

Last stand in Asia for shy, defenseless anteater

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In this June 9, 2009 file photo, a Thai zoo official feeds pangolin with milk at the Dusit zoo in Bangkok, Thailand. The pangolin trade, banned in 2002 by CITES, the international convention on endangered species, resembles a pyramid. At the base are poor rural hunters, including workers on Indonesia's vast palm oil plantations. They use dogs or smoke to flush the pangolins out or shake the solitary, nocturnal animals from trees in often protected forests. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit, File)

(AP) -- As the 20 cardboard boxes bound for China rolled through the X-ray machine at Jakarta's airport, Indonesian customs officials suspected what was inside didn't match what was declared. Instead of fresh fish, a closer look revealed the meat and scales of the most illegally trafficked mammal in Asia: the pangolin.

Once widespread, the shy and defenseless anteater is being vacuumed up for sale largely in China, where many believe it can cure an array of

ailments and boost sexual prowess. The last stand of the four Asian species has shrunk to Sumatra and Kalimantan in Indonesia, Palawan in the southern Philippines and parts of Malaysia and India.

From fields and forests to Chinese cooking pots and medicine vials, the industrial-scale trade is propelled along similar trafficking routes for tigers, turtles, bears, snakes and other mostly endangered species across Asia, all driven by a seemingly insatiable demand for often dubious medical remedies, tonics and aphrodisiacs.

"We are watching a species just slip away," says Chris Shepard, who has tracked wildlife trafficking in Asia for two decades. He says a 100-fold increase is needed in efforts to save the pangolin, sometimes described as a walking pine cone.

Eight tons of meat and scales, worth \$269,000, were found in the boxes at Jakarta airport and at a warehouse raided the following day. Four people were arrested.

"I am trying hard to win the war," says Brig. Gen. Raffles Brotestes Panjaitan, Indonesia's top wildlife police officer, citing the July seizure. But he lists a host of obstacles: poverty, corruption, an inadequate force and weak international cooperation.

Little studied and hardly an iconic species, pangolins are found in Asia and Africa. They are natural pest controllers, gobbling up ants and termites.

Conservationists first took serious notice in the 1990s when massive harvesting in China and its borderlands, driven by skyrocketing prices, was sweeping southwards, decimating the slow-breeding animals in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. "In many places, hunters tell us they don't even look for them any more," Shepherd says.

By the early 2000s, supplies in Thailand were drying up, as evidenced by the development of an unusual barter trade: Thai smugglers would give insurgents in Indonesia's Aceh province up to five AK-47 rifles in exchange for one pangolin, according to the International Crisis Group, which monitors conflicts globally.

The pangolin trade - banned in 2002 by CITES, the international convention on endangered species - resembles a pyramid.

At the base are poor rural hunters, including workers on Indonesia's vast palm oil plantations. They use dogs or smoke to flush the pangolins out or shake the solitary, nocturnal animals from trees in often protected forests.

"Everything is against them. ... They have no teeth. Their only defense is to roll up in a ball that fits perfectly into a bag," Shepherd says. Under stress, pangolins can develop stomach ulcers and die.

Middlemen set up buying stations in rural areas and deliver the animals through secretive networks to the less than dozen kingpins in Asia suspected of handling the international connections.

Factories in Sumatra butcher the pangolins, slitting their throats, then stripping off and drying the valuable scales.

The smuggling routes almost all end in China, Shepherd says. Other destinations include Vietnam, the top wildlife consuming nation in Southeast Asia, and South Korea.

Pangolins from Indonesia are sent to mainland Southeast Asia, then trucked up the Thai-Malaysian peninsula through Thailand and Laos to southern China. Chinese fishing boats ferry those from the Philippines directly to home ports.

Smugglers in the eastern Malaysian state of Sabah ship theirs to Vietnam's seaport of Haiphong or to mainland Malaysia to join the trucking routes. From India, they pass overland through Nepal and Myanmar.

Ground into powder, pangolin scales are believed to cure rheumatism and skin diseases, reduce swellings, promote lactation for breast-feeding mothers and alleviate other medical problems. Even if it works, conservationists say, proven substitutes are available that wouldn't devastate a species.

Preservation efforts focus on strengthening often lackluster law enforcement in the region.

"Everything is now set up to stop this from happening. The laws are good enough to put traders out of business and into jail," Shepherd says. "It boils down to corruption and enforcement agencies not having the will to act. Wildlife trafficking is still generally not taken seriously."

Weighed against the profits, the penalties for trafficking are low. Not long ago, an entire pangolin could be bought in Indonesia for \$5 or less. Panjaitan, the Indonesian official, says just the scales from an average-sized animal now go for about \$275. The scales fetch up to \$750 a kilogram (\$340 a pound) in China.

Panjaitan, the director of Investigation and Forest Protection in the Ministry of Forestry, hopes Indonesia will greatly stiffen its jail term this year for major forest encroachment - directly linked to harvesting of [pangolins](#) and other wildlife - to a maximum of 20 years.

Although seizures and arrests of low-level smugglers have increased substantially, almost none of the major players have been put behind bars. And as Asian stocks vanish, Africa's three pangolin species have

emerged as substitutes - a similar pattern to other traditional Chinese medicines, such as subbing lion bones for those of the now rare tiger.

Still, Steven Galster, executive director of Bangkok-based FREELAND, a group fighting wildlife and human trafficking, points to some progress.

Suspecting that a private zoo was a cover for wildlife trafficking, Thai officials charged Daoruang Kongpitakin in July with illegal possession of two leopards. Her brother and sister had been arrested several times for pangolin smuggling.

Wildlife investigators are also tracking a shadowy company in Southeast Asia, which wields influence with both senior Lao and Vietnamese officials and could be among the region's biggest traffickers.

ASEAN-WEN, a wildlife enforcement network of the 10 Southeast Asian nations, has also notched successes since its 2005 inception.

Such developments across several countries could be a game changer, Galster says. "But will they move fast enough for the species to survive?"

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