In Africa, the scales are sourced by representatives of the criminal networks from local villages in areas where pangolins are found. Criminal networks use a legal supply of commodities – usually agricultural produce, timber or plastic waste – to conceal the contraband. Integration of the illegal contraband into the legal market takes place through the production of TCM in China. Upon reaching destination, the contraband is distributed to safe locations.

The container is transported to the port and loaded onto the vessel by the carrier. The vessel owner cannot control whether the Bill of Lading matches the contents of the container. Customs authorities do have this power, but they do not inspect every container, instead they rely on targeted inspections. The delivery address might not be formally associated with the declared consignee.

A Bill of Lading is issued to ship the container loaded with the consignment to Asia: Cargo, container, consignor, consignee and carrier details are included in the document. There is no requirement to declare the ownership of the cargo. Depending on the Bill of Lading details, the carrier will deliver the container at the port of discharge – where the consignee or the consignee’s transport company will take over – or to a place of delivery elsewhere in the country.

Legal TCM is distributed legally in China and Southeast Asia. The scales are further smuggled into China in smaller batches (possibly by land).

Supplies chains of pangolin scales

Transnational wildlife trafficking is a complex process and relies on a criminal network and supply chain which includes corrupt officials and workers at key ports, airports and border crossings. The networks also take advantage of intrinsic vulnerabilities in shipping processes, which enable them to hide or disguise the true nature of the shipment. The graphic illustrates the supply chain of pangolin scales being sourced in Africa, ways in which they can be trafficked, and vulnerabilities exploited across multiple geographical boundaries in order to reach the final consumer.