



Pangolins – the most trafficked animal on earth



All books are journeys, writes **Richard Peirce**. His books on rhinos, elephants, orcas, great white sharks, and lions all took over his life while they were in progress. Then, like children, they remained in my life and popped up from time to time in various ways. Pangolins had a different impact, and even now after the book has been finished I am not sure why.

Everyone I interviewed had clearly fallen for, what they saw as, the special magic of these weird looking enigmatic little mammals. At first I didn't get it, then the deeper I journeyed into the world of pangolins the more I understood, until eventually I too was captivated. Being described as "the most trafficked mammal in the world" is hardly a label any species would be happy with. Time and again people spoke of the innocence and vulnerability of pangolins. A San elder I interviewed for the book described pangolins as not hurting any other creatures, and having no enemies (except ants maybe!!).

Writers like me see the good, bad, and ugly of human behaviour towards animals, and I guess we think we are pretty bomb proof and hard bitten. I don't think I get upset anymore by what I see, but I do get angry. I visited Vietnam and Laos in late 2019 doing research

for both my pangolin book and a lion film, and when I was offered a live pangolin to eat for \$3,000, and meat at \$300 a kilo, I got very angry. In one restaurant in Saigon I asked about the availability of "wild meat". I was instantly offered civet cat, and then when I said I had eaten civet cat, and was looking for something more interesting, I was offered pangolin. Civet cats were the likely vector that enabled the first SARS virus to infect humans in 2002-2004. And now scientists believe it is very likely that pangolins were the vector for the current novel coronavirus outbreak which has brought the world to its knees. If so this would make pangolins the most expensive meals ever eaten in human history! Selling these animals to eat demonstrates stunning irresponsibility, and flagrant disregard for international law because Vietnam, Laos, China and other S.E. Asian countries are all CITES Parties, which

means they are signatories to an international agreement making trade in pangolins illegal.

CITES

CITES is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The convention text was drafted in 1963 following a resolution adopted at a meeting of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The text of the resolution was finally accepted in Washington in March 1973 by 80 countries and, on 1st July 1975, the Convention came into force. CITES is an international agreement to which countries voluntarily subscribe, and its resolutions are legally binding on member states, which are known as Parties. CITES resolutions do not take the place of national laws, but each Party has to ensure that its domestic legislation reflects CITES resolutions and that they are implemented.

Levels of trade are regulated and defined by CITES by listing on one of three appendices: Appendix I, II or III. Appendix I is for the most endangered animals and plants, which are threatened with extinction; all international trade is prohibited, unless for scientific research or in special circumstances.

In both Vietnam and Laos I had no trouble finding pangolin products on sale, despite their being Appendix I listed animals. If I, a foreign tourist, could easily find these products on sale so could the police. Clearly either a blind eye was being turned deliberately, or the fact that trade in pangolin products is illegal under international law was not important to the authorities.

In the wake of the latest coronavirus pandemic there are very positive signs that China will at last move effectively to ban wildlife trade. The hope is that where China leads others will follow.

From January 2020 onwards there was considerable reporting, in both mainstream and social media platforms, of possible modifications to China's Wildlife Protection Law (WPL). The first development came on

26th January, when three Chinese agencies, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the National Forestry and Grasslands Administration, and the State Administration for Market Regulation issued the 'Notification regarding the prohibition of trade in wildlife'. This required all facilities keeping wild animals in captivity to quarantine them; and all consumptive operators, including food outlets, supermarkets and produce markets, were banned from selling wild animals in any form. The ban was to last until the national coronavirus epidemic was over. There appeared to be grey areas in the ban, such as the status of products sold for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and manufactured products such as tiger or lion bone, wine and cake.

On 24th February, China's highest law-making body, the National People's Congress (NPC), put in place a series of measures that appeared to back up and strengthen the restrictions imposed in January. These measures prohibited trade in most terrestrial wild animal species consumed as food. The ban only covered food, so trade in pets, TCM and ornamental artefacts was not addressed. Although there seemed to be notable loopholes, which meant the measures fell short of being a total ban, these moves indicated significant departures from the existing WPL, and seemed to demonstrate recognition of the dangers posed by wildlife consumption. Although the pandemic had triggered moves by China's lawmakers, many issues needed to be reviewed and resolved before permanent changes could be made to the WPL. The term 'wildlife' would need to be defined, in terms of whether it covered captive-bred species. Another major issue is the use of pangolin scales in TCM. During June hopeful signs perhaps indicated which way the review process might be going when pangolin scales were officially delisted from TCM. One-way TCM practitioners get around using illegal (CITES Appendix I) pangolin scales is by claiming they come from stockpiles, so

NGO's and others began calling for the burning of these stocks. There was also speculation that the Chinese government might compensate breeders of wild species if they switched to other forms of agriculture.

The NPC meeting in May passed new laws affecting Hong Kong, but revision of the WPL did not come up. At the time of writing in June 2020 the review process is ongoing, and people worldwide are waiting to find out what new measures will eventually become law. The coronavirus pandemic has left the world in no doubt that China's wildlife laws affect every human living on the planet.

SPECIES

There are four species of African and four species of Asian pangolins. The Asian species are the Chinese, Indian, Malayan (Sunda) and Philippine pangolins, and the African species are the White-bellied, Black-bellied, Giant and Temminck's. My book "Pangolin; Scales of Injustice", starts off telling the time story of a Temminck's pangolin poached in Zimbabwe, trafficked into South Africa, and then rescued in a sting operation. The book goes on to

discuss pangolin scientific research currently in progress in South Africa, and then details a visit to Vietnam and Laos before discussing the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The final part of the book looks at the biology, history and symbolism of the four African species, and then moves on to examine conservation, and the future of the "most trafficked mammal in the world".

The coronavirus pandemic has put huge pressure on China and if, as is hoped, this results in meaningful amendments to China's laws, and this wind of change blows across other S.E. Asian countries, then it may be that the virus could save pangolins from extinction. One of those I interviewed for the book was a bushman elder called, Izak Kruiper who kindly wrote one of the Forewords. Izak told me of the belief of the San that those who kill or hurt pangolins will suffer adverse consequences. He was not surprised when I told him about coronavirus, and the possibility that pangolins had been the agent which brought the virus to humans via bats. For Izak the novel coronavirus was clearly a logical outcome of men's abuse of pangolins.

Richard Peirce is best known as a shark conservationist and as former Chairman of the Shark Conservation Society and the Shark Trust. A committed environmental activist, he has authored several books, including *Orca* (apex predators), *Giant Steps* (elephants), *Cuddle Me Kill Me* (canned lion hunting), *Nicole* (about a shark's marathon journey), and *The Poacher's Moon* (rhinos), all published by Struik Nature.

Pangolins: Scales of Injustice

ePub: 9781775847137 (June 2020) | **RRP:** R160.00

Fully illustrated print edition will be launched on World Pangolin Day (21 February 2021)
ISBN: 9781775847120

