

In South Africa, plans for a refuge for pangolins in peril

June 16 2018, by Christopher Torchia



In this photo taken on Friday March 16, 2018 a pangolin from the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital is held by a carer before being taken to the field to forage for food, near Johannesburg. Africa's pangolins are under increasing threat from traffickers who sell the meat as well as the scales of the anteater for use in traditional Chinese medicine. In South Africa, plans are underway to build a rehabilitation center for sick or rescued pangolins as well as deploy sniffer dogs specially trained to detect the scales' pungent aroma. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

Monitored by a conservationist, a young pangolin slurped ants with a long tongue near a veterinary hospital that became a temporary home after the animal was found near the body of its mother, killed by a jolt from an electric fence. The six-month-old scaly anteater foraged on a hillside, building up strength in a tiny step for a campaign to save one of the world's most heavily trafficked mammals.

Traffickers often sell the pangolin meat locally and ship the scales for use in traditional medicine in Asia, mainly China. The growing illegal industry has prompted plans in South Africa for a rehabilitation center for sick or rescued pangolins as well as the deployment of sniffer dogs specially trained to detect the scales' pungent aroma.

Africa's four species of pangolins are under increasing pressure from poachers because Asia's four species have been decimated, according to experts. While commercial trade in all eight species is forbidden, international confiscations of African pangolin scales amounted to about 47 tons in 2017, more than double the quantity seized in the previous year, said the African Pangolin Working Group , a conservation organization based in South Africa.

"The rate of escalation is astounding," said Eric Ichikowitz, director of a South African foundation.

The Ichikowitz Family Foundation , which has previously trained dogs to detect rhino horn, has funded the training of several dogs that will check for hidden pangolin scales at South African borders, Ichikowitz said.



In this photo taken on Friday March 16, 2018 a pangolin from the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital forages for food, near Johannesburg. Africa's pangolins are under increasing threat from traffickers who sell the meat as well as the scales of the anteater for use in traditional Chinese medicine. In South Africa, plans are underway to build a rehabilitation center for sick or rescued pangolins as well as deploy sniffer dogs specially trained to detect the scales' pungent aroma. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

The foundation has also acquired land near Johannesburg for construction of a "pangalorium"—a research and medical center for pangolins, including the growing number of live animals seized in sting operations, he said.

Pangolin scales contain keratin, a protein also found in rhino horn and human fingernails. There is no scientific proof that they provide any

medicinal value. Conservationists say well over 1 million pangolins have been poached since around 2000; the various kinds range from vulnerable to critically endangered on a list of threatened species.

Eight rescued pangolins have been treated at the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital since last year, though about half died because their health had deteriorated while they were being transported by traffickers. The young female pangolin found near the body of its mother was later released into the wild but weakened and died from pneumonia.

"There's so little known about pangolins—their diseases, their parasites and what affects them—that it's all a work in progress," said Nicci Wright, a wildlife rehabilitation specialist and a consultant to the African branch of the Humane Society International, an animal protection group.

One pangolin that was confiscated in Johannesburg after being brought from Zimbabwe had been doused in bleach, apparently to disguise its strong natural smell at the border, Wright said. Another was covered in pig manure for the same reason. In a different case, Wright said, a rescued pangolin was "absolutely pitch black" because it had been drenched in fuel while being clandestinely transported by car.



In this photo taken on Friday March 16, 2018 a pangolin from the Johannesburg Wildlife Veterinary Hospital forages for food at the base of an anthill, near Johannesburg. Africa's pangolins are under increasing threat from traffickers who sell the meat as well as the scales of the anteater for use in traditional Chinese medicine. In South Africa, plans are underway to build a rehabilitation center for sick or rescued pangolins as well as deploy sniffer dogs specially trained to detect the scales' pungent aroma. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

There are currently about 30 pangolin trafficking cases in the South African courts, a sharp increase from previous years. Conservationists are encouraged by several jail sentences—the first ever—for pangolin poachers and traders in South Africa starting last year. The punishments range from three to seven years in prison.

While the export of [pangolin](#) scales to Asia surges, there have been instances of traffickers apparently trying to sell live pangolins to people they think will want to rehabilitate the animals, in what amounts to a

form of ransom, said Raymond Jansen, chairman of the African Pangolin Working Group.

"This is the feeling I'm getting," Jansen said. "We're not quite sure what to make of it."

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