Why are pangolins threatened with extinction?

Pangolins – ‘ngaka’ in Chichewa – are now threatened with extinction, with research estimating that global populations have declined by 80% in the last 20 years.\(^1\) Pangolins are the most trafficked mammal in the world\(^1\), with numbers being decimated to satisfy demand in Asia, where they are prized for both their meat and scales. The latter are used in traditional Chinese medicine, despite being made from keratin – the same substance found in human hair and fingernails – and thus having no proven efficacy.

Are they protected by law?

Pangolins are afforded the highest level of protection under international law, listed under CITES’ Appendix II. Perpetrators caught in possession of live pangolins or any of their derivatives face a prison sentence of up to 30 years in Malawi.

Is pangolin-related crime rising in Malawi?

Yes. Pangolin-related arrests more than tripled between 2019 and 2020, a reflection of both improved law enforcement and an increase in trafficking activity. Of cases completed in 2020, 95% resulted in a custodial conviction of between 1.5 and 10 years.
What is the scale of the illicit global pangolin trade?

Record international seizures of pangolin contraband in recent years reflect the nature and extent of this serious organised crime. Detailed analysis by the UNODC\(^1\) illustrates a sustained and alarming increase in pangolin-related trafficking since 2014. The equivalent of almost 142,000 pangolins were seized in 2018. CITES reported eleven large seizures of pangolin scales in 2019, averaging 5.5 tonnes each.\(^4\) The largest seizures recorded in 2020 and 2021 were both in Nigeria at 9.5 and 8.8 tonnes respectively.\(^5\)

Why are traffickers targeting Africa’s wild populations?

Approximately 200,000 pangolins are consumed in Asia each year.\(^6\) However, pangolins do not reproduce well in captivity and cannot be bred at a commercial scale to satisfy demand. However, wild sourcing is unsustainable and as Asia’s wild pangolin populations have dwindled, attention has turned to Africa. West and Central African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo act as transit countries and logistical hubs for pangolin and other types of wildlife trafficking, accumulating product from within and beyond their borders.\(^7\)
Where are the pangolins sourced?

Although Malawi is a pangolin range state, sightings of these elusive creatures are rare. Populations are generally higher in Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, and criminals are known to bring pangolins in from these neighbouring countries because they fetch a higher value in Malawi. Pangolin traders also favour Malawi as a transit hub since its ‘porous borders’ facilitate transnational trafficking activity via uncharted routes. **The majority of pangolins are trafficked from Mozambique**, where land clearance from logging operations destroys pangolin habitats and exposes their burrows, and inroads into previously untouched areas facilitates hunters’ access to new pangolin populations. Communities in these areas are increasingly aware of the growing regional market for pangolin meat and scales, and buyers are readily available.

What is the nature of the local market?

Following trends in Zambia, there is now a growing demand from Chinese residents in Malawi who regard pangolin meat as a delicacy. To guarantee freshness, live pangolins are delivered to the customer before being **budgeoned with a machete or a stick and then boiled, sometimes whilst still alive**. Pangolin scales may be kept for personal use, or collated and sold on in shipments going to more profitable markets in Vietnam and China. There is also some evidence of the African ritual of ‘**blasting**’ within Malawi, in which live pangolins are jetted with water to remove the scales which are (falsely) believed to turn into dollar notes. The brutal process ultimately results in a painful death.

Who are the perpetrators?

The majority of those arrested by the authorities to date are **low-level traders** who are generally on a low income. They often work alongside more criminally experienced **intermediary ‘middlemen’** who, in turn, sell on to foreign nationals. These intermediaries make around ten times the profits of the traders, who in turn make 4 to 5 times that of the source poachers. **Transnational trafficking syndicates** operating within Malawi’s borders are also known to deal in pangolin products.
### How does pangolin trafficking overlap with other wildlife crimes?

At the lowest levels, pangolin poaching and dealing can be opportunistic. If they can be located, pangolins are easy to catch and transport, and ‘black market’ trade routes are accessible through community networks. Moving up the chain, however, pangolin trade becomes increasingly organised. Whilst it is yet to be connected to any of the international multi-tonne pangolin scale seizures of recent years, Malawi has previously been identified as **Southern Africa’s principal transit hub for wildlife traffickers** and has been linked to some of the largest ivory seizures of all time.

The **notorious Lin-Zhang syndicate** – described as one of Southern Africa’s most prolific wildlife trafficking gangs – is known to have dealt in pangolins. By December 2020, seven Chinese and four Malawian nationals had been sentenced to between three and eleven years for varying offences, including the possession of elephant ivory, rhino horn, pangolin scales and firearms.

### What is the response from the Government of Malawi?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strengthened legislation &amp; legal tools</th>
<th>Pangolins are a listed species under <strong>new wildlife legislation</strong> (regs updated 2019) and are thus afforded the highest level of protection in Malawi. <strong>New legal tools</strong> for magistrates and prosecutors include a legislation manual, sentencing guidelines, and a model charge handbook.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Specialist investigations &amp; prosecutions</td>
<td>Understanding the nature of wildlife crimes is critical to ensuring that enforcement resources are focused effectively. Authorities follow an <strong>intelligence-led approach with specialised wildlife crime investigators and prosecutors.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative response</td>
<td>Wildlife crime threatens more than the nation’s natural heritage; the organised criminal networks that control supply chains are <strong>associated with corruption, money laundering, and violence</strong>. The Government works closely with key NGO partners through <strong>public-private partnerships</strong>, and has also formed the <strong>Inter-Agency Committee</strong> to Combat Wildlife Crime which actively shares intelligence and facilitates collaboration across the 13 member agencies.</td>
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<td>Campaigns</td>
<td>The nationwide ‘Stop Wildlife Crime’ campaign has <strong>presidential and diplomatic support.</strong> IWT is also one of the key issues for the <strong>Malawi Parliamentary Conservation Caucus.</strong></td>
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<td>Rescue &amp; release</td>
<td>17 confiscated pangolins were rehabilitated and returned to the wild in 2020, thanks to effective <strong>NGO partnerships</strong> and new protocols on the processing of life wild animals as ‘evidence’.</td>
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2. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is a global agreement among governments to regulate or ban international trade in species under threat.
4. [4 cites.org](http://4 cites.org) recorded 11 seizures of over 1 tonne in 2019.
8. [9 www.thetimes.co.uk/article/chinese-traffickers-jailed-in-blow-to-animal-parts-trade-278m9c7h](http://9 www.thetimes.co.uk/article/chinese-traffickers-jailed-in-blow-to-animal-parts-trade-278m9c7h)
9. [IACCWC member agencies: Financial Intelligence Authority, Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Ministry of Justice, National Intelligence Bureau, Anti-Corruption Bureau, Malawi Police Service, Department of Immigration, Malawi Defence Force, Malawi Revenue Authority, Department of Forestry, The Judiciary, Environmental Affairs Department, Department of National Parks and Wildlife, Lilongwe Wildlife Trust.](http://IACCWC member agencies: Financial Intelligence Authority, Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, Ministry of Justice, National Intelligence Bureau, Anti-Corruption Bureau, Malawi Police Service, Department of Immigration, Malawi Defence Force, Malawi Revenue Authority, Department of Forestry, The Judiciary, Environmental Affairs Department, Department of National Parks and Wildlife, Lilongwe Wildlife Trust.)

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