



Like slow-moving pine cones: a pangolin in Kenya captured by an infrared camera. The solitary animals are nocturnal to avoid predators. Photograph: Will Burrard-Lucas/Pangolin Project

Long thought to be extinct in Kenya, giant pangolins are now being helped back from the brink

In 2018, sightings of these solitary, nocturnal animals were recorded in Kenya for the first time in half a century. Now conservationists are working with farmers to create space for them on the land

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Tue 5 Dec 2023 08.00 GMT

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hen Fred Telekwa settled on his farm inside Nyakweri forest, in western Kenya, four years ago, his main worry was how to prevent elephants and buffaloes from destroying his crops. The nearby Maasai Mara game reserve housed a huge amount of roaming wildlife.

“Two or three elephants can clear an acre of cabbages in one night. I had no choice but to put up an electric fence to ward off the animals,” he says.

Fred Telekwa stands near where a female pangolin was killed by his electric fence in the Nyakweri area of western Kenya. Photograph: Edwin Ndeke/The Guardian

But the fence had unintended consequences. One morning in November last year, Telekwa woke up to the sight of a giant ground pangolin that had been electrocuted as she tried to reach a termite mound. She was pregnant. And her death left Telekwa distraught.

“I am one of those people who have supported the conservation of pangolins in this forest. How could one die within my land? I am yet to get over the loss,” he says, stroking the wire with a wooden staff.

“That was the first and last time I ever saw a pangolin. In fact, had she not been electrocuted, chances are I would not have seen her.”

A solitary, nocturnal, scaly-clad animal that looks like a huge, slow-moving pine cone, the endangered giant ground pangolin was believed to be extinct in Kenya.



A team from the Pangolin Project measure and tag a giant ground pangolin at night. The images were taken with an infrared camera to avoid stressing the pangolin as the nocturnal animals are very sensitive to light. Photograph: Will Burrard-Lucas/Pangolin Project

Their rediscovery, through a scattering of sightings in 2018, was cause for cautious celebration among conservationists. Now, the fight is on to ensure this tiny population survives.

Pangolins are highly endangered, and their numbers are declining rapidly. They are considered the world's most trafficked animals – especially to Asian markets, where their meat is seen as a delicacy and their scales are sold as a cure for conditions including hangovers and liver problems, and to help mothers breastfeed.

There is no scientific evidence that pangolin scales have any medicinal value. Nevertheless, the wildlife protection organisation Traffic estimates that in 2021 alone, 23.5 tonnes of pangolins and their body parts were trafficked, and 1 million of the animals have been poached over the past decade.



A local man shows a wood pile that will be lit and covered in turf to produce charcoal in the Nyakweri area. Photograph: Edwin Ndeke/The Guardian

In Kenya, little is known about the giant ground pangolins' population – including how many live in the country's forests. Before 2018, it was assumed that the pangolin was locally extinct, as the last-known sighting was in 1971 in western Kenya. Today, local conservationists estimate there are only between 30 and 80 left in the country.

Since last year, the Pangolin Project has been working with landowners around Nyakweri forest to create space for these animals, a tall order considering that most, like Telekwa, are farmers who are clearing the forest for farming and erecting electric fences to keep away wild animals.



Beryl Makori, operations manager at the Pangolin Project. 'We are losing the forest ecosystem,' she says. Photograph: Edwin Ndeke/The Guardian

Within the forest lie bags of charcoal, freshly felled trees, neatly arranged logs and charcoal kilns – clear indicators of the loss of forest cover, a key habitat for the giant ground pangolin in Kenya.

“There are so many threats that make the giant ground pangolin a priority,” says Beryl Makori, the project manager. “We are losing the forest ecosystem following land demarcation to individual pieces,” she says.

“There is also a measure of poaching because we have found some pangolins without scales after being electrocuted.”

Reducing or stopping deforestation is crucial if the few remaining giant ground pangolins in Kenya are to survive in the wild. Already, about 23 landowners, representing at least 60 households, have come together to form the Nyekweri Kimintet Forest Conservation Trust, covering almost 2,020 hectares (5,000 acres).

Peter Ole Tompoy, 70, heads the conservancy that protects the Nyakweri forest and hopes to persuade more landowners to sign conservancy leases and give the giant pangolins a fighting chance.



Peter Ole Tompoy, chairman of Nyakweri Kimintent conservancy, has been working to save Kenya's pangolins. Photograph: Edwin Ndeke/The Guardian

“Maasai are pastoralists. Previously, we didn't have these land demarcations and would move all over looking for pasture. Now the demarcation has divided the land,” says Tompoy, who, despite his passion for conservation, has never seen a pangolin.

Some landowners say the lack of an alternative livelihood to farming has held them back from fully embracing conservation. Musuak Ole Kakui grows maize on 30 of his 80 acres. “An acre gives me 20 to 25 bags of maize. A bag sells for 5,000 Kenyan shillings [£27] – or 100,000 an acre,” he said. “Conservation may not earn my family a similar amount.”

According to Araluen “Azza” Schunmann, director of the [Pangolin Crisis Fund](#), addressing the needs of local people is crucial to making conservation work. “Community-led conservation is central to saving endangered species and creating coexistence between wildlife and the people living alongside wildlife,” she says. “For wildlife to thrive, the people of the region need to thrive as well.”



Paul Nangida, a 'pangolin guardian' in the community, tracks a pangolin as a ranger stands guard. Photograph: Edwin Ndeke/The Guardian

In the meantime, the Pangolin Project has been raising awareness in the community with a small team of young men making the rounds of homesteads and helping landowners to remove the lowest strands of electric fences, which are the most dangerous threat to the animals.

So far, these “pangolin guardians” have spoken to about 1,800 households, says Claire Okell, founder of the Pangolin Project. “The community will have a sense of ownership if these pangolins are protected within their area.”

Although pangolins have received a lot of attention as the world’s most trafficked mammals, “this knowledge has not translated into a robust conservation drive”, she says.

Now it is a race against time to save the pangolin, says Makori. “I feel we are protecting the last of the pangolins. We will give all it takes for a protected habitat with a viable population.”