



Conservation, crime and communities:

Community-based Pangolin Conservation, Nepal

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At a glance

COUNTRY	Nepal
LOCATION	Non-protected area, Taplejung District, Eastern Himalayas
SPECIES	Chinese pangolin (<i>Manis pentadactyla</i>)
ILLEGAL WILDLIFE TRADE CONTEXT	Increasing activity by local people in illegal trade
TYPE OF POACHERS	Local people
TYPE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN TACKLING IWT	Community intelligence gathering Awareness-raising and behavior change of poachers
CONSERVATION INCENTIVE MECHANISM	Awareness raising of IWT penalties

The story so far

The need to raise public awareness about the threatened status of the Chinese pangolin and the laws that exist to protect the animal in Nepal has put community-engagement at the heart of a conservation programme in the east of the country.

The project – one of only a handful of community-based pangolin conservation projects worldwide – is being run by the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) with support from the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) EDGE Fellowship scheme. Set up in 2012, the project aims to collect baseline information on ecology, status, distribution and specific threats facing the Chinese pangolin, and to generate support for their conservation.

Local villagers are engaged through conservation sub-committees, set up within the existing local administration network. Through training workshops, these individuals learn about the Chinese pangolin and the consequences of illegal trade, which they then in turn share with their communities. The goal is to tackle widespread ignorance about these increasingly rare animals, and to strengthen community commitment to stop illegal trade.



Awareness Raising Programme 2013 (Ambika Prasad Khatiwada)

The Chinese pangolin has the dubious accolade of being the world's most illegally traded mammal. Up to one million animals are thought to have been taken from the wild during the past decade; a loss that has resulted in the Chinese pangolin being recently upgraded to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.



Chinese Pangolin, (Ambika Prasad Khatiwada)

Unaware that the pangolin is endangered

Chinese pangolins are one of two pangolin species that occur in Nepal. They are widely distributed in non-protected areas, but local communities — often unaware that the pangolin is endangered — have been increasingly involved in the illegal trade. The meat is appreciated as a delicacy and the demand for scales is driven by the market for traditional medicine.

The price that illegal traders pay for scales varies at local level, depending on the bargaining experience of local individuals and their knowledge of the trade. In the project area, the value can reach US\$700 per kg; a 350 per cent increase in local value over the past eight years. Most of the scales are fed into the international market, and their value at their final destination is unknown.

In Nepal, tough laws are in place to protect endangered species, but enforcement is weak and the government does not have the level of human resources needed to police the illegal wildlife trade outside protected areas.

Community engagement programmes for natural resource conservation in the country are gaining in popularity, backed by relevant acts and policies such as the 1991 Forest Act of Nepal and the 1999 local self-governance act.

A transit point for illegal trade

The project focuses on two villages (Nangkholyang and Dokhu) in the Taplejung municipality in the east of Nepal — a transit point for the illegal trade in pangolin into Tibet and India. The population here is characterised by local ethnic diversity and the main sources of income are agriculture, livestock and labour.

Most households live close to subsistence level, with some being better off due to income from farming or government jobs (such as teachers). However, data from the project revealed that those who get involved with illegal trade were generally not the poorest.

Poaching isn't the only threat to the pangolin in the area. Habitat loss due to road building and deforestation is a challenge, as well as the loss of prey (termites and ants) due to the increased use of insecticides in agriculture.

Against this backdrop, not only do conservation committees build awareness of the pangolin's plight and win the support of villagers to feel a sense of responsibility for 'their' pangolin; they also strengthen the local community's capacity for law enforcement.

The project was designed on the basis of existing local governance. In Nepal, districts are divided into administrative units run by Village Development Committees (VDCs). These VDCs are each subdivided

into nine wards. Working with two VDCs, the project has established a pangolin conservation sub-committee in each ward.

A representative from each sub-committee was then appointed to a VDC level conservation committee, tasked with launching and supporting conservation activities to raise awareness and control illegal trade in the village's jurisdiction.

What works and why?

The sub-committees form the front line of support and endorsement for the project's aims. Through them, a total of 263 local people (192 men and 71 women) have been affiliated in conservation work, including surveys, community meetings, workshops and school teaching programmes.

Local leaders were involved in project design from the outset, and the main Nepalese project implementor was himself a resident of one of the villages, which boosted interest.

Before the project began, villagers who came across a pangolin by chance would more likely than not have killed it to have its meat as a delicacy and the scales to sell. Now, however, there is evidence of a change in attitudes. This change is seen in the growing number of cases where locals who come across a live pangolin in the road or fields, choose to bring it back to the village and to the attention of conservation sub-committee members. They then use the opportunity to gather people around to talk about the pangolin and explain the law before releasing the animal back into the wild.

The role of the sub-committees in reducing illegal trade in pangolins works on various levels. They are educating those locals who did not realise that killing pangolins was illegal, and exerting their influence and authority over neighbours, relatives and friends who may have been knowingly engaged in illegal activities. Finally, they discourage outsiders from coming into the villages in search of scales because they are ready to inform the authorities and security services.

Local press interest in the conservation project has helped to build stronger community self-esteem, and there is a sense among villagers that their efforts could help them to develop local tourism and gain government support.

Overall, there has been a genuine interest and support for the conservation programme, which helps to stigmatise and discourage local poachers. There is a virtuous circle driven by social cohesion and community values, backed by the threat of enforcement.



Training Local Youths in Pangolin Monitoring (Ambika Prasad Khatiwada)

Challenges

- There is little direct benefit to the communities from participating in pangolin conservation.
- The initial high levels of interest and curiosity during the start-up phase of the project could be difficult to maintain.
- Illegal trade is more widespread and more sophisticated than initially thought realised.
- Illegal traders who used to operate openly — for example coming into villages to buy scales - are now setting up underground networks.

Lessons learnt

- Communication and raising awareness about the threatened status of local animals influences attitudes and wins support for conservation.
- Conservation programmes need to bring benefits, directly or indirectly, to local communities if their support and engagement is to last.
- Illegal trade at a local level is not always intentional.

COULD THIS WORK ELSEWHERE?

Yes. In Nepal, the National Trust for Nature Conservation has started similar community-based conservation work in five VDCs to support the USAID-funded Hariyo Ban Programme which focusses on Goral (a threatened goat-like species) conservation. This project raises public awareness to stop poaching at local level (people were killing Goral for local consumption) and supports communities through livelihood improvement initiatives (home stay tourism, tree planting, improved livestock rearing) and establishing community conservation groups.