolin” comes from the Malay “pengguling,” meaning something that rolls up. When threatened, pangolins curl into a ball, making them easy to grab and toss into a sack despite their razor-sharp scales. Hunters also trap them in snares placed outside the animals’ underground burrows.

“Pangolins are being taken out of these areas at an alarming rate and there are few prosecutions,” says Gina Schrader, conservation associate at Defenders of Wildlife. As a participant in the Emerging Wildlife Conservation Leaders program, a training and mentoring initiative supported by Defenders, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the White Oak Conservation Center/Howard Gilman Foundation, Schrader and five other emerging leaders formed the Pangolin Conservation Support Initiative (PCSI) to help protect pangolins in Cambodia. The country’s Cardamom Mountains provide one of Asia’s last strongholds for the Malayan pangolin.

“Unfortunately even the animals rescued alive that are not too dehydrated, injured in traps or bitten up by hunting dogs often die anyway,” says Schrader.

Go Wild!
Casts from Wild Tracks

Polar Bear: \$39.95	Black Bear: \$29.95
Wolf: \$24.95	Cougar: \$24.95
Grizzly: \$34.95	GARDEN/HOME

Great Gift!

A Symbol of Wildlife Conservation

order at:
www.AuthenticClawPrints.com
856-287-7969

“Pangolins don’t do well in captivity because they are easily stressed. Another problem is that rescuers don’t know where they came from, so they are not sure where to release them back into the wild.”

Pangolins’ secretive, solitary, nocturnal nature makes them tough to study. Little is known about them beyond their basic physiology—they have small heads, broad tails, are toothless, have no external ears but good hearing, have poor sight and like skunks, emit a powerful odor in self-defense—and the fact that they eat mostly ants and termites, which they excavate with long, sharp claws and slurp down with their long tongues. Lack of information leaves rangers, law enforcement agents and conservationists helpless to save most pangolins once they’re out of the forest.

To help, PCSI partnered with government officials and other conservation organizations to coordinate countrywide pangolin protection efforts. In November 2008, they brought together more than 50 people—including local village leaders and government officials, forest rangers, police and others—for a two-day workshop. They showed participants how to handle pangolins, give them first-aid treatment and how to release them back into the wild. They also discussed pangolin biology, conservation laws and brainstormed about how to stem the illegal trade. Locals promised to aid police in building intelligence networks.

Public education is one key to stemming the trade, says Schrader. When PCSI discovered that no educational materials existed, they launched a Web site (www.savepangolins.org) and

commissioned a Cambodian artist to design a colorful poster (since many there can’t read). They also wrote up a fact sheet in Khmer and English and created a coloring sheet for kids. The simple message: Protect Cambodia’s pangolins. The effort has spawned countrywide education efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade.

But if pangolins across Asia are to

be rescued from their rapid slide toward extinction, enforcement agencies must work together to close porous borders and prosecute traffickers, says Zwirn.

“It’s an organized crime that requires an organized response,” adds Pantel. “At the rate pangolins are being collected, they might disappear before we get a chance to study them.”



An armadillo-like animal native to Southeast Asia and parts of Africa, the pangolin is endangered by habitat loss and poaching. When sleeping or threatened, the animal rolls up into a ball (above, left), making it easy prey for poachers.

© GEORGE STEINMETZ/CORBIS