

Pangolins in Africa: Expert unpacks why millions have been traded illegally and what can be done about it

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Pangolins are fascinating creatures known for their unique appearance

and distinctive scales. They are mammals belonging to the order Pholidota and are [native to Africa and Asia](#). Due to their primary diet of ants and termites, pangolins are often referred to as "scaly anteaters".

The African pangolin species are dispersed throughout southern, western, central and east Africa.

Pangolins face rapid declines across Asia and Africa, with all eight species classified as [vulnerable, endangered](#), or critically endangered. They are [threatened](#) by poaching and [habitat loss](#), driven by the demand for their meat and scales.

Pangolins are the [most trafficked wild mammal in the world](#). [Their meat is considered a delicacy](#) in Asia while their scales are also used in [traditional medicines](#), fetching huge sums on the [black market](#). As many as [8.5 million pangolins](#) are estimated to have been removed from the wild in west and central Africa for the illegal trade between 2014 and 2021.

The trade route analysis of pangolin trafficking [points to](#) Lagos as the main connection point both domestically and worldwide, including south-east Asian countries. Malaysia, Laos and Singapore also serve as key transit countries for pangolin-scale shipments from Nigeria.

China and Vietnam are the main [destinations for these illegal shipments](#).

I am a zoologist who's passionate about the environment and biodiversity conservation. I am also the founder and chair of Pangolin Conservation Guild Nigeria. In my view, effective protection, law enforcement and changes in consumer behavior are necessary to address the complex drivers of poaching and trafficking.

What makes pangolins special

Pangolins are interesting for a number of reasons.

Scales: Unlike any other mammals, they are covered with keratin scales. This adaptation is a defense against predators. The scales, [made of the same material as human fingernails](#), provide armor-like protection as they curl into a ball when threatened, shielding their vulnerable underbelly. The scales can account for up to [20% of a pangolin's total body weight](#). A pangolin's scales are a reminder of the incredible diversity of adaptations in the natural world.

Habitats: Pangolins, as a group, are also adaptable to different environmental conditions. Their habitats include tropical forests, dry woodlands and savannahs. Some pangolin species, like the white-bellied, are adept climbers and spend much of their time in the canopy, foraging for insects among the branches. These arboreal habits provide them with both food and shelter, as well as protection from ground-dwelling predators. Other pangolin species, such as the ground pangolins, live on the forest floor or in grasslands. They may dig burrows underground where they retreat for rest and safety, particularly during the heat of the day or to escape potential threats.

Defense: The name "pangolin" [originates](#) from the Malay word pengguling, which translates to "rolling up". They tuck in their head and limbs and curl into a tight ball when faced with danger, wrapping their body in a protective layer of overlapping scales. This has helped pangolins survive predators such as big cats, hyenas and humans.

Diet: [Pangolins primarily feed on ants and termites](#), making them essential players in controlling insect populations within their ecosystems. They find the insects using their keen sense of smell and their tongues—which are often longer than their bodies. These long

tongues are coated with sticky saliva, allowing them to probe deep into ant and termite nests to extract their prey. Their strong claws are also well-suited for tearing open insect nests and breaking through hard soil to uncover hidden prey. Pangolins' diets play a crucial role in maintaining the health and stability of their environments.

Pangolins in Africa

In west and central Africa, the giant pangolin is distributed in a variety of habitats, including primary and secondary forests, swamp forests and wooded savannahs. Temminck's pangolin (*Smutsia temminckii*) is the [most widely distributed African pangolin](#), occurring mainly in southern and east Africa. The [black-bellied pangolin](#) (*Phataginus tetradactyla*) is an arboreal pangolin species, and occurs in west and central Africa. The [white-bellied pangolin](#) (*Phataginus tricuspis*) is the most frequently encountered pangolin in Africa. The white-bellied pangolin is [found in north-central and south-western Nigeria](#).

In Nigeria, pangolins are found in various habitats, including [forests, savannahs and grasslands](#). Their distribution and abundance in Nigeria are uncertain, highlighting the need for further research and conservation efforts.

Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, serves as a hub for the [illegal trade](#) of pangolins. It is a transit route to Cameroon and is involved in shipments of pangolins from sub-Saharan Africa to Asia. Cameroon is at [the center of wildlife trafficking in central Africa](#). It is both a source country of animal products as well as a transit route for contraband from neighboring Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic.

In 2022, Nigerian customs officials [seized](#) 1,613 tons of pangolin scales and arrested 14 people. In October 2023, Nigeria [burned](#) four tons of

seized pangolin scales, valued at US\$1.4 million. Officials said this was the first time they had publicly destroyed seized wildlife products to discourage illegal trafficking.

Why pangolin conservation is important

Pangolin conservation is crucial for several reasons.

Firstly, pangolins play a vital role in ecosystems by controlling insect populations, particularly ants and termites, which helps maintain ecological balance.

They also contribute to soil health through their digging behavior, which aerates the soil and promotes nutrient cycling.

Moreover, pangolins are indicators of ecosystem health. Their presence or absence can reflect the overall well-being of their habitats. Protecting [pangolins](#) helps safeguard biodiversity and the integrity of their ecosystems.

They also have cultural and economic value in many regions, contributing to ecotourism.

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