

IN THE EASTERN GHATS, A SMALL MOVEMENT IS UNDERWAY TO PROTECT THE ENDANGERED PANGOLIN

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Shy, solitary and nocturnal, the pangolin is believed to be the world's most trafficked animal. The toothless, sticky-tongued creature thrives on ants and termites, and lives in hollow trees and burrows throughout the Eastern Ghats ranges in Visakhapatnam, Vizianagaram and Srikakulam.

When threatened, the pangolin curls up into a tight ball, exposing its scales to prevent attack by predators. Unfortunately, this defense mechanism is the primary cause for its near-extinction, making it an easy prey for poachers.

The scared pangolin is simply lifted away by poachers, who then boil it to death and tear up the scales. These scales are used to make traditional medicines that are said to cure diseases. However, the medicinal value is not conclusively proven yet.

The World Pangolin Day is observed on the third Saturday of February each year (February 20) and serves as a reminder of the sad plight of these creatures and the urgent need to speed up conservation efforts to protect them.

The species is legally protected under Schedule I (on a par with the Bengal tiger) of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and is also categorised as 'endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

There are eight species of pangolins; among them the population of four Asian pangolin species, including Indian Pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*) is reported to have declined significantly in many areas due to hunting and trade.

Little is known about the conservation status and activity pattern of the Indian pangolin throughout its range.

However, reports from local communities have revealed there has been a rise in poaching and illegal trade of pangolins since 2010 in the three districts of North Coastal Andhra Pradesh in South India, according to the Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society (EGWS).

In order to collate data on the status of pangolins in the North Coastal AP region, EGWS in collaboration with Save Pangolins and Pangolin Crisis Fund USA initiated an immediate conservation status survey to acquire vital data on the presence/absence of the species and specific human-induced threats. The project areas are mainly human-dominated landscapes and unprotected forest patches where Pangolins inhabit.

"We mainly use interview-based data, followed by any historical records or rescues in the region. Burrow counts and camera trapping will also be carried out in the future, once we have reliable information about their presence. In 2019 alone, our team rescued two pangolins from Madugula and Anakapalle regions where locals picked them up ignorantly and put them in confinement. We released the animals in the presence of the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department Officials deep in the reserve forest," says Murty Kantimahanti of EGWS.

The main goal of the project is to generate baseline data on the distribution of Indian pangolins

in Northern Andhra Pradesh.

“The objective is to assess the presence/absence of Indian pangolin in protected and unprotected human-dominated landscapes of the three coastal districts in north-eastern ghats of Andhra Pradesh; to understand local perceptions of rural communities living alongside the pangolin habitat; assess human-induced threats to the species and the habitat in the region; impart awareness about the threatened status and conservation significance of Indian pangolin among all major stakeholders,” Murty adds.

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