

MARCH - MAY 2024

ndege

AIRKENYA, AEROLINK UGANDA & REGIONAL AIR INFLIGHT MAGAZINE

NEWS

Murchison:
The Greatest
Waterfall of the Nile

Tambarare:
A New Experience
in an Old Location

**Walking the Serengeti
in the Company of Kings**



BOOK ONLINE

www.airkenya.com
www.regionaltanzania.com
www.aerolinkuganda.com



The best way to fly



Saving Uganda's Endangered Pangolins, One at a Time

Part Two of Two (Part One was in our Dec 2023 Edition)

By Anne Calcagno

www.annecalcano.com

Muzee Pango Rescue
("muzee" means old
man or gentleman in
Luganda)

PHOTO: Rebeca Sandoval

The December 2023 issue of Ndege News highlighted the community-based, non-NGO, work of Moses Arinetwe's Pangolin Rescue Centre in Rugando (not Rotango as was written in the last article). This Part Two, focuses on "The Pangolin Project: Back to the Wild" endeavours of the NGO Biodiversity Alliance, co-founded by Rebeca Sandoval. The Biodiversity Alliance mission integrates work on wildlife conservation, reforestation and restoration of habitats, community initiatives, and education and advocacy campaigns.





Measuring a pangolin. PHOTO: Greg Lavender

Uganda is home to four of the eight threatened pangolin species: the Ground Pangolin, Giant Pangolin, White Bellied or Tree Climbing Pangolin and the recent Uganda re-introduction, the Black Bellied Pangolin. The global habitat of the eight world pangolin species lies across the tropics. All are now on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Pangolins, elusive and nocturnal beings with a penchant for solitary living and burrow-dwelling, are rarely seen in the wild. Surprisingly, these creatures have maintained a form similar to their current one, for an impressive 56 million years. Concerted conservation efforts over decades have allowed us astonishing, close-hand encounters with habituated gorilla, chimpanzee and golden monkey family troops. Lions, leopards, elephants, giraffes, Cape buffalo, hippos, they all attract the safari goers to the Pearl of Africa, but it is high time that we give pangolins, "the least known, most illegally trafficked mammal, in the world," their deserved protection.

WildAid estimates that, worldwide, over 200,000 pangolin a year are poached and killed for their body parts, just as elephant and rhino are. Put another way, Sir David Attenborough, in a BBC Earth special, alerts: "Today, a pangolin will be taken from the wild every five minutes." Why? Primarily for their scales, used in traditional Asian medicines, the tragic misunderstanding being that their scales are made of keratin, the same protein that forms our hair and fingernails. They have no medicinal value. Two important Ugandan pangolin rescue operations work tirelessly to save these long-tongued species from extinction.

When I speak with Rebeca, her four dogs interject with excited barking, a reminder of the delights and demands of inter-species living. They may not know she's an accomplished environmental activist with almost 20 years of experience in development, natural resource management and combatting wildlife crime, but they're certainly enjoying the benefits of sharing her Kampala home base.

From here, she works in close contact with the Uganda Wildlife Authorities to rescue and release trapped pangolin back into the wild, and to close down trafficking supply chains. This past October, Sandoval successfully released two Black Bellied pangolins into Kibale National Park after decades of reported absence across Uganda.

Despite Uganda's admirable forward-thinking, eco-centric accomplishments in wildlife conservation, the country has not yet been able to shed its unfortunate position as transit hub for illegal wildlife trade. An international issue that reflects transcontinental trafficking in a supply-and-demand pull that sends biodiversity ripple effects across the globe.

Of Spanish descent, Rebeca's conservation work has taken her all over the world, working with some of the world's top wildlife conservation and anti-trafficking agencies. She cites Lisa Hywood, founder of the highly-respected Tikki Hywood Foundation in Zimbabwe, and Israeli, Ofir Drori,

founder of the multi-country EAGLE network that has brought over 1,500 arrests, subsequent prosecutions and imprisonments of major wildlife traffickers, as her esteemed mentors. "They taught me early on," she says, "that if you want to crack down on trafficking, you've got to pursue those at the top who control the trail of money."

Rebeca worked undercover on her first pangolin trafficking case in 2017. "I was at a conference," she says, "when I received a tip-off. A Chinese national had set up a pangolin breeding farm in concrete enclosures in her back yard in Kampala. I visited her, portraying myself as a person interested in traditional medicines. She took me out for lunch, she chatted volubly, and then I was shown the pangolins in captivity. It was the first time I saw live pangolin. I had to hold back my tears when she handed me a male who was so terrified and shaking, he urinated uncontrollably." Critical financial support from the Tikki Hywood Foundation enabled UWA to raid and close down the operation and rescue the four



Did you know? A baby is called a pangopup PHOTO: Isaac Kasamani

surviving pangolins, including a pregnant female. They were released to safety in Murchison Falls National Park. This arrest can be seen in a compelling short documentary titled "Back to the Wild", that the THF also funded.

Rebeca and her team, in close

collaboration with UWA, have rescued over 200 pangolins to date. But the disparity between their endangered status and the enormous efforts undertaken to save even one pangolin, is clearly unbalanced. Local farmers are most likely to come upon them unexpectedly. Either they injure or kill them mistaking their long tails for a snake or, misinformed, they



Pangolin Release PHOTO: Alejandro Moreno de Carlos

believe they can sell them for a high sum of money.

“In fact, these captures make the low-level offenders very little money,” Rebeca explains “while putting them at great risk for being jailed, which is a terrible blow to their families and communities.” Which is why the Biodiversity Alliance is deeply committed to community education and outreach throughout Uganda. Rebeca says, “I tell people if you see a pangolin, it’s a blessing not a curse. Say no to trafficking them, just as you would say no to drugs.”

Pangolin do not have prolific birth rates, another factor restricting their population. According to Live Science, African female pangolins have about a five-month gestation period, and give birth to one “pangopup”. The little one rides on its mother’s tail as she forages, remaining dependent on her milk for up to four months.

Sandoval’s voice is tenderly reverent, as she explains, “They each have a different personality, you know. One can be so sweet, another very mischievous, another silly, playful even. And they instinctively understand when they are in safe hands, and cuddle, relaxing.”

In the wild, pangolins perform miracles for their ecosystems. According to savepangolins.org, their insatiable appetite gives them an important role: pest control. Estimates indicate that one adult pangolin can consume more than 70 million insects annually, ants and



Pangolin rescue. PHOTO: Alejandro Moreno de Carlos

termites being particularly delectable; these they snatch with their long agile tongues and sharp purposeful front claws. The faecal matter they leave behind is excellent fertiliser. Rebeca adds, “We like to call them gardeners of nature.”

But their specialised diet and their highly sensitive dependence on



Pangolin drawn by Caleb aged 15 years

specific natural habitats, makes them extremely difficult to keep in captivity, where they experience a high mortality rate. This is why most NGOs, including Rebeca’s, do not allow public interactions. “We understand tourists’ natural curiosity, but it is not in the pangolin’s best interest to have their releases delayed. We raise money to enable the UWA rangers to have the fuel, crates, and a per diem allowance to reintroduce the pangolin into the wild as quickly as possible.”

The best way we can help is by spreading awareness of and supporting these important Ugandan rescue operations. Uganda’s pangolin heroes work tirelessly, for no personal profit other than the belief that these “gardeners of nature” have the right to exist.



AeroLink Uganda flies to major national parks on schedule and charters across East Africa.

CONTACT INFO:
www.biodiversityalliance.org
 biodiversityalliance (Instagram)
rebeca@biodiversityalliance.com