

The Global Observatory of Transnational Criminal Networks

The illicit pangolin
trade in Africa:
Players, networks
and cases

No. 20

Kimon de Greef
(Authors and Researchers)

Luis Jorge Garay
Salamanca
(Scientific Director)

This research was elaborated through protocols and technologies developed by Vortex
Foundation
(<http://www.scivortex.org>).



Fusion supported this research as preparation for the series "The Traffickers"
(<http://thetraffickers.com>).





The Global Observatory of Transnational Criminal Networks - Research Paper No. 23.
VORTEX Working Papers No. 33

The Illicit Pangolin Trade in Africa: Players, Networks and Cases

© Kimon de Greef 2017

Scientific Director
Luis Jorge Garay

Text, audio and video included in this publication are protected by copyright laws. Reproduction is permitted if the author and the editor are referenced and quoted.

Opinions and ideas expressed by the authors do not compromise or reflect the opinions of Fusion Media Group or Vortex Foundation.

© Vortex Foundation, 2018. Copyright.

First edition, 2018.

Electronic Edition, Bogotá, Colombia

Disclaimer

The facts and the analysis presented herein are sustained in documents and interviews exposed in mass media and judicial records related to the criminal networks analyzed. No primary information uncovering facts has been gathered, which means that only secondary sources were consulted, from legal to media documents. In the case of the names mentioned, quoted or referenced on indictments —with the exception of those specifically mentioned, quoted or referenced in the text as definitively condemned-, the presumption of innocence, in observance of individual rights is always preserved.

The judicial truth is the jurisdiction of the courts, which by law will decide whether the defendants are innocent or guilty.¹ It is stated that belonging to, participating in, being connected to, or appearing on a network, as analyzed herein, does not imply having committed a criminal act or being engaged in a criminal enterprise. It is always possible to belong, participate, be connected, or appear on a network as an agent promoting interests that are socially and institutionally beneficial, or as a result of coercion, among other reasons unrelated to criminal acts committed by the agent.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
1. Pangolin poaching hotspots in Africa.....	8
Cameroon	9
Uganda	9
Zimbabwe.....	10
2. Criminal players and recent cases.....	11
Togo.....	11
Cameroon	12
Uganda.....	15
Conclusion	18
Bibliography.....	20
About the Authors	21
Kimon de Greef	21

Introduction

The pangolin, also known as the scaly anteater, is regarded the most trafficked mammal in the world¹. In recent years, concern has been growing internationally about the illicit trade in African pangolins to the Far East, where pangolin products fetch lucrative prices (Challenger 2011). Pangolin meat is considered a high-end delicacy and status symbol, while pangolin scales are reputed to have a range of medicinal properties, much like rhino horn, in consumer countries like Vietnam and China (Pantel & Anak 2010).

According to Gardner (1946), writing about medicinal consumption in South China, “dried (pangolin) scales are roasted, ashed, cooked in oil, butter, vinegar, boy’s urine, or roasted with earth or oyster-shells, to cure a variety of ills. Amongst these are excessive nervousness and hysterical crying in children, women possessed by devils and ogres, malarial fever and deafness.”

A 2014 report by China’s Public Security Bureau for Forests found that the average price for a kilogram of pangolin scales in China was \$600². Meanwhile, the South East Asian conservation organization Wildlife Alliance has claimed that scales can fetch up to \$3,000 / kg on Asian black-markets, with pangolin meat selling for up to \$300 / kg³.

According to Annamiticus, an international NGO that monitors the international illegal wildlife trade, an estimated 8,125 pangolins were seized globally in 2013⁴. The organization estimates that, in total, a between 117,000 and 234,000 pangolins were traded illegally around the world between January 2011 and December 2013. Due to its illicit nature, however, the trade’s true magnitude is not known.

In Africa, where enforcement is generally weak and borders are porous, there is poor understanding of both the dynamics and scale of the trade, as this report will show. To date there have been no successful prosecutions of major traffickers in Africa, despite a number

¹ IUCN Pangolin Specialist Group. Available in: <http://www.pangolinsg.org/>

² Davies (2014) *'Shocking' scale of pangolin smuggling revealed*. Available in: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/26549963>

³ White (2014) *Animal trade down?* Available in: <http://goo.gl/MhFuQw>

⁴ Annimaticus (2014) *Pangolin Trafficking: Over 8,000 Pangolins Seized in 2013*. Available in: <http://goo.gl/Xue74y>

of large confiscations of pangolin shipments in route to Asia, where consumption is concentrated specially in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Vietnam. It is thus difficult to map out the criminal networks driving the trade. Within these constraints, however, there is evidence connecting certain individuals and institutions to the poaching and illicit export of pangolin. This sheds light on an under-researched phenomenon and provides a base for future monitoring and analysis.

This report offers an overview of what is known about major hotspots, key criminal players, and recent cases related to the poaching and illicit export of African pangolins to Asia.

1. Pangolin poaching hotspots in Africa

There is a long tradition of pangolin use on the African continent, where pangolins continue to be hunted for bushmeat and for use in traditional African medicine. This report is not focused on local patterns of consumptive use, however, it takes into consideration the growing trend of large-scale transnational trafficking from Africa to markets in Asia.

Seizures of both live and dead African pangolins, as well as scales, have taken place in a number of European and Asian countries, destined in known cases for China, Vietnam and Thailand. These shipments originated in 13 African countries: Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, South Africa, Congo, Guinea, Kenya, Nigeria, Angola, and Uganda (data from Challenger & Haywood 2012).

Media reports have also recorded pangolin poaching and export activities in Gabon⁵ and Togo⁶, both situated in West Africa. Given the wide geographic range of the four African pangolin species — which exist across Southern, East, West and Central Africa — it is likely that poaching has occurred or is occurring in other African states as well.

To date, the largest recorded seizures of pangolin products have occurred in route from Uganda, Nigeria, Gabon, and Cameroon. Some of these cases will be discussed in greater detail later in this report. It is worth noting that these seizures do not necessarily indicate particularly high levels of poaching in these four countries, as wildlife trafficking networks extend across the continent and may simply be using certain ports as trans-shipment hubs. To give an example, abalone, a valuable shellfish species found along the South African coast and subject to rampant poaching for consumption in China, is frequently exported via neighboring countries like Swaziland, Mozambique and Lesotho (de Greef 2013).

Nevertheless, it is useful using two of these countries — Uganda, in East Africa, and Cameroon, in West Africa — as starting points for this analysis. These countries were chosen to illustrate that pangolin trafficking now occurs right across the African continent, with ports

⁵ News24 (2014) *Gabon poachers decimate pangolin*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/RNFxZJ>

⁶ Christy, B (2009) *On Trail of Largest African Ivory Seizure in 25 Years, Locating Suspected Kingpin in Vietnam*. Available in: <http://goo.gl/WiLcSc>

on the both coastlines seemingly functioning as export hubs. Pangolin poaching has been recorded in Central Africa as well, including in the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo; however, information on wildlife crime in Central Africa is limited and it has not been possible to draw on academic articles and media reports as in the two other regions.

Cameroon

Cameroon is home to three of Africa's four pangolin species: the giant ground Pangolin (*Smutsia gigantea*), the white-bellied Pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*), and the long-tailed Pangolin (*Uromanis tetradactyla*). Since 2012, there have been 9 separate seizures of pangolin products from Cameroon, making it the most frequent source country on record (data courtesy of the African Pangolin Working Group). In all but two of these cases, the confiscated shipments consisted of scales. Shipments have been routed via Malaysia and Nigeria to China, where the main import hub appears to be Hong Kong. There is evidence that both Cameroonian citizens and resident Chinese nationals are involved in the trade. This will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Uganda

Uganda is home to the white-bellied pangolin (*Phataginus tricuspis*) and the giant ground pangolin (*Smutsia gigantea*). In January 2015, wildlife officials seized more than 700kg of ivory and two tons of pangolin skins at Uganda's main airport, Entebbe⁷. The shipment was en route to Amsterdam. The boxes had been labeled as communications equipment that needed repairs, and had been cleared for export by custom officials.

According to Interpol, Uganda is a key transit country for the illegal ivory trade to Asia⁸. Interpol stated: "Large-scale ivory shipments (from East Africa) typically indicate the

⁷ News24 (2015) *Uganda seizes massive ivory, pangolin haul*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/yAYh4u>

⁸ Interpol (2014) *Elephant Poaching and Ivory Trafficking in East Africa: Assessment for an Effective Law Enforcement Response*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/ReUMFm>

participation of organised crime, with trafficking syndicates operating in multiple countries simultaneously.”

Pangolin products being shipped en masse alongside ivory suggests that these same syndicates are now involved in the pangolin trade, too. Note that this is also the case in Cameroon, as will be discussed shortly.

Zimbabwe

A third country worth noting, for contrast, is Zimbabwe, where there have been few large confiscations but many low-level arrests of poachers in recent years. To illustrate, Zimbabwean officials made 12 arrests, relating to 7 cases, in just 3 months in 2015⁹. The Tikki Hywood Trust, a Zimbabwean conservation NGO, has kept a record of these sorts of arrests going back to the early 2000s¹⁰. There is no published evidence of larger trafficking activities in Zimbabwe to date.

⁹ News24 (2015) *Scaly anteater poachers nabbed in Zimbabwe*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/WUZcy1>

¹⁰ Tikki Hywood Trust. Available in: <http://www.tikkihywoodtrust.org/>

2. Criminal players and recent cases

It has not been possible to find evidence of concluded major criminal cases involving pangolin traffickers in Africa. Darren Pietersen, chairperson of the African Pangolin Working Group, was “unaware of any big cases” when interviewed for this paper (interviewed 23 August). Dutch wildlife trafficking expert Jaap Reijngoud¹¹ was similarly unaware of major criminal cases, despite his familiarity with a number of large confiscations in Europe (interviewed 26 August).

There have nevertheless been a number of large arrests in recent years. Some of these will be discussed in this section.

Togo

A large confiscation of ivory and pangolin scales in Lomé last year led to the arrest of Huu Khao Dinh, a Vietnamese national. It was the largest ivory seizure in 25 years. From an Interpol press release on the incident¹²:

“On 23 and 29 January 2014, a Joint Unit for checking containers in the Autonomous Port of Lomé, one of the departments of the *Office Central de Repression du Trafic Illicite des Drogues et du Blanchiment* (Central Bureau against illicit drug trafficking and money laundering), seized 3.815 tons of ivory, 22.55 kg of pangolin scales and 266 teak logs in containers IPXU3172087 and MSKU7612805 being exported to Vietnam. The ivory and Pangolin scales were hidden under the teak logs, at the back of the containers. The traffickers had managed to transfer the containers to the terminal for shipment. They were intercepted due to the vigilance of the agents controlling the traffic in the port. On the shipping documents, the cargo was declared as cashew nuts.”

In addition to Huu Khao Dinh, two Togolese men, Mohamed Alamou and Manzamesso Walla, were also arrested. Police are still seeking another Vietnamese suspect, Dao Van Bien,

¹¹ REIJNGOUD CONCEPT. Available in: <http://www.reijngoudconcept.net/>

¹² Inerpol (2014) Modus operandi/Hiding place, Togo. Available in: <https://goo.gl/brQZwL>

who runs a major timber import operation in Vietnam. The name of the company is Dat Long Agricultural Produce and Wood Import-Export Company, Ltd.

National Geographic investigative journalist Bryan Christy travelled to Vietnam to meet Van Bien, who remains at large despite an Interpol Red Notice against him. Despite reaching Van Bien on the telephone, Christy was unsuccessful in this quest¹³.

Van Bien has shipped “hundreds” of multi-ton timber containers to Vietnam in the past, according to research by Christy.

A third Vietnamese suspect, Vu Quang Thai, is also still at large after fleeing Togo in January 2014, according to Interpol.

According to Christy, Huu Khao Dinh was due to go on trial in December 2014. No further information about this trial could be found.

In Lomé, Togo has a deep-sea port, which makes it possible to export large shipments of product and thus positions the country as a favorable hub for the illicit wildlife trade in West Africa¹⁴.

In a separate case, Togolese officials arrested two local men, Kouyakoutouli Panawé and Pawilou Abalo, for running an illicit pangolin “trafficking network”, after tracking their operations for more than six months¹⁵. The men were in possession of 198.26 Kg of pangolin scales when they were arrested in Lomé on 6 May 2014. It has not been possible to follow up on this case yet, due to a lack of contact with Togolese authorities.

Cameroon

On June 11th, 2014, Hong Kong Customs officials intercepted an illegal shipment of 2.6 tons of pangolin scales from Cameroon. The scales, packed inside 115 bags on a shipment falsely declared as timber, were routed via Malaysia. An unnamed Malaysian businessman, aged

¹³ Christy, B. (2014) *On Trail of Largest African Ivory Seizure in 25 Years*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/lb1ww0>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ TALF (2014) *Arrest of illicit traffickers of pangolins scales*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/MyurdX>

46, was arrested following the discovery, but was later released on bail, “pending further investigation”¹⁶.

The same businessman was linked to another large confiscation on May 24th, 2014, when 40 bags containing 1 tonne of pangolin scales were discovered inside a shipment from Uganda. The shipment was falsely declared as plastic waste.

Malaysia is a known hub for pangolin trafficking, with the 2009 raid of one Borneo syndicate’s premises leading to the confiscation of detailed notebooks, which revealed that some 22,200 pangolins were killed and 834.4 kg of pangolin scales were supplied to the syndicate between May 2007 and January 2009 (Pantal & Anak 2010). Analyzing the logbooks revealed that Malaysia was being used as an early trans-shipment point in the South East Asia region, with pangolins being shipped on to Thailand, Myanmar and Laos en route to China and Vietnam (see map below).

Anson Wong, arguably the world's most notorious smuggler of endangered species¹⁷, is a Malaysian citizen. He has not been directly linked to pangolin poaching in media reports but has been linked to ivory and rhino horn smuggling from Africa in the past¹⁸. As this report has already revealed, there are existing links between the illicit trade in these products and African pangolin poaching.

In a separate case, the “biggest wildlife trafficker in Cameroon” was arrested in Limbe in August 2013, when Wei Tao, a Chinese national, was arrested with 7 large sacks of pangolin scales. Tao reportedly smuggled the pangolin scales from Douala to Limbe Port for exportation to China through Nigeria. Two Cameroonians, Elvis Theze Njangwe and Harrison Azie, were also arrested, according to the wildlife law enforcement NGO Last Great Ape Organization (LAGA)¹⁹.

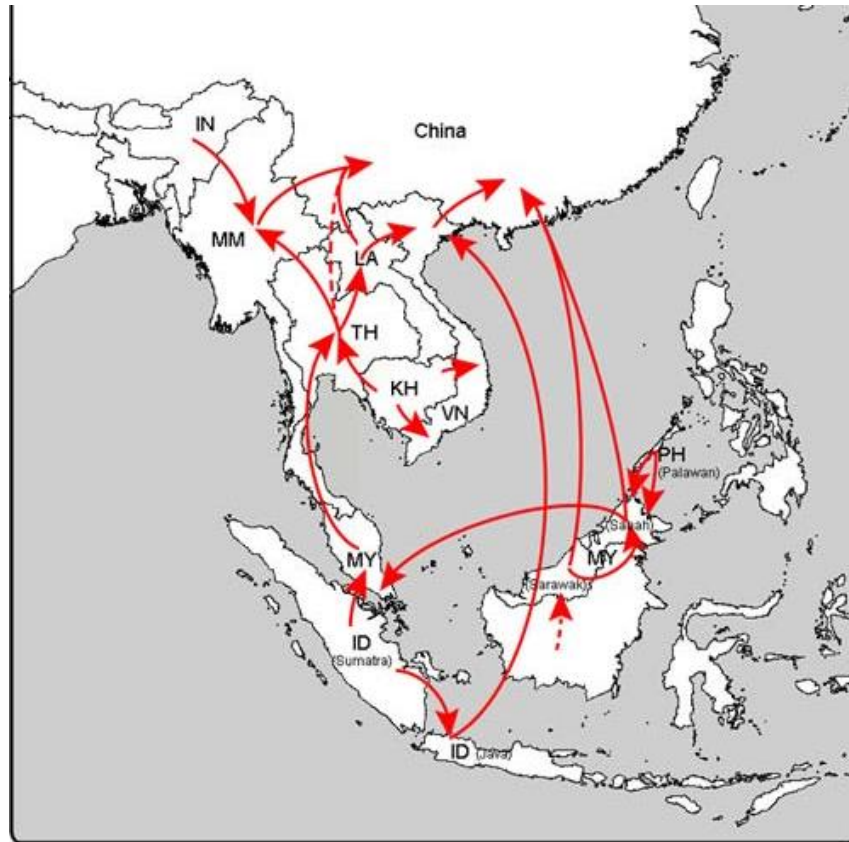
¹⁶Lo, C. (2014) *Pangolin scales worth HK\$17m found hidden in shipments from Africa*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/316wbq>

¹⁷Christy, B. (2010) *The Kingpin: An exposé of the world's most notorious wildlife dealer, his special government friend, and his ambitious new plan*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/WUKp3m>

¹⁸Christy, B. (2010) *The Serpent King*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/JWb50S>

¹⁹LAGA (2013) *August 2013 Report*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/aYyw3L>

Figure 1. Overview of the pangolin trade in Asia



Source: Pantal & Anak (2010), using TRAFFIC seizure information. (Prepared by Sandrine Pantel).

Another Chinese national was arrested at Nsimalen International Airport, in Yaounde, with 4 elephant tusks, 25 worked pieces of ivory and 44kg of giant pangolin scales, while attempting to traffic the products to Hong Kong. The man is allegedly based in Equatorial Guinea and has been linked to Chinese individuals working in a road construction company in Djoum, Cameroon²⁰. This case reveals existing linkages between traffickers working in various West African countries.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

In yet another case, a Cameroonian woman was arrested in April 2014 for the possession of pangolin scales. From the LAGA report²¹:

“The booming illegal trade in giant pangolin scales continued with the arrest of a woman found in possession of 4 bags of the scales. She is a repeat offender who had earlier been arrested twice, the last time she was found with gorilla parts and is known to be trafficking in meat of protected wildlife and to have a ready market with the Chinese. She is known for buying and selling quantities of animal trophies especially giant pangolin scales and crocodiles and has been involved in this trade for years.”

Uganda

In July 2014, the Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA) controversially granted an export permit for 7 tons of pangolin scales to Smico Skin Craft Industries, run by Kampala businessman Smith Ewa Maku. Maku wrote to Andrew Seguya, the executive director of UWA, seeking permission to collect game trophies for export²².

Maku wrote: “I am also requesting you to grant me the collection of old trophies of animals, which have died of natural causes, fires, deforestation, agriculture and human settlement; processes that occur all the time.”

Seguya was later suspended from UWA, on November 21st, 2014, after more than one ton of ivory — mostly confiscated from suspected traffickers — was stolen from a UWA cache.

A series of recent scandals has implicated UWA officials in ivory trafficking, as well as Ugandan police and army officials²³.

Smith Ewa Maku has been linked to the illicit wildlife trade before. In 2006 he was linked to a foiled attempt to export 250 endangered tortoises from Nairobi, having sold an expired CITES permit to a certain Charles Kasamba, who was captured with the shipment²⁴. Maku

²¹ LAGA (2014) *2014 Annual Report*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/aYyw3L>

²² Tenywa, G. (2015) *UWA clears export of sh11b pangolin scales*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/sSUzJY>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Tenywa, G. (2007) *Uganda: Presidential Aide Cited in Scam*. Available in: <http://www.newvision.co.ug/D/8/13/553535>

was never prosecuted for this case; nor was presidential adviser Yekoyadah Nuwagaba, who was linked to the sale as well.

Nuwagaba, in turn, has been linked to the discovery, in 2011, of a Kampala student in possession of 76 hippopotamus teeth, two elephant tusks, and four kilograms of pangolin scales²⁵.

Nuwagaba was not arrested in this case either. He is a former recipient of a Ugandan Presidential Award, issued in 2011²⁶.

Maku, too, has been honored with a Presidential Award, in 2002. A taxidermist, furrier and artisan by trade, Maku worked for the defunct Uganda Wildlife Development Corporation Hunting department in the 1970s²⁷. He also owns Uganda American Pet Exchange, a company that exports wild animals to the USA²⁸. Kampala resident Anderson Maku, presumably a relative, currently lists his own occupation as “Cargo Supervisor at Uganda American Pet Exchange” on social media²⁹.

Smith Ewa Maku was blocked from exporting 280 primates to the USA in 2005, due to irregularities with his CITES permits³⁰.

Returning to the massive 7-ton export permit granted to Maku in 2014, Ugandan environmental NGO Greenwatch sued the UWA for improper conduct, alleging that the export permit was being used as a cover for ongoing illicit activities, and insisting that the permit should be revoked. Their case was dismissed in June 2015, and Maku granted permission to proceed with his export³¹.

There has been no further word on this case.

In July 2012, James Busanani, a resident of Kisoro, West Uganda, was intercepted with 115 kg of pangolin scales, while driving to meet Chinese clients in Kampala³². He told police that he received deliveries of pangolin scales from the Democratic Republic of

²⁵ Habati, M. A. (2012) *2011: Worst year for Uganda's wildlife*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/U01Scl>

²⁶ Office of the President. Republic of Uganda. National Awards. Available in: <https://goo.gl/U01Scl>

²⁷ Tenywa, G. (2015) *UWA clears export of sh11b pangolin scales*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/ilis13>

²⁸ Company record: <https://opencorporates.com/companies/ug/V02290>

²⁹ Anderson Maku. <https://goo.gl/gBLCH6>

³⁰ Tenywa, G. (2005) *UWA blocks export of 280 monkey*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/8xWFvg>

³¹ Okanya, A. (2015) *Court lifts ban on businessman's pangolin scales export license*. Available in: <https://goo.gl/Pukl66>

³² Mayanja, B (2012) Police foil attempt to smuggle Pangolin scales <http://www.newvision.co.ug/news/632887-police-foil-attempt-to-smuggle-pangolin-scales.html>

Congo and throughout Uganda, paying his suppliers 50,000 Ugandan Shillings per kilogram, equivalent at the time to \$20 US. Busanani claimed that he had exported pangolin scales to China many times before.

Conclusion

There is evidence that pangolin trafficking has become entwined with other illicit wildlife trades on the continent, with confiscations of large shipments containing pangolin products alongside ivory. Africa is increasingly seen as a profitable source, destination, or trans-shipment point for organized criminal activities; pangolins appear to have become just another commodity on the thriving black-market. This report has revealed links between pangolin trafficking and the illicit ivory trade in both West and East Africa, with the movement of pangolin products between Africa states, destined ultimately for China.

Asian, including Vietnamese, Malaysian and Chinese entrepreneurs on the continent appear to be providing a conduit for the illicit trade, in some cases buying batches of pangolin meat or, more typically, scales from local middlemen (or middlewomen, as the arrest of a female trafficker in Cameroon illustrates).

Although this is a speculative analysis, and requires more thorough fieldwork, a typical trafficking network might look something like this:

- Local poachers, operating at a low level, as evidenced by arrests in Zimbabwe, for example;
- Local buyers, with existing links to either the trade in live wild animals (e.g. Smith Ewa Maku in Zimbabwe) or to other illicit trades dealing in dead products (e.g. ivory middlemen in Uganda); and
- Asian buyers / exporters living on the African continent, with links to other large export businesses, for example of timber or electronics.
- Asian importers, whether in Vietnam, China or Malaysia, distributing the product on towards end-users once it arrives from Africa.

To understand the networks driving pangolin trafficking, analyses of each tier will be necessary.

This report has also revealed that there are multiple pathways for pangolin products leaving Africa, and thus that coordinated enforcement, both across the continent and with international agencies, is required to reign in the trade.

Of concern is the notable lack of successfully concluded cases against large traffickers. Although there have been multiple arrests in connection with large shipments, few, if any, of these have been processed through the court system to date, based on available evidence. Although attention has been called to Pangolin trafficking, it doesn't appear as a priority for enforcement agencies and judicial systems across Africa.

More worrying yet, there are signs that officials may be complicit in the illicit pangolin trade, with recent events in Uganda, for example, suggesting high-end corruption, or at the very least gross ineptitude on behalf of wildlife authorities. The fact that 7 tons of pangolin scales were legally cleared for export by a known wildlife trafficking offender in Uganda last year is alarming, to say the least.

Bibliography

Challender & Haywood (2012) *African pangolins under increased pressure from poaching and intercontinental trade*. TRAFFIC Bulletin Vol. 24 No. 2.

Gardner (1946) *Chinese Medicine and the Pangolin*. Nature Vol. 141

Pantal & Anak (2010) *A preliminary assessment of Sunda pangolin trade in Sabah*. TRAFFIC South East Asia.

Media reports have been cited in-text, with footnotes.

About the Authors

Kimon de Greef

Kimon de Greef is a freelance writer from Cape Town, south Africa. Among other things he writes about informal economies. He has a Master degree in Conservation Biology. Currently he is working in a book about illicit resource trades in South Africa.