



MEDIA RELEASE

## The trafficking of pangolin scales must be tackled as a transnational organised crime says new report

***Scaling Up: The Rapid Growth in the Industrial Scale Trafficking of Pangolin Scales (2016-2019)* has been published today on the run up to World Pangolin Day**

The Hague, the Netherlands, 10 February 2020

The [Wildlife Justice Commission](#) (WJC) has released today, on the run up to Pangolin Day, the report *Scaling Up: The Rapid Growth in the Trafficking of Pangolin Scales (2016-2019)* (1). The report highlights that this large-scale trafficking, which is driving the species to the brink of extinction, must be addressed as a transnational organised crime and that we must use advanced investigative techniques to effectively tackle it.

The report combines the analysis of reported seizure data between 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2019 and the WJC's own investigative findings to build a comprehensive understanding of the criminal dynamics and trends on the transnational trafficking of pangolin scales. The WJC focuses its investigations and intelligence on the trafficking of scales as it is most vulnerable to organised criminality. The scales are sought as component of traditional Chinese medicine, despite there being no scientific evidence of there being any medicinal value.

The analysis puts the spotlight on the trafficking to identify prolific countries (including the disproportional involvement of Nigeria and Vietnam), smuggling routes, shipping methods and the street value of pangolin scales. The analysis shows a significant and rapid increase in the volume being trafficked, facilitated by organised criminal networks.

An estimated 206.4 tonnes of smuggled pangolin scales were confiscated between 2016-2019 from 52 seizures. Analysis of the seizure data shows an increase in trafficking at unprecedented levels: nearly two-thirds of the tonnage seized (132.1 tonnes) were detected in the last two years (2018-2019). While in 2019, the average weight of a single pangolin scale shipment was 6.2 tonnes, compared with 2.2 tonnes three years earlier.

“We believe that the total figure is only a fraction of the total being trafficked, as it is likely that a significant proportion of smuggling passes undetected,” said Sarah Stoner, WJC Director of Intelligence. “Our investigative approach adds an additional dimension in quantifying the scale of trafficking due to our intelligence concerning the stockpiling of pangolin scales (over 16 tonnes over three years) in Vietnam alone, which is in addition to the detected seizures we have analysed.”

The analysis also examines the relationship between ivory and pangolin scales trafficking and what this means in a crime context. Due to the decrease in the value of ivory, organised criminal networks have switched commodity types and are having to move huge shipments of scales to maintain profit margins. Pangolin scales are worth less per kg than ivory (2).

“Organised crime in wildlife is not species specific: it is about high-value commodities and profits. Networks will shift to a different species if the margins are good. In order to effectively tackle it, organised wildlife crime





must be tackled from a criminal perspective, as well as from its transnational dimension, rather than solely focusing on it at a national level,” said Stoner.

In its report, the WJC observes that the regular use of methodology such controlled deliveries can yield remarkable results if it is used as a tool to bring the organisers of pangolin trafficking to justice.

“The recent year-long investigation in China into the trafficking of pangolin scales and the more recent seizure by Nigerian authorities (3) are great examples of how these transnational wildlife crimes should be investigated and the tangible results it can achieve in meaningfully disrupting organised criminality. Without this approach, pangolins remain in an incredibly vulnerable position that is threatening their existence,” added Stoner.

*The Wildlife Justice Commission operates globally to disrupt and help dismantle organised transnational criminal networks trading in wildlife, timber and fish. We do this by collecting evidence and turning it into accountability.*

**Notes for editor:**

1. (1) Full report is available at the WJC website, [www.wildlifejustice.org](http://www.wildlifejustice.org)
2. (2) The WJC’s *Ivory Snapshot Analysis* published on September 2019, provided a thorough view of trends and changes in the criminal dynamics of the transnational trafficking of ivory, pointing out the increase of detected consignments including ivory weighing over 500 kg, as well as the worrying trend of large volumes of pangolin scales that are increasingly being smuggled in combination with ivory.
3. (3) In December 2019, Chinese authorities made a breakthrough by **confiscating 10.65 tonnes of pangolin scales** smuggled from Nigeria through South Korea to China during a year-long investigation that showed the markings of a controlled delivery. More recently, in January 2020, **Nigerian Customs seized pangolin scales** among other contraband that was smuggled across the Nigerian/Cameroon border. These type of high-level and closely coordinated interventions to disrupt the criminal networks behind the global trafficking of scales are now paramount to protect African pangolins from the ongoing demand for their scales and meat.

