

Pangolins: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

While the pangolin has the unfortunate reputation of being the world's most trafficked mammal, it is also one of its most elusive and under-researched: little is known about its range, its behaviour or even its lifespan. **Sue Watt** looks at new initiatives and research aiming to reveal more about this enigmatic creature.

THE PANGOLERT HOTLINE

If you're planning to visit Africa and want to help alleviate the plight of pangolins, put this WhatsApp number in your phone: +27 72 7264654.

It's the Pangolert Hotline, a vital tool for reporting pangolin sightings that is available to anyone, not just researchers, rangers or guides. Should you be fortunate enough to spot a pangolin on your safari, take a photograph and send it, with location details, to the WhatsApp number. Even photographs taken years ago help to build a picture of the pangolins' whereabouts in the wild.

The hotline was recently launched by Pangolin.Africa, a leading non-profit dedicated to the conservation of the species and supported by Pangolin Photo

Safaris. The intention behind this simple initiative is to accumulate a database of sightings to better understand the range, distribution and populations of pangolins across Africa.

"With little funding dedicated to population assessment, the true impact of trafficking remains largely hidden," explains Toby Jermyn, founder of Pangolin.Africa. "This simple action could help save a pangolin and contribute vital data that informs conservation. Poaching often leaves no trace. By building a reliable sighting database, we can proactively protect pangolins, rather than just react to crises."

Crucially, if the pangolin is injured, in distress, in captivity or being harmed, the hotline also alerts authorities to activity in the illegal wildlife trade. With a vetted network of veterinarians, rehabilitation clinics, NGOs and law enforcement officials across Central and southern Africa, the Pangolert team swings into action when these sensitive animals are at risk.

"Getting to an injured pangolin as quickly as possible is essential if we want effective veterinary care, and Pangolert is a huge advantage in making that possible," explains Machel Van Niekerk, founder of the Kalahari Wildlife Project in the Northern Cape. "Our work with Pangolin. Africa has not only helped to save several pangolins from the trade, but it's also motivated our community to work together to save a species."

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PANGOLIN UNIVERSAL NOTCHING SYSTEM

Despite the overwhelming number of pangolins seized by law enforcement groups investigating the illegal wildlife trade, authorities have no means of knowing the animals' origins or sourcing information about them. The main reason for this is the lack of a universal system of identification for the animal.

Because of their elusive, nocturnal nature, pangolins are under-researched compared to other vulnerable animals. A standard identification system shared across the conservation sphere would help fill in gaps of knowledge around pangolin ageing, reproduction, survivorship, migration and local trafficking patterns, and would enable rescued animals to be relocated to their original homelands. While some projects currently have their own specific notching schemes, these have little impact on wider monitoring and collaborative data sharing.

Last September, researchers published a report recommending a new Pangolin Universal Notching System (PUNS) in the Cambridge University Press, aiming to

create unique identification numbers for some 15,554 individuals.

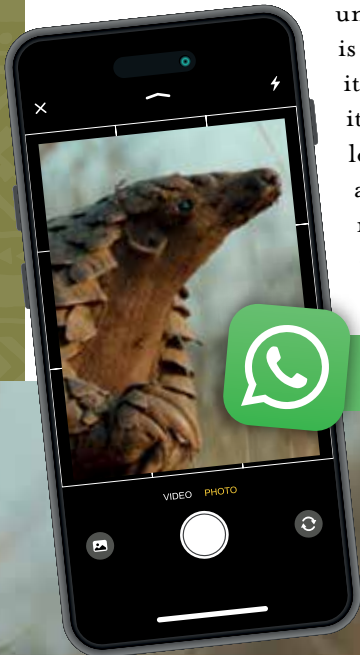
The new system borrows from existing methods of identifying turtles and hoofed animals. Essentially, permanent holes would be gently drilled in a pattern on the scales of a pangolin's back, causing very little stress. Through a numerical-based code, the pattern and location of the holes would signify the sex of the animal and the unique reference number given to it, which could then be searched on the database.

The next step is for the IUCN Pangolin Specialist Group to approve PUNS and take forward the creation of the database system, ensuring the future of this important collaborative conservation tool to protect pangolins across the world.

[Source: Mongabay]



IMAGE COURTESY OF MARTIN ET AL. (2024) THE PANGOLIN UNIVERSAL NOTCHING SYSTEM: A SCALE-MARKING METHODOLOGY FOR PANGOLINS. ORYX, 1-7



Must watch. Photo from Pangolin: Kulu's Journey (Netflix)



Kulu and the Pangolarium

Lepogo Lodges, a non-profit safari lodge collection within South Africa's Lapalala Wilderness Reserve, has joined forces with the African Pangolin Working Group to build a pioneering state-of-the-art facility dedicated to the rehabilitation of trafficked pangolins. The Pangolarium opened in February, with a comprehensive veterinary unit housing all the medical technology needed to help pangolins

recover from the physical and psychological stresses of the illegal wildlife trade.

Notoriously sensitive creatures, pangolins often fall into a state of shock from the trauma of trafficking and need specialised care to get them through recovery and rehoming back to the wild. The Pangolarium has been designed with their security and wellbeing in mind. Its exact location is confidential and access isn't guaranteed, ensuring the integrity of the rehabilitation process at all times.

To see the work of the Pangolarium and the African Pangolin Working Group, check out the new Netflix documentary *Pangolin: Kulu's Journey*. Filmed on Lapalala and directed by Academy Award-winning Pippa Ehrlich of *My Octopus Teacher*, it focuses on trafficking, rehabilitation and the beguiling nature of pangolins, following the emotional story of rescued Kulu and her human carer.