



PANGOLIN CRISIS: THE CONSUMERS' RACE AGAINST NATURE

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Abstract: The International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, in 2014, declared all 8 species of the Pangolin as critically endangered and being threatened with extinction. The Pangolin, also known as the 'scaly anteater', is a mammal predominantly found in regions of Asia and Africa and is the world's most illegally trafficked mammal. It is widely poached and illegally traded for its scales and meat. Although the international ban on trade of all kinds of Pangolin parts and products has been effective since 2017, a Reuters report revealed that there has been a 72 per cent rise in seizures of endangered species like the Pangolin.

The paper establishes a strong link between the root cause of the Pangolin crisis and consumerism. A high demand of Pangolin meat and scales, especially in countries like China and Vietnam, has led to this widespread wildlife crime. The larger crisis is the social disease of consumerism, where overconsumption has caused irreparable damage to the environment. People are consuming much more than what they need owing to social, media and economic influences. The repeated and unceasing poaching, trafficking, and consumption of the Pangolin have eventually led to its current status 'threatened with extinction'. The environment has reached tipping-point as it nears the end of capacity. The consumerist culture that is the dominant mindset and reality needs to be replaced with sustainable systems of living. A re-working of mechanisms of consumption must be adopted for the well-being of the planet.

Keywords: pangolin, consumerism, illegal trafficking, wildlife conservation, poaching

THE PLIGHT OF THE PANGOLIN

Pangolin, a scaly ant-eating mammal, is the world's most illegally trafficked animal for its scales and meat in Vietnam, China, and parts of Africa. It is under a serious threat of extinction as all species are listed under Appendix 1¹ of the IUCN Red List (CITES "Appendices" 2017). Poached for its scales used as accessories, or in medicine and for its meat which is a delicacy in East Asian countries, the Pangolin population has dramatically shrunk in the past decade. The large-scale illegal trade and trafficking of live pangolins, as well as pangolin parts is rampant in China and Africa. According to studies done by TRAFFIC, the Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network, every year approximately 20 tonnes of Pangolin products are trafficked internationally. Only in the last decade, around 1,000,000 pangolins have been poached. The report also states that from the year 2010 to 2015, around 1,270 seizure incidents in 67 regions/countries took place (TRAFFIC.org). Although an international ban has been effective on the trade and consumption of all kinds of pangolin parts and/or products since 2016, it has done very little to contain the mass killing of this mammal. Despite lacking scientific evidence, pangolin scales are being used widely in medicines to help treat asthma or cure liver ailments. Almost all of such claims are not backed by any kind of medical evidence or data. The consumer demand for pangolin meat has shot up in China and Vietnam in recent years where it is considered a symbol of wealth and status and is consumed as a delicacy. Owing to this, a study published in the journal Conservation Letters reported that the price of the giant pangolin has risen 5.8 times since the 1990s (Ingram, et al. 2017). From this it is clear that human levels of consumption have gone far beyond the sustainable capacity of nature and as a result, has done irreversible damage to the environment. Consumerism, the social disease that has driven the planet to the edge of its capacity, needs more than just mere constraints in the form of poorly-enforced laws. It needs

to be removed, rejected and replaced with sustainable ways of consumption. This excerpt taken from the essay written by John Kenneth Galbraith in 1958, perfectly poses the real and very current problem of human consumption:

This gargantuan and growing appetite has become the point of departure for all discussions of the resource problem. In face of this vast use, what is happening to our domestic reserves or ores, to our energy sources, to our renewable resources? (Galbraith & Jarrett 1958)

CRISIS OF CONSUMERISM

In the many discussions regarding depleting resources of our planet, there lies a tendency to conveniently put the blame on overpopulation. However, it is overconsumption that is more likely the chief cause of Earth's dismal condition. During the International Conference on Population and Development, held in 1994 in Cairo, delegates from developing nations made claims stating that the level of consumption of one child in the US during his or her lifetime was twenty times more than that of an Indian or African child. They advocated that the real problem of the earth's resources comes from the overconsumption in the developed nations than overpopulation in developing states. However, the argument cannot be concluded by sidelining the problem of the rise in population either. Population, especially poor and uneducated from developing nations, is the prime mechanisms in illegal wildlife trade, poaching and transporting of illegal products. This is because such countries are geographically located in areas most accessible to animals of high demand and most importantly, the people are engaged in such activities for survival than indulgence. The consumers, in fact, are those who possess the economic power to gratify their individual desires - Crème of the society. The motivations for overconsumption of goods can chiefly be attributed to three factors, namely social factors, economic factors and media influence. The same have been found to be prime driving forces in the increase in illegal trafficking of pangolins.

Social factors

Today, the global race toward economic growth is unstoppable. With industrialization, has come greater employability. In addition to better standards of living, there is an increased addiction to spending. The emergence of affluent households, high income families and elite societies, has led to the birth of a social need to perpetually challenge existing thresholds. Social consciousness has moved from comfort and necessity to visibility and status. The desire to be unique has begun popular trends like the 'limited edition'. Well, quite ironically, resources are indeed limited. Moreover, the mindless consumption and hoarding of goods and products to satisfy one's social status has so far only destroyed the scope of sustaining future generations. In a report published in 2017 in the journal of the Society for Conservation Biology called *Conservation Letters*,² highlighted the various motives that drive people to poach pangolins which primarily included “the desire to improve financial well-being or social standing” (Cooney, et al. 2016). In China, the pangolin is considered to be a delicacy for the elite and has become a symbol for status in society. It is served in high-profile luncheons as a sign of respect to superiors. In addition to this, it is also used in several cultural practices and traditions in African as well as East Asian societies. For example, in China the scales of the pangolin are said to contain vital properties to cure several liver ailments and help with lactation in young mothers.

However, the extent to which these claims are true or backed by concrete evidence is unclear. Meanwhile, the presence of criminal organizations that control drug trafficking and illegal wildlife trade in the borders of Vietnam and China, have sufficiently bribed officials on several raids at ports to look the other way. There is a lack of accountability in many such cases along with corruption at institutional levels. Therefore, corruption has become a structural hindrance to the enforcement of anti-poaching laws in these states.

Economic Factors

Despite the glaring evidence of resource depletion, species extinction, pollution, global warming and environmental degradation, there is a hush in the room when the Consumer is summoned. Galbraith in his essay looked into the reasons why there is such a deep silence on the problem of consumption. One of them is economic growth. The common understanding of the industrialists and economists of the West in the 1950s (and even now) was growth being directly proportional to increasing production of consumer goods. Indeed, half a country survives on the benefits and returns of any production sector. This system is completely shielded from challenge for fear of issues like employability, income generation, market competition and trade wars. However, Rachel Carson in her book *Silent Spring* asked the question that had been taboo for years: Is it correct to continue economic expansion at the cost of wild species and habitats? (Carson 2015)

In the journal *Conservation Letters*, a report titled 'Assessing Africa-wide Pangolin exploitation by Scaling Local Data' (2017), evidence has proven that the market demand for pangolins has increased considerably in the past years. The data suggests that there has been an almost 5.8 times increase in the price of the giant pangolin. In addition to this, more shocking results concluded that there has been a 150 per cent rise in the number of pangolins poached in the last 40 years. This indicates how there is a direct response to the demand for pangolins in the market despite a legal ban. The presence of a market with stakeholders on either sides - production and consumption, there is significant incentive for the illegal trafficking to continue for the sake of personal indulgence, feeding the demand and making profits, and keeping the market alive.

Media Influence

Consumerism is driven by strong socially and economically-backed motives which are most often propagated by the media. The web of the internet has eased into the lives of people in every stratum of

society. The kind of reach and impact it has on the minds of consumers is unchallenged. And thus, it is the businessman's favorite tool. From advertisements to celebrity endorsements, there is no limit to the kind of media content a person can consume per day. And so, it is the fastest, easiest and unfortunately (for the environment), the most effective way to influence consumer buying. However, the media can be used in a counter-effective way as well. In the case of the pangolin, the use of media has been put to use for the rejection and discouragement of consumption of pangolin products. Actors like Jackie Chan have voiced out their public disapproval of the atrocities carried out against the mammal which has brought in significant changes in the mindset of people. Moreover, media groups, NGOs, environment organizations and many other platforms have taken to media to condemn the act of pangolin trafficking and are exercising proactive initiatives to create awareness.

CONSUME VS. CONSERVE

The world is plagued by the menace of consumerism. The Oil dispute in Venezuela has led to political and social crises. Whaling in Iceland, Norway, and Japan has defied all possible legal moratoriums to continue mass killings. The lives of millions in Southeast Asian islands are threatened due to climate change that is transforming the landscape of the earth forever. Long gone is the era of peace, prosperity, abundance, and thriving on Earth. Humans have sufficiently ravaged the depths, scaled the heights and scarred the surface of the planet. So what is the solution, or rather, how can this situation be managed? Ramachandra Guha, in his book *How Much should a Person Consume*, has very aptly quoted Helmut Lippelt (a German environmentalist) who strongly vouches for the world to work on remodeling the industrial mechanisms into more ecologically sustainable ways for consumption (Guha 2006). Lippelt comes from the school of thought that believes economic development for the West is directly linked to the exploitation and looting of resources from the Third World. This approach of re-industrialization that is ecologically-conscious has scope for enormous results, provided, it reaches the highest tables of policy-

makers, industrialists, economists, governments, banks, and politicians. In a report given by four international scholars invited by the Dutch Alliance of Sustainable Development in 1992 on the 'Dutch economy and environment', the prime focus was mainly on the people's "addiction to affluence". The report suggested possibilities for the Dutch to put self-constraints on their own society in their levels of consumption and dependency on resources. A conscious effort made by people towards self-correction and exercising restraints in levels of consumption can lead to greater and more effective change. A global social action of such resolve will lead to changes at the political and economic levels where ideas like sharing of wealth, common goods and sustainable consumption can be enforced through public policies.

CONCLUSION

The pangolin is far from saved despite the efforts being taken by international organizations like WWF, CITE, TRAFFIC etc. The illegal trafficking and consumption has only gained momentum as more and more routes for illicit trade are opening up. The only way to a solution is a global effort towards sustainability. This is only possible if individuals exercise responsible and ecological buying. The earth's threshold is fast-approaching and world economies are still focused on making more and more privileged people in lesser spaces. It is time for the international community to come together to find solutions and manage the crisis we have found ourselves in. The fact is - there is no Planet B.

NOTES

1. The Appendix 1 of IUCN Red List provides a detailed report on the about 1200 species, are species that are threatened with extinction and are or may be affected by trade.
2. *Conservation Letters* is a scientific journal publishing empirical and theoretical research with significant implications for the conservation of biological diversity.

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