

Seizures of African pangolin scales in Malaysia in 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, the trade in pangolins and their derivatives to meet demand for their meat and scales has escalated to unsustainable levels, threatening their continued survival in the wild (CITES, 2016a; CITES, 2016b). Sought after for use in traditional Asian medicines, the scales are in greatest demand at present, followed by the meat which is valued as a luxury dish (Wu *et al.*, 2004; Wu and Ma, 2007; Zhang and Yin, 2014; Nijman, 2015; Xu, 2016). There are eight species of pangolins in the world, with four found in Asia and four in Africa. The persistent demand in Asia for pangolin scales and meat has caused drastic declines of the Asian pangolins across large parts of their range, with the Sunda Pangolin *Manis javanica* and the Chinese Pangolin *Manis pentadactyla* appearing to be the most affected, and over time there has been a noticeable shift in the poaching and trade for the four pangolin species found in Africa; this shift has been observed since 2000 (Heinrich *et al.*, 2016), likely due in part to the establishment of a zero export quota by CITES for all Asian pangolins (Challender and Hywood, 2012; CITES, 2016; Gomez *et al.*, 2016; Heinrich *et al.*, 2016). Confirming this turn of events, large shipments of pangolins from Africa are increasingly being seized in Asia, and, alarmingly, in growing volumes (Anon., 2014a; Anon., 2014b; Cheng *et al.*, 2016; Heinrich *et al.*, 2016; Zhou, 2016). Although occasionally involving whole animals (dead/frozen), these seizures were largely of pangolin scales, reinforcing the fact that trade is fuelled to meet the demand for the scales for use in traditional medicines in Asia (TRAFFIC, 2015; Cheng *et al.*, 2016; CITES, 2016b; Heinrich *et al.*, 2016; Heinrich *in prep.*).

Malaysia is home to one species of pangolin, the Sunda Pangolin, and has generally been considered a source for pangolins in trade, intended mainly for the international market (Tuuga, 2009; Pantel and Anak, 2010; Challender *et al.*, 2014; CITES, 2016a; Heinrich *et al.*, 2016; Krishnasamy, 2016). In 2000, Malaysia was reported to have legally exported 21 270 pangolin skins to China, USA and Singapore for commercial purposes (CITES, 2016a). Further, between 2000 and 2012, Singapore and Japan are reported to have licensed re-exports of 48 596 skins that originated from Malaysia, for commercial purposes (CITES, 2016a). Investigation of logbooks seized by the Sabah Wildlife Department in 2009, revealed that one syndicate in the State of Sabah was alone responsible for some 22 200 Sunda Pangolins being killed and supplied illegally for trade over a 14-month period between May 2007 and January 2009 (Pantel and Anak, 2010). Some

local trade of pangolins for meat and traditional medicine has also been documented in the country, occasionally found for sale illegally in wild meat restaurants (Tuuga, 2009; Yuen, 2013; Arumugam, 2015; Anon., 2017).

MALAYSIA AS A TRANSIT COUNTRY

On the international front, Malaysia is a notable transit country, with shipments of wildlife, their parts and products both legally traded and smuggled in and out from neighbouring countries, and increasingly from Africa, bound for other parts of Asia (Milliken *et al.*, 2013; Milliken *et al.*, 2016; CITES, 2016a; Cheng *et al.*, 2016; TRAFFIC, 2017a; TRAFFIC, 2017b). Malaysia's role as a transit hub for wildlife smuggling has been well documented for wildlife contraband from Africa such as ivory, rhinoceros horns, and Critically Endangered tortoises from Madagascar, all listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (TRAFFIC, 2010; Milliken *et al.*, 2013; Milliken *et al.*, 2016; Latiff, 2017; TRAFFIC, 2017a; TRAFFIC, 2017b). Recently, large seizures of pangolin scales from Africa, both in transit and those reportedly bound for Malaysia, have become frequent in the country, illustrated by the spate of seizures made by the Royal Malaysian Customs (RMC) Department. These occurrences highlight the vulnerability of the country and the region as an important transit point for high-value African wildlife and their parts heading to key consumer countries in Asia. This short note considers the seizures of African pangolin scales that have taken place in Malaysia over a four-month period in 2017 to contextualize the role of Malaysia in the smuggling of African pangolins.

SEIZURES OF AFRICAN PANGOLIN SCALES IN MALAYSIA

Between May and August 2017, there were six confirmed seizures of African pangolin scales in Malaysia (Fig. 1), totalling 6695 kg. Apart from one seizure at Sepanggar Port in Kota Kinabalu Sabah, all of them took place at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) air cargo terminal. These transactions involved no fewer than seven export and transit countries along the trade chains—Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with Dubai in the UAE, Turkey and the DRC each featuring twice, while Ghana was the reported source country in three of the six shipments. The shipments comprised between 288 kg and 5000 kg of pangolin scales (Fig. 1).

Two seizures, which took place in June within six days of each other and accounted for 10% of the seizures (or 682 kg) are of particular interest as the reported country of origin, airline used and false declaration on the shipping document were identical: Ghana (as country of origin), Turkish Airlines (as the method of transport) and oyster shell (declaration of goods). The similarities



◀ Fig. 1.

Summary of African pangolin seizures in Malaysia, May–August 2017.

of the two shipments suggest that they might have been part of a single export deal from Ghana which was packed separately (in 12 and 16 boxes) as a means of transporting smaller volumes into Malaysia. In the five seizures involving air transportation, Malaysia was the reported end destination. In late July 2017, the Ghanaian authorities reportedly arrested three members of a wildlife trafficking syndicate who admitted smuggling pangolin scales to Malaysia (Bokpe, 2017). The media report stated that an accomplice in Nigeria was involved in shipping the scales from Ghana to Malaysia, and that a Chinese national was involved in the smuggling; it is unknown if this arrest refers to either one or both of the Ghana–Malaysia pangolin scale shipments that took place in June. This case points to a clear need to investigate the links between the individuals and countries involved in the trade chain.

Notably, in July 2017 Sabah Customs reported the seizure of 8000 kg of pangolin scales at Sepanggar Port in Kota Kinabalu, though the origin of the shipment has not been made public; authorities have not ruled out that this shipment—Malaysia’s largest pangolin scales seizure to date—could have originated from the African continent (Vanar, 2017). Investigations into this shipment, which arrived in Malaysia in 226 sacks each weighing between 30–50 kg, are ongoing, including efforts to conduct forensic DNA tests on the seized scales (Chan, 2017; Vanar, 2017). If this shipment is confirmed to have originated in Africa, Malaysia would be implicated in a minimum of 14 694 kg of African pangolin scales from seven shipments within a four-month period. Significantly, it highlights that Sepanggar Port in Sabah could potentially emerge as an important transit point for wildlife commodities from Africa being

smuggled through Malaysia, and requires continued vigilance: at least 13 000 kg of pangolin scales have been seized in Sepanggar Port alone, representing 86% of all the pangolin seizures described in this article. A seizure of 5000 kg of African pangolin scales in late August 2017 from Nigeria also included 3000 kg of ivory (Chan, 2017; TRAFFIC, 2017c; Vanar, 2017). In both the Sabah seizures, two local men, including one who owned the company that was reportedly shipping the scales to China, were arrested to aid with investigations (Chan, 2017; Avila, 2017; TRAFFIC, 2017c; Vanar, 2017). Investigations into these sea port seizures are ongoing and authorities have not yet confirmed if Malaysia was the end destination, or used as a transit route to other locations in the region. On the other hand, Malaysia was listed as the end destination in the five shipments of pangolin scales that originated from the DRC and Ghana, which were seized at the airports. The nature and scale of the seizures coupled with the fact the Malaysia does not possess an active market for these products, suggest that there may be parties in Malaysia functioning as consolidators and / distributors or redistributors of pangolin scales to other destinations in the region; further investigations are critical to improve understanding of the situation and to tackle associated problems effectively.

Besides these cases described above, at least four other significant seizures of African pangolin scales have taken place since 2014 involving Malaysia as part of the trade chain; these collectively amounted to more than 8000 kg of scales. In May 2014, Hong Kong Customs seized a container with 1000 kg of pangolin scales that came from Kenya via Malaysia but originated in Uganda (Anon, 2014b; CITES, 2016a). Days later, Hong Kong Customs again seized another container of

pangolin scales from Cameroon that had travelled via Malaysia, weighing 2340 kg. Authorities believed that the two shipments were connected and later arrested a Malaysian businessman in connection to the cases, the outcome of which is unknown (Anon, 2014b). In August 2015, Customs at the Da Nang port in Viet Nam seized 4002 kg of pangolin scales that were shipped together with 1023 kg of ivory (TRAFFIC; 2015; Heinrich *et al.* 2016). This shipment was reportedly from Malaysia; however, given that it was mixed with African Elephant *Loxodonta africana* ivory, it is likely that it originated from the African continent and had transited Malaysia prior to arrival in Viet Nam. Finally, in December 2016, it was reported that 670 kg of African pangolin scales had been seized in Cameroon, reportedly destined for Malaysia (VOA News, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

These incidents highlight the fact that Malaysia is being used as a transit point for pangolins—scales in particular—adding another group of CITES Appendix I-listed species being shipped from Africa through Malaysia. These seizures also draw attention to the fact that Malaysia's role involves large volumes being sent via containerized shipments by sea as well as smaller-scale shipments of pangolin scales transported by air. Seizures, and related enforcement actions, by the Malaysian authorities send a clear signal of the country's commitment to tackling illegal trade. The international nature of these smuggling efforts, however, clearly calls for increased international co-operation to combat this trade, and is an opportunity to make full use of the CITES partnership and obligations. This is particularly needed to unravel links between operators in Malaysia, such as the two men arrested in connection with the seizures in Sabah, and other countries along the trade chain; the smugglers have used fictitious names and local addresses on the shipping documentation in an attempt to evade detection.



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Pangolin scales seizure by the Royal Malaysian Customs in July 2017.

Collaboration between airlines and logistics companies and law enforcement agencies such as Customs and Immigration is necessary as they hold key intelligence on the syndicates moving pangolin scales across continents and can greatly aid in any investigations. Ultimately, through collaborative efforts that lead both to seizures and to the arrest and successful prosecution of criminals, Malaysia can remove itself from being one of the transit countries of choice in South-east Asia for pangolins or other illicit wildlife coming from Africa to Asia.

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