

Illegal trade of Philippine pangolins is surging, report shows

by Elizabeth Claire Alberts on 4 August 2020

- *A new report published by TRAFFIC found that the illegal pangolin trade in the Philippines increased nine-fold in the last two years, with the authorities confiscating an estimated 6,894 pangolins between 2018 and 2019.*
- *Data included seizures of pangolin scales and retrievals of live pangolins that escaped from wildlife traffickers.*
- *TRAFFIC researchers also conducted ad hoc surveys around Manila to discover pangolin meat being served at restaurants and shops selling pills made from pangolin derivatives.*
- *It's estimated that Philippine pangolins, a critically endangered species of the pangolin, have declined up to 95% in the last 40 years.*

A single, wild pangolin wandered across a golf course in the Philippine's Cavite province in March 2018. When the golf club staff spotted the scaly anteater, which was hundreds of miles from its natural habitat on the island of Palawan, they contacted the authorities to come retrieve it. The pangolin was eventually put into a rehabilitation program in an attempt to release it back into the wild; in the end, however, it didn't make it.

While it's not entirely clear how this Philippine pangolin (*Manis culionensis*) wound up on a golf course, the most likely explanation is that it had escaped from the wildlife trade. In the Philippines, pangolins are a protected species, and anyone caught trading them faces hefty fines and prison sentences of up to 12 years. But this hasn't stopped traders from stealing pangolins from the Palawan region and transporting them to various towns and cities to sell them for meat consumption or medicinal use.



A Philippine pangolin. Image by TRAFFIC.

According to a new [report](#) released today by TRAFFIC, an NGO that monitors the international trade of wild animals and plants, an estimated 740 Philippine pangolins were seized between 2000 and 2017. But in the next two years, the trade increased nine-fold — between 2018 and 2019, authorities intercepted an estimated 6,894 pangolins, representing 90% of all pangolins caught up in the illegal trade in the Philippines over the last two decades.

But these estimates are probably quite conservative, according to Richard Thomas, global communications coordinator at TRAFFIC.

“[C]ertainly the detected seizures are just the tip of the iceberg,” Thomas told Mongabay. “How many more seizures are ‘under water’ is anyone’s guess but I suspect the true figure would be jaw-dropping.”

The figures include a record-breaking [bust](#) in September 2019. Following a raid in Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, authorities confiscated 1154 kilograms (2,545 pounds) of pangolin scales and other wildlife parts from a two-story home there. A Chinese national, who was already known to Palawan authorities for a previous attempt to smuggle wildlife, was implicated in the seizure. He may have been preparing to export the pangolin scales to China, according to TRAFFIC.



Confiscated pangolin scales in Cagayan de Oro City in 2017, reportedly heading to Guangdong, China. Image by TRAFFIC.

In the last two years, there were also 18 “retrieval incidents” of live pangolins found roaming the streets of towns near Manila or nearby provinces, including the pangolin spotted on the golf course, the report states.

TRAFFIC researchers also conducted ad hoc surveys in the Manila metropolitan area in 2018 and 2019, and discovered pangolin meat being served in at least five restaurants, although it was not advertised on the menu and only available on a pre-order basis. They also found three shops in Manila selling pills that were manufactured in China using pangolin derivatives.

“While the rise in pangolin seizures speaks to successful enforcement action, it is also deeply alarming news for this rare animal,” Elizabeth John, senior communications officer at TRAFFIC in Southeast Asia, said in a statement.



Imported “Armadillo antipyretic pills” reportedly containing pangolin derivatives. Image by TRAFFIC.

The Philippine pangolin is one of the most heavily poached and trafficked of the eight pangolin species, and is currently listed as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List. Due to the shy, elusive nature of the pangolin, its population status is difficult to assess, but it’s believed that the subspecies has [declined](#) up to 95% over the past 40 years.

While comprehensive data isn’t yet available for 2020, the trade doesn’t appear to be slowing down. In January, authorities [seized](#) 20 Philippine pangolins from a local wildlife trafficker in El Nido, Palawan, and released them back into the wild. There have also been three more retrieval incidents of smuggled pangolins since the start of the year.

Historically, the judiciary haven’t penalized convicted traffickers to the full extent of the law, and this may be one element that’s exacerbating the illegal trade, according to TRAFFIC.



Poached pangolins in a trafficker's facility in El Nido, Palawan. Image by TRAFFIC

"I think you'd have to say sentences simply haven't been in the realm of acting as a sufficient deterrent," Thomas said. "Take the example of the first successful conviction of traffickers outside Palawan — on paper they received a three month prison sentence and USD1,970 fine for illegally transporting 10 live pangolins but all three were released from custody after paying the fine and being granted probation."

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in the Philippines recently [acknowledged](#) that the current penalties were not helping put a stop to wildlife crime in the Philippines, and officials have suggested that any convicted traffickers be given a mandatory minimum jail term of six years, and not be eligible for probation.

"With pressure continuing to mount, the only hope for the Philippine Pangolin is by stamping out the illegal trade through thorough investigations into poaching and trafficking cases, more prosecutions and solid convictions of traffickers," John said.

Citation:

Sy, E. Y., & Krishnasamy, K. (2020). *Endangered by Trade: The Ongoing Illegal Pangolin Trade in the Philippines*. Retrieved from TRAFFIC, Southeast Asia Regional Office

website: <https://www.traffic.org/site/assets/files/13052/philippine-pangolin-trade.pdf>

Editor's note: The headline of this article was changed on 08/05/2020.

Banner image caption: Frozen Philippine pangolins intended for the wild meat black market were seized in Palawan on 28th July 2018. Image by Marsha Posada-Ocampo/DENR.

<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/08/weak-enforcement-sees-surg-ing-trade-in-philippine-pangolin-study-shows/#:~:text=A%20new%20report%20published%20by,pangolins%20between%202018%20and%202019.>