



## Original research article

## Pangolin trade in the Mong La wildlife market and the role of Myanmar in the smuggling of pangolins into China

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## ABSTRACT

We report on the illegal trade in live pangolins, their meat, and their scales in the Special Development Zone of Mong La, Shan State, Myanmar, on the border with China, and present an analysis of the role of Myanmar in the trade of pangolins into China. Mong La caters exclusively for the Chinese market and is best described as a Chinese enclave in Myanmar. We surveyed the morning market, wildlife trophy shops and wild meat restaurants during four visits in 2006, 2009, 2013–2014, and 2015. We observed 42 bags of scales, 32 whole skins, 16 fetuses or pangolin parts in wine, and 27 whole pangolins for sale. Our observations suggest Mong La has emerged as a significant hub of the pangolin trade. The origin of the pangolins is unclear but it seems to comprise a mixture of pangolins from Myanmar and neighbouring countries, and potentially African countries. Myanmar, on the basis of its geographic position, size and weak government, has emerged as an important transit country for the smuggling of pangolins to China. Data from 29 seizures from Myanmar and 23 from neighbouring countries (Thailand, India, China) implicating Myanmar as a source of pangolins or as a transit point for pangolins sourced in other countries, in the period 2010–2014, illustrate the magnitude of this trade. Combined these seizures amount to 4339 kg of scales and 518 whole pangolins, with a retail value in Myanmar of US\$3.09 million. Trade in pangolins, their parts or their derivatives is illegal in Myanmar and CITES II listing with a zero-quota preclude international trade in them. We urge the Myanmar government to liaise with regional authorities to curb the trade in pangolins and recommend that the Myanmar and Chinese CITES authorities in particular come together urgently as to resolve the illicit trade of pangolins and their parts across their borders.

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## 1. Introduction

Trade in pangolins is seen as a major impediment for their conservation, especially so for the four Asian species but increasingly for the four African species as well. The primary threat is poaching for international trade, which is largely driven by demand in China, and to a lesser extent Vietnam, and involves live animals, their meat and scales (Pantel and Chin, 2009; Shepherd, 2009). In China and Vietnam increasing wealth appears to have led to significant rise in the exploitation of pangolins across Asia (Challender and Hywood, 2011; Pantel and Chin, 2009) and, more recently, Africa (Challender and

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Hywood, 2012; Baker, 2014). Pangolin meat is consumed as a luxury dish and scales are used in traditional Asian medicine, purportedly curing a range of ailments.

Sharing a 2185 km long and often porous border with China, having strong economic ties to China and high levels of corruption, Myanmar is a gateway for a wide variety of illegally transported wildlife into China (Oswell, 2010; Nijman and Shepherd, 2014; Sharma, 2014; Nijman and Shepherd, 2015). We focused on the town of Mong La, in the eastern part of the country on the border with China, and a well known centre for wildlife trade (Davies, 2005; Peterson, 2007; Shepherd and Nijman, 2007; Oswell, 2010; Felbab-Brown, 2011; Nijman and Shepherd, 2014, 2015), to assess the trade in pangolins and their parts.

There are three species of pangolin native to Myanmar. In eastern Myanmar two species of pangolin are present, i.e. the Sunda pangolin *Manis javanica* and the Chinese pangolin *M. pentadactyla*, and some 1000 km to the west, the Indian pangolin *M. crassicaudata* can be found. Both the Sunda and the Chinese pangolin are listed as Critically Endangered (Challender et al., 2014a,b) and the Indian pangolin is listed as Endangered (Baillie et al., 2014). All are primarily threatened by over-exploitation.

Pangolins are a totally protected animal under Myanmar's Protection of Wildlife and Wild Plants and Conservation of Natural Areas Law of 1994. Killing, possessing, selling, transporting or transferring (including exporting) totally protected wildlife, or any part thereof, without permission, is punishable with imprisonment for up to seven years and/or a fine of up to MMK 50,000 (USD 8183) (Naing, 2009). In China, pangolins (both native and non-native species) are listed as Class II Protected Wildlife Species under the Wildlife Protection Law; the hunting and trade of pangolins within China are managed by provincial forestry bureau. In 2008 the Chinese government issued a regulation pertaining to the sale of pangolin scales in stock: these scales need to be registered and marked individually, and can only be sold in accredited hospitals, and thus are of little relevance to the trade as observed on the China–Myanmar border, as pangolin products in Mong La are clearly not part of this regulated system. Trading pangolins or their parts is considered a criminal offence in China: penalties depend on the seriousness of the offence and the value of the parts. For instance on offender smuggling up to eight pangolins or parts valued between RMB 100,000 and 200,000 (USD 16,250–32,500) shall be liable to fixed-term imprisonment of not less than five years and concurrently to a fine. Smuggling parts valued over RMB 200,000 is considered an 'especially serious offence' carrying a penalty of life imprisonment or death (Zang, 2009). All species of pangolin are listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), meaning that all international trade is subject to the provisions provided by the Convention. However, since 2000 a zero annual export quota has been established for the four Asian species for specimens removed from the wild and traded for primarily commercial purposes. All range countries of pangolins, including Myanmar and China, are Party to CITES, and in principle the adoption of a zero-quota should have led to a non-existent international trade in Asian pangolins.

The only study thus far about pangolin trade in Myanmar in recent years appears to be Naing (2009), who reported that the Myanmar authorities had made five seizures in 2006 and 2007 (mostly in Mandalay) totalling 233 skins and one live individual. Studies from neighbouring China and India suggest a more prominent role of Myanmar but this has yet to be quantified. Zhou et al. (2014) reported on seizures of pangolins made in China's Yunnan province in the period 2010–2013 (i.e. 2592 kg scales, 259 whole pangolins). The province of Yunnan shares its border with Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam, and an unknown proportion of the pangolins seized in Yunnan may have been derived from Myanmar or may have passed through Myanmar. Mohapatra et al. (2015) recently gave an overview of the pangolin trade in India from the period 2009–2014, again largely based on seizure data, and presented strong evidence of trade links between India and Myanmar and India, Myanmar and China.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study area

Mong La is situated in one of 24 Special Development Zones ('Special Region 4'), designated in 2001 as part of an overall plan to reduce poverty, raise the standard of living, and narrow the gap between urban and rural areas (ADB, 2006). Special Region 4 is controlled by the Sai Leung (Chinese name Lin Min Xiang) and policed by the 3000 strong National Democratic Alliance Army of the Eastern Shan State (Oswell, 2010); the Myanmar central government have limited authority in Mong La. Mong La's position on the border with China's Yunnan Province allows for cross-border trade with China. Starting in June 1989, when Special Region 4 was granted virtual autonomy, the town was developed by Chinese investors and focuses on the entertainment industry, with numerous nightclubs, karaoke lounges, exotic meat restaurants and 24-hour casinos (Davies, 2005; Nijman and Shepherd, 2014); several venues in Mong La offer sex services, as well as gaming and alcohol. A prominent gay establishment with live sex shows at the outskirts of the town (Beyrer, 2001) has closed down. The surrounding countryside has seen an increase in cash crop production (with large stands of rubber and bananas) as to supply the Chinese market. While Mong La is situated within Myanmar its outlook is firmly directed to China. About 80% of the people working and living in the area are Chinese. Chinese (Mandarin/Putonghua) is spoken widely in Mong La, all signs are in Chinese characters, the mobile phone network and electricity providers are Chinese, and the Chinese Yuan Renminbi (RMB), and not the Myanmar Kyat, is the currency of daily use. Local time follows Beijing Standard Time and is 1.5 h ahead of the rest of Myanmar.

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