

# Pangolins threatened by criminal networks in southern Africa

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Pangolins are under threat from illegal trafficking networks, conservationists said Wednesday, as they urged southern African

countries to step up protection of one of the world's most smuggled mammals.

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The flesh of these endangered scaled mammals is considered a delicacy in China and Vietnam, where their bones and blood are also used for [traditional medicine](#).

Demand for [pangolin scales](#) has exploded over the past decade, with seizures rising from 21 kilogrammes in 2011 (56 pounds) to 68,000 kilogrammes this year, says WildAid.

That trade became illegal when pangolins were placed under full protection from [international trade](#) by the [wild fauna](#) and flora CITES convention in 2016.

But an EU-funded research project has found that criminal gangs have since tapped into the industry.

"It is vital that we understand and prevent the [illicit trade](#) in pangolins before it is too late," said researcher Richard Chelin in a statement on Wednesday.

He added that strategies to combat illegal wildlife trafficking had focused mainly on iconic species such as elephants and rhinos, at the expense of lesser-known animals such as pangolins.

"The threat to the rhino shows that early interventions are better than reactive measures at the height of a crisis," said Chelin.

Southern Africa remains the only region with a reasonably healthy

pangolin population.

Conservationists are lobbying the government to do more to protect the species.

"A small fine or a few days in jail is not a deterrent for organised criminals in a high-value industry," said South Africa environmental inspector Fanie Masango.

While hunting elephant and rhino in South Africa can lead to a 100,000 rand (6,730 dollars) fine and a ten-year prison sentence, a pangolin hunter can get away with 1,500 rand (around 100 dollars).

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