

***A Cry for Pangolins* by Xiao Ka Yee Brianna**

As a child, I was fascinated by the most unusual and exotic animals, but never could I have imagined encountering a creature as peculiar as the pangolin. With its distinctive features including a toothless mouth, an elongated tongue that can extend beyond its body, and a coat of scales that covers its entire figure, this artichoke-like animal is a true marvel of nature. What's more, the pangolin possesses an incredible ability to defend itself against predators by rolling up into a tight ball, using its scales as armour to shield it from harm.

Despite its remarkable qualities, the pangolin remains one of the most overlooked and endangered species on our planet. As a nocturnal and reclusive animal, it has escaped the public eye to a great extent, making it vulnerable to exploitation and neglect. But after discovering more about these curious scaly creatures that have thrived on our planet for 80 million years and played vital roles in balancing our ecosystems (Fauna and Flora), but are actually the world's most trafficked animal – my curiosity swiftly turned to concern.

With pangolins now facing an alarming extinction crisis due to habitat loss and rampant poaching for their meat and scales, I realised these strange animals deserved far more than human ignorance. The story of the pangolin - from its unusual anatomy and prehistoric origins to its current plight and role in our environment - is an enthralling one that deserves to be told. And with awareness comes the chance to take action and save these extraordinary creatures before it's too late.

Pangolins, also known as scaly anteaters or pholidotas, play a crucial role in maintaining the health and stability of the globe's blooming ecosystems. They adopt an insectivorous diet, feeding primarily on ants and termites. A single pangolin can consume up to 73 million ants annually, effectively controlling insect populations and preventing them

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from causing damage to the environment, human agriculture and homes (University of Liverpool). By consuming these insects, pangolins help to maintain the health of forests and other ecosystems, which in turn can benefit humans by providing clean air, water, and other resources like medicine. The unique biology of pangolins also makes them a subject of immense scientific interest. Their scales, made of keratin (a fibrous protein that helps form human hair and nails), have evolved as a highly effective defence mechanism against fierce predators, prompting innovators past and present to study their distinctive scales and develop products from it, such as protective armour for soldiers.

Despite their ecological importance and scientific potential, pangolins face unprecedented threats due to human activities. The primary drivers of their decline are poaching and illegal wildlife trade. Pangolins are hunted for their uncommon scales, which are believed to have beneficial medicinal properties such as promoting lactation, reducing swelling and aiding kidney function. In addition, their meat is considered a delicacy in some countries, and their unique appearance makes them a sharp target for the exotic pet trade.

The statistics released by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) regarding the illegal trade and poaching of pangolins are absolutely staggering. Over a period of 10 years, more than 1,000,000 pangolins were trafficked (WWF), and to put that in perspective, that's equivalent to one pangolin being poached every three minutes. The trade is extensive, with pangolins being smuggled from their natural habitats in Africa and Asia to markets in numerous countries. The poaching and trafficking of pangolins not only threaten the survival of the species but also cause untold suffering, as pangolins are often transported in cruel and inhumane conditions. The cruelty involved in the illegal trade of pangolins is extremely heartbreaking — traffickers often stuff live pangolins into tight, cramped spaces, causing

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severe stress and injuries to the animals. Many pangolins die before they even reach their destination, while others endure a slow, painful death at the hands of poachers who butcher them for their precious scales and meat. The devastating impact of this illegal trade on pangolin populations cannot be overstated.

Unfortunately, poaching is not the only threat that pangolins face. They are also severely impacted by habitat loss. Pangolins inhabit forests and grasslands but their natural habitats are rapidly diminishing due to deforestation and expanding agriculture. As their habitats are destroyed or fragmented, pangolins are forced into smaller and more isolated areas, making them more vulnerable to predators and other threats. Deforestation and agricultural expansion also disrupt the ecological balance of the habitats in which pangolins live, further exacerbating their decline. Some pangolin species are now critically endangered, and if immediate action is not taken, they could soon disappear from our planet forever.

To reverse the decline of pangolins and ensure their survival, we must take a multi-pronged approach that addresses both the demand and supply sides of the illegal trade. Raising awareness about the plight of pangolins is a vital first step. By shining a light on these fascinating creatures and the challenges they face, we can inspire people to take action and support conservation efforts.

According to Dr. Beryl Makori, a wildlife biologist, “People don't know what a pangolin is so when they see a pangolin, they think that it is something harmful or something poisonous or dangerous so the first instinct of every human when they see something harmful, it is time to kill it or hit it to get away from it.” (AfricaNews) With minimal awareness among the public, pangolins are often seen as a threat, prompting people to harm

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them. Targeted educational initiatives can help rectify misconceptions by mitigating unfounded hostility towards pangolins. Conservation outreach utilising social media, celebrity advocacy, and documentary films that can engage broader audiences has potential to significantly augment public comprehension of pangolin morphology, ecology, and conservation status among non-specialists. Increased valuation of this functionally important but severely threatened animal may prompt societal endorsement of policies and programs designed to address threats and ensure long-term viability of pangolin populations.

Additionally, collaboration between governments, NGOs, and local communities is essential to effectively combat the illegal trade of pangolins. Governments can play a crucial role in strengthening laws and regulations to protect pangolins and their habitats. For example, countries can establish protected areas where pangolins can live and breed safely, and implement policies to prevent the illegal trade and consumption of pangolin products. Furthermore, governments can provide resources to support law enforcement efforts, such as training and equipment for wildlife rangers and customs officials. NGOs also play a vital role in pangolin conservation. These organisations can work with local communities to raise awareness about the importance of pangolin protection and develop initiatives to support pangolin conservation. NGOs can also provide funding for research, as well as legal and advocacy support to combat wildlife trafficking. Local communities that live alongside pangolins can be powerful allies in pangolin conservation. For instance, community-based ecotourism initiatives can generate income while promoting pangolin conservation, providing an economic incentive for communities to protect pangolins and their habitats.

Lastly, participating in research and conservation efforts can help us better understand the biology, ecology, and threats faced by pangolins, informing more effective management

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strategies. Habitat restoration and protection, as well as captive breeding programs, can play a role in the recovery of pangolin populations. Some organisations we can support include Save Pangolins and The Pangolin Conservation & Research Foundation (PCRF), and some charitable projects that raise sociocultural awareness on pangolins include the Pangolin Crisis Fund. Moreover, encouraging public celebrations of pangolin-focused awareness days, for example World Pangolin Day falling on the third Saturday of February each year, can play a role in amplifying societal knowledge of and support for pangolin conservation. With increased philanthropic involvement through volunteerism and activism, organisations and government agencies will be better placed to mitigate anthropogenic threats, recover declining pangolin populations and ensure the long-term survival of these ecologically valuable yet critically imperilled species.

The time has come to give the humble pangolin the recognition and protection it deserves. As the guardians of our planet, we have a responsibility to ensure that these unique creatures continue to thrive in their natural habitats, contributing to the health of our ecosystems for generations to come. By raising awareness, advocating for stronger laws and enforcement, and supporting research and conservancy, we can give this unseen species a fighting chance to survive and flourish. Let's not let pangolins disappear without anyone knowing about their amazing existence – instead, let's celebrate and protect them. Pangolins deserve our love, care and hope for a better future. The time to act is now. Our efforts to save this incredible species must start here, and continue with an unwavering effort that matches how astounding pangolins truly are.

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