

The Shy Scaly Animal That Could Curl Up And Die

IT'S STRAIGHT OUT OF THE PREHISTORIC AGE AND MOST PEOPLE HAVE NEVER SEEN ONE. THE PANGOLIN IS THE SHY SCALY CREATURE THAT HAS BECOME THE WORLD'S MOST TRAFFICKED AND ENDANGERED ANIMAL. IT COULD SOON DISAPPEAR FROM AFRICA, UNLESS...

BY JAY CABOZ

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Some say it walks like a drunken Velociraptor, tail out and claws curled against its chest. Others think it looks like a scaly anteater. Most ask what on earth is it? This is the little known and misunderstood pangolin, a disappearing mammal seen rarely in the African wild, even by game rangers. Its scarcity gives it a high price on the black market; so much so it faces extinction faster than the rhino. The pangolin can end up as a soup – \$300 a bowl – or is used in traditional medicine in Africa and Asia.

Cape or Temminck's ground pangolin (*Manis temminckii*)



“The best description I have come across is a pangolin looks like an artichoke with armor. It comes from the cretaceous era. Its tongue is so long it curls in its belly. It has no teeth and has powerful front claws. In Africa alone, we estimate an excess of 10,000 a year are traded. It is the most illegally traded mammal in the world,” says Ray Jansen, a professor at the University of Tshwane and Vice-Chair of the African Pangolin Working Group.

The 80-million-year-old mammals can eat 200,000 ants and termites a day and are so elusive it’s almost impossible to say exactly how many of them are out there. Jansen’s rough estimate is that there could be anywhere between 37,000 and 44,000 in Southern Africa alone. All eight varieties of this ancient species (three in Asia; one in India and four in Africa) have been flagged on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. The issue, fears Jansen, is that because so little is known about the pangolin, blocking the illegal trade is hard.

“In April 2014, six tons of pangolin scales were confiscated in China. The amount when put into perspective is frightening; it is the equivalent of 2 million pangolins. It’s such a fascinating animal and as the awareness has grown so has the mapping of the illegal trade. We had cases where until recently; officials in America were confiscating scales thinking they were from a tortoise. The demand from the Asian market is also new. The pangolin in Asia have virtually been hunted to extinction, you can expect to pay \$300 dollars for pangolin soups. So now we are expecting the demand to gravitate toward Africa,” says Jansen.

The tall wiry Jansen is every inch a professor. It’s harder to find a pangolin than his office, which is tucked away on the fourth floor of the University of Tshwane’s Pretoria campus. When you do find him, he is buried under a mountain of paperwork and animal skeletons. Jansen is no stranger to animals. He grew up hunting guinea fowl on the open school grounds of St Stithians Boys College,

in Johannesburg, before moving to Port Elizabeth to complete a PhD in ornithology. He is also a trained falconer, was part of the dog tracker unit in the army and was a teacher.

Jansen took up the plight of the pangolin in June 2011. It was the day he held a mother pangolin and her dead pup, curled in her pouch, on the verge of being smuggled out of the country.

“To hold that small dead pup in your hands and see for the first time what these fascinating creatures look like. It was so emotional. But you have to move that emotion and anger into something else; I knew at that moment that I had to do something. You could say this pup essentially started the whole project.”

The university called on his skills as an expert in genetic mapping to do more research.

“It was the first mammal work I had ever done, but I found it was fascinating. The pangolin was a mystery to the scientific world. There

Ray Jansen



PHOTO BY KENNY PINNOCK

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had been no real data on its genetics or proven scientific research on its habits. We were the pioneers. It was the first time I was seeing a baby. We wanted to take the body back to the bio-bank in Pretoria to analyze its genetics. At the time no one knew what the physiology of a pangolin even was,” says Jansen.

Months later, Jansen released the mother of the dead pup in a game reserve in the Waterberg.

On this summer’s day, Jansen is ecstatic, virtually jumping with joy. He’d just heard of a pangolin rescue by Jen Guyton, a conservationist, in the Gorongosa National Park in Mozambique. One more mother and its baby safely returned to the wild. He digs into his drawers and pulls out his cell phone.

“This is an example of the problem we were facing,” he says handing over the phone.

On the phone is a screengrab of an advert for a pangolin for sale on Alibaba, the \$231-billion Chinese e-commerce company; a lesson that the pangolin is never far from the consumers mind. Jansen removed the advert.

Since 2011, Jansen has breathed life into the topic. His efforts have caught the ear of the famous.

“The pangolin runs the risk of becoming extinct before most people have even heard of them,” says Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, who lent his voice in a



Pangolin species



video blog campaign against wildlife trafficking in November.

Closer to home, South African-born Nicky Oppenheimer, whose family is worth \$6.8 billion and is the third richest man in Africa, according to Forbes, has thrown his weight behind the cause. His philanthropic interest is in finding a solution to the largest killer of pangolins in South Africa – electrified game fences.

“Pangolins walk on their hind feet so when they make contact with the lower wire it’s at their belly height. They then curl instinctively around the wire. In the end they are pulsed to death,” says Jansen.

Along with the poachers, electricity could kill off the pangolin before the next sale on Alibaba.

“What is a pangolin? The research we did revealed that the pangolin is most closely related to a cat. It’s not even on the same genetics as an armadillo,” says Jansen.

Jansen and Oppenheimer hope the pangolin, like the cat, will have nine lives. **P**