

World's most illegally trafficked mammal is given a chance to survive

By Damian Carrington, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.07.16

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Zimbabwe game reserve guide Matus Mhambe holds "Marimba," a female pangolin that has been nine years in care at the Wild Is Life animal sanctuary just outside the country's capital Harare, September 22, 2016. Photo: JEKESAI NJIKIZANA/AFP/Getty Images

Pangolins have a tough existence. After all, they are the world's most illegally trafficked mammal. However, they were thrown a lifeline at a global wildlife summit on Wednesday, with a total trade ban in all pangolin species.

More than a million wild pangolins have been killed in the last decade. There is a rising appetite in China and Vietnam for its meat and its scales, a supposed medicine. The unique scaly anteaters are fast heading for extinction in Asia and poachers are now plundering Africa.

However, on Wednesday 182 nations unanimously agreed on a total ban on international trade on all species. This happened at the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The decision prompted cheers and applause from delegates who were all gathered at the summit in Johannesburg.

CITES works to crack down on a \$20 billion-a-year criminal enterprise: wildlife trafficking. It also tries to ensure that the legal trade in food, skins, pets and traditional remedies does not threaten any species.

Pangolin Scales Are In High Demand

The four Asian species of pangolin have been decimated by illegal poaching. The animals breed slowly and are easy to catch – they simply roll up when threatened. “It is an effective tactic against a hungry lion, but a disadvantage when approached by a human collector,” said Nigeria’s delegate. The price of pangolin scales has risen tenfold in the last five years.

The growing scale of the black market has been revealed by frequent huge seizures. Indonesian authorities confiscated and burned thousands of frozen pangolins in 2015. Meanwhile, a Chinese ship which ran aground in the Philippines in 2013 was carrying 10 tons of pangolin. But traffickers have increasingly targeted the four African species: giant, South African, long-tailed and white-bellied. In June, more than 11 tons of pangolin scales were seized in Hong Kong in just two shipments from Africa.

Vietnam’s delegate said adding the strictest protection possible to pangolins, as CITES did, was crucial. It is important for the survival of the Sunda and Chinese pangolins in particular, which are critically endangered. The move will pressure affected nations into tougher law enforcement and higher penalties for criminals.

Indonesia Opposes New Protection

Indonesia was the only nation to oppose the new protection for Sunda and Chinese pangolins. China abstained, noting that pangolins are also caught for bush meat in many countries and that habitat loss is also a factor. Laos supported the Asian pangolin proposals, but the Guardian revealed on Tuesday how senior Laos officials have cut deals with wildlife traffickers.

“This is a huge win and rare piece of good news for some of the world’s most trafficked and endangered animals,” said Ginette Hemley. Hemley is the head of the World Wildlife Fund delegation to CITES. “This eliminates any question about legality of trade, making it harder for criminals to traffic them and increasing the consequences for those who do.” She said efforts to reduce the demand in China and Vietnam were vital too.

Giving Pangolins And Barbary Apes A Chance

“This decision will help give pangolins a fighting chance,” said Dr. Susan Lieberman, at the Wildlife Conservation Society. “The world is standing up for the little guy with this pivotal decision. These species need extra protection and now they will get it.”

Like pangolins, the protection for the endangered barbary ape was increased to the highest level. The barbary ape is the only wild primate in Europe. The population of the ape has at least halved in the last 30 years, to as few as 6,500.

Many barbary apes are illegally captured each year. They are largely taken for the European exotic pet trade and to be used as props for tourist photos. Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy, MEP and head of the European parliament delegation to CITES, said: "This is a key next step in protecting a species for which the EU is unfortunately a key destination market."

CITES Success Stories

Some of the CITES decisions on Wednesday removed existing protection from species where conservation efforts have been successful. South Africa won support for the removal of the strictest protection from the Cape mountain zebra. Its population is now growing at 9 percent a year. There are currently 4,800 living in the country.

The American wood bison was completely removed from the CITES protective list on Wednesday. Its population has grown to 9,000 and is not threatened by poaching. There are about 500,000 American bison in total, far fewer than the 20 million or more that once roamed the continent.

Also on Wednesday, European countries gained some protection for the western tur, a mountain goat with spectacular horns. The goat is found only in the Caucasus mountains. Its population in some parts of Europe has fallen from 12,000 to 4,000 in the last 30 years. Russia has about 20,000 of the goats, but opposed the proposal. It argued that the goat was already well protected and that trophy hunting encouraged conservation and helped prevent poaching.

Quiz

1 Which two of the following sentences from the article include central ideas of the article?

1. *However, they were thrown a lifeline at a global wildlife summit on Wednesday, with a total trade ban in all pangolin species.*
2. *CITES works to crack down on a \$20 billion-a-year criminal enterprise: wildlife trafficking.*
3. *"It is an effective tactic against a hungry lion, but a disadvantage when approached by a human collector," said Nigeria's delegate.*
4. *The American wood bison was completely removed from the CITES protective list on Wednesday.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 2 and 4

2 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) The barbary ape is the only wild primate found in Europe and it is endangered.
- (B) The meat and scales of pangolins are sometimes eaten in China and Vietnam.
- (C) The American wood bison has been completely removed from the list of protected animals.
- (D) The agreement to protect the pangolin is important to saving the species from extinction.

3 Read the following sentence from the section "Pangolin Scales Are In High Demand."

The four Asian species of pangolin have been decimated by illegal poaching.

Based on the article, what is the BEST definition of the word "decimated"?

- (A) almost completely destroyed
- (B) eliminated without a trace
- (C) given a chance of survival
- (D) very carefully protected

Also on Wednesday, European countries gained some protection for the western tur, a mountain goat with spectacular horns.

How does using the word "spectacular" affect the tone of the sentence above?

- (A) It conveys the sadness of the decline of the western tur.
- (B) It conveys the impressiveness of the western tur's physical features.
- (C) It conveys the serious importance of protecting the western tur.
- (D) It conveys the dramatic nature of the western tur's behavior.