

Pangolin sales plunge in Gabon over coronavirus fears

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A market in Gabon's capital where bushmeat is sold, including pangolins, whose popularity has plummeted since it was blamed for transmitting coronavirus to humans

Pangolins were once a prized item in the markets of Gabon's capital

Libreville, but bushmeat sellers have started hiding the small, scaly mammals behind boar legs and porcupine carcasses.

Trading the [endangered animal](#), considered to be the most poached in the world, is illegal in the West African country. But that's not why the merchants are hiding their stocks.

A team of Chinese researchers suspect the pangolin of transmitting the novel coronavirus to humans at another game market some 11,000 kilometres (6,850 miles) from Libreville in the Chinese city of Wuhan—the epicentre of the pandemic that has rocked the world.

As a result, bushmeat sellers in Gabon's markets have lost some of their best customers.

Several at a Libreville market claim that Chinese buyers used to come to snatch up their pangolin supplies, but those shoppers have now disappeared.

"We've been eating pangolin for years—don't bring the disease here," said Melanie, a vegetable seller at the market acting as a spokeswoman for the bushmeat sellers, who prefer to stay silent.

Scale prices 'like ivory'

The animal's meat is a delicacy in Gabon, but Asian customers are also interested in the scales that cover the pangolin and make its tail look like an artichoke.

Used in Chinese medicine, the scales are sold at a steep price to illegal dealers in China, says Luc Mathot, director of the NGO Conservation Justice.

At "\$1,000 a kilogramme, more or less like ivory," he calls the price "ridiculous" since the scales "are made of keratin, like in fingernails".

The high price has been a boon to central African hunters, who consider the pangolin "the cherry on the cake" when they go off to target other game, says Pauline Grentzinger, a veterinarian from the Lekedi national park.

She says that pangolins "are not very shy".

"When they see you, they roll into a ball, you just have to bend down to pick them up..."

But she emphasises the importance of protecting the vulnerable animal.

"It's a species not very related to other species and which, besides representing unique aspects of evolution, is the only mammal covered in scales!"



Some bushmeat lovers at the Libreville market were not discouraged by the coronavirus shadow looming over pangolins

Some customers undeterred

While Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo have become hubs for trafficking pangolin scales, trading is informal in Gabon.

The price of Gabonese pangolin has soared in recent years, according to researchers in a 2018 study. They blamed international trafficking for the boost in demand.

In Gabon, three of the four African species of pangolin live in the forests that cover 88 percent of the country.

The country has adopted strict wildlife protection standards, according to Lee White, the minister of water and forests. In 2006 the giant [pangolin](#) species was classified as one of the world's most endangered and its [international trade](#) was banned.

"We are conducting border surveillance with teams of sniffer dogs" that detect the scales, but also elephant ivory or panther skins, White explained.

At the national level, game "can be sold between members of the same community" for "customary use", but its trade in the Libreville markets is "illegal", White says.

Forest rangers sometimes lack the means to deal with international trafficking networks. However, some of the traffickers themselves may be affected by the panic created by the spread of the coronavirus.

"China has closed its market to exotic meats, as soon as it was required," says Grentzinger of Lekedi [national park](#).

But for the moment, with only one case of COVID-19 detected in Gabon, bushmeat lovers are not discouraged.

"We'd been told about monkey, which would give Ebola, and yet we kept eating it and never got that," says Melanie.

Other [market](#) customers seem to agree.

"It has no impact on your health. On the contrary, the most important thing is to eat it fresh," says customer Tatiana.

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