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DECEMBER 2023 - FEBRUARY 2024

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Saving Uganda's Endangered Pangolins, One at a Time

Part One of Two (Part Two in March 2024 Edition)

By Anne Calcagno

"I formerly worked as a ranger in the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest, protecting the gorillas. I left due to a work injury. I became the Ugandan representative on behalf of the organization Global Rights for Elephants and Rhinos. Perhaps you've heard of the yearly Global March Against Extinction of Elephants and Rhinos? It occurs in over 130 cities in the world – literally from Hong Kong to Washington. While working for them I discovered the high rate at which pangolins were going extinct. I developed presentations to build awareness of them. I began receiving calls about captured pangolins needing rescue." Moses Arineitwe may be a maverick. But one entirely dedicated to pangolins.

A Pangolin on a tree

PHOTO © MOSES ARINEITWE

I land at Uganda's Kihihi airport where experienced tour guide Gordon Kwikiiriza awaits with his safari vehicle. I'll be settling into Gorilla Bluff Lodge in Bwindi before going on safari drives that will exceed my wildest dreams. From the life-changing experience of standing feet away from habituated Mountain gorilla troops in the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, to groggily waking up in the dark to spot lions at dawn in Queen Elizabeth National Park, to sighting a leopard sprinting across the savannah and another lounging majestically in a sausage tree. I encounter the national animals heralded on Ugandan currency: grey crowned cranes and elegant kob antelope. On safari, we will come upon a parade of elephants, baboons carrying babies, black-and-white Colobus and blue monkeys swinging through trees, trotting warthogs, African buffalo flanked by white egrets, and later, in the Kazinga Channel, noisy bloats of submerged hippopotamuses. In Kibale National Park, I spend hours tracking fast-moving chimpanzees. Relating all this to a local, I was challenged, "But have you seen a pangolin?" I research a number of Internet sites and discover, repeatedly, the statement: Pangolins are the least known, and most illegally trafficked mammal in the world."

I am mortified I was not aware.

Uganda is home to three of the four pangolin species found in Africa: The Ground Pangolin, Giant Pangolin, and the White Bellied Pangolin, (also known as the Tree Climbing Pangolin). WildAid estimates that, world wide, over 200,000 pangolin a year are poached. In Uganda, two important Pangolin rescue operations – a community operation in Rotango, and an NGO in Kampala with close ties to the highly respected Tikki Hywood Foundation

Moses Arineitwe

– apply very different conservation philosophies to rescuing this criminally endangered species out of the hands of traffickers.

In this, Part one of a two-part piece on Pangolin rescue, I focus on the Centre in Rotango.

The Pangolin Rescue Centre is a twenty-minute drive north from Bwindi, down a bumpy narrow red clay road. A simple wooden house awaits in a clearing. Inside, a small fund-raising store sells T-Shirts, carved wooden pangolin models, drawings and baskets. Informative posters reveal a creature that looks like a cross between a squat armadillo and a pointy-nosed weasel, its nature described as shy, solitary and largely nocturnal. Founder Moses Arineitwe greets me. Slender and clear-spoken, Moses explains, "Pangolins are so rarely spotted in the wild that its precarious situation lacks enough global mobilization against its extinction. We work diligently with the Ugandan Wildlife Authorities, wishing to be at the forefront of saving it." His operation is community-based, boots on the ground, and very locally connected, but it is not an NGO. Since 2015, this operation has rescued and released 158 pangolins. In 2019, BBC Newsday positively featured Moses' endeavors. Recently, he was the subject of Ellie Stones' conservation documentary "The Pangolin Man." In an area of dire poverty, where animal needs must be tackled in relation to real human needs, Moses has inspired an expanding community of farmers, wildlife lovers, and reformed traffickers to act as unpaid informants for the sake of saving pangolins.

Warmed by the golden afternoon light, I accompany Moses on tour of the grounds. We pass secured outdoor enclosures where pangolin are first treated in isolation.
"Some have been handled carelessly in the wrong hands, they arrive injured or suffering from high stress levels. Delivering them back out

immediately in the wild like that, they might die."

Along the way, hand painted white signs informs me: "Pangolin babies ride on their mother's backs." And, "A pangolin's tongue is as long as its body." But they have no teeth. Moses guides me to the rehabilitation area where healed pangolins readjust to nature – which is when a visitor like me can observe (but not handle) them – before their release into the wild. Different pangolin rescue operations discourage outsider visits, fearing the possible spread off zoonotic diseases. Moses assures me there have been no such cases under his watch. "I believe that when people see them, they are really moved to activate for their protection."
One pangolin peers from an open crate, cautiously sniffing out this environment's new smells. Another is circling the roots of a tree, claws digging madly, head plunged down to extricate delicious termites, its brown scales flexing in delicate synchronicity with its body's twists and turns. Its eyes close intermittently in an expression of what I think is pure bliss, but in fact pangolins must protect their eyes & nostrils from the stings of soldier ants.

Moses points to a tree's crown. High up, hard to spot because it camouflages so perfectly with the trunk's bark, a pangolin clambers up and down, nose and snout investigating choice insects, its long tail wrapping around limbs. The Centre's staff keep an eye on each pangolin.

Wiping his brow, Moses explains, "Their most serious threat comes from poachers. Pangolins are the only mammals wholly covered in scales. Only their soft undersides have sparse fur. Their overlapping scales tighten and curve so it can roll up into a tight, still ball. This is their primary defense, effective against most predators except humans. Like the Rhino's horn, their scales are made from keratin, the same protein that forms human hair and fingernails. They get slaughtered for their scales, which are illegally sought after by Asian dealers, to be ground down into traditional local medicine. How can there be special medical value in harvesting the equivalent of fingernails?"

Child visiting PRC

Walking back to the Centre, anger rises in me over the fate of these inoffensive burrowers who pose no threat to humans. Besides, they work so hard at being extremely efficient agents in controlling the extensive ants and termites of Uganda's ecosystem.

The Pangolin Rescue Centre depends on donations, and, in the world of animal conservation, following an organization's money trail is one of the best ways to discover fund misappropriation. Arineitwe's has never been found guilty of such. "Many people believe that only NGOs are legitimate. But running a non-profit is more expensive than I can afford." He doesn't add what I believe to be true, which is that too few African-run rescue operations are helped to grow, rebuffed as they are from getting essential international funding.

And he has been quite inventive. Because he works closely with reformed poachers, "some of whom it gives me deep pleasure to have hired here, we understand that even they must still make a living to meaningfully sustain themselves

Pangolin Rescue Centre PHOTO © ANNE CALCAGNO

Anne Calcagno with Bwindi Impenetrable National Park porter

and their families." This is why, on the Centre's land, I encounter a bee-keeping and beeswax soap-making, a large vegetable-growing garden, a man-made catfish pond replenished twice-yearly, and a women-led oyster-mushroom cultivation project. To fight any worthy cause, is also to discover all the more that could be done.

I think back to what brought me to Uganda. I was drawn to its strict small-group safari policies and forward-thinking protocols for protecting its rich and rare endangered wildlife. And, in every way, my trip exceeded my expectations. And then, like the best of surprises, I have this life-changing experience of meeting Ugandan Moses Arineitwe.

As dusk falls, tree shadows lengthen, birds flit and call. I imagine pangolins dreaming about nights when they may roam freely again. I ask Moses about the future. He ponders: "I have so many dreams and hopes. We're very grateful donors helped us buy a motorcycle that permits us to procure termite-full clumps of wood to feed the pangolins while they're healing. But we need more, and money for fuel. We have no on-site veterinary care. Vets generously offer me guidance in treating wounded pangolins, using our limited supplies, mostly iodine and basic antibiotics. You can imagine how this is insufficient. But then again we are blessed that we are continually releasing rehabilitated pangolins into strictly protected wilderness parks."

The Bwindi Impenetrable National Park has become essential for release of African white-bellied (or tree-climbing) forest pangolins. Queen Elizabeth National Park is providing instrumental safety for the savannah-loving Giant Ground pangolin and Temminck's Ground pangolin. Moses hopes someday there will be funds enough to radio tag and track released pangolins so as to follow up on their needs and progress. "So little is known about this species, it would help pangolins everywhere."

I think to myself; I've been to both parks witnessing the bountiful heritage of Uganda's wise and eco-conscious wild animal preservation. Yet, little did I know that there, unseen, pangolins are fighting for the very right to their existence.

AeroLink Uganda operates into all safari destinations within Uganda on both scheduled flights and charter service.

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