

## China & its Pangolin Protection

### Why in news?

China accorded pangolin the highest level of protection and removed its scales from its list of approved traditional medicines.

### What is China's latest decision?

- The Chinese State Forestry and Grassland Administration had issued a notice upgrading its protection of pangolins.
- It has also banned all commercial trade of the endangered mammal.
- The move came about after the 2020 edition of the “Chinese Pharmacopoeia” excluded traditional medicines made from four species.
- This 2020 edition also listed alternatives sourced from species which are not endangered.

### What does Covid-19 have to do with China's decision?

- Back in February 2020, the reports linking the transmission of the virus to wet markets in Wuhan had emerged.
- So, China banned the consumption of wild animals, including pangolins, in an attempt to limit the risk of diseases being transmitted from animals to humans.
- Before its latest decision, China has removed health insurance cover to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) recipes with pangolin products.
- Also, pangolin meat is considered a delicacy in China and Vietnam.
- Their scales, which are made of keratin are believed to improve lactation, are considered to promote blood circulation, and remove blood stasis.
- These so-called health benefits are so far unproven.
- The mere suspicion of unproven link between pangolins and Covid-19 has increased public discussion on health risks from human-wildlife interactions.
- These discussions have raised awareness of the exploitation of pangolins.

### What makes pangolins the most trafficked animals in the world?

- **Eight species** of pangolins, the scaly insectivorous creatures, are distributed across Asia and Africa.
- They have long been hunted for their meat and scales, which indigenous tribes in central and eastern India are also known to have worn as rings.

- Two of these species are found in 15 states in India, although their numbers are yet to be completely documented.
- The creatures are **strictly nocturnal**, repelling predators by **curling up into scaly spheres** upon being alarmed.
- The same defence mechanism however, makes them slow and easy to catch once spotted.
- They do not occur in large numbers and their **shy nature** makes encounters with humans rare.
- Their alleged health benefits in TCM prompted a booming illicit export of scales from Africa over the past decade.
- Conservation of pangolins received its first shot in the arm when the 2017 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) enforced an international trade ban.

### **Are the animals trafficked from India as well?**

- Law enforcement authorities in India have made seizures of pangolin scales **from 2012 onward**.
- Once the demand for pangolins in China is known, indigenous tribes in India supply it to customers through middlemen in Bhutan and Nepal.
- Once Pangolins are caught, killed and skinned, the exchange of scales typically takes place at Siliguri (West Bengal) or Moreh (Manipur).
- Poachers use only trains and buses to avoid detection, and carry as much as 30 kg of scales at a time.
- **TRAFFIC study 2018** found that 5,772 pangolins had been detected by law enforcement agencies in India between 2009 and 2017.
- The Madhya Pradesh Police's Special Task Force is the leader in tracking pangolin poachers and traffickers.
- It was formed in 2014 specifically to crack down the illicit export of the endangered creatures.
- Given the fluctuating demand for scales, the price ranges between Rs 30,000 and Rs 1 crore for a single animal.

### **How will China's decision impact pangolin trafficking?**

- Some experts say that the immediate impact would be pangolin scales losing their legitimacy in TCM.
- However, some say that the history of the ban of wildlife trade in China is not encouraging.
- There is a continued availability of **tiger bone wine** — believed to have health benefits — despite its ban on tiger products in 1993.
- The price of the **elephant ivory** plummeted by two-thirds after China banned it.

- The same trend would apply to pangolin scales.
- India, where the trade largely remains local, has been registering a decline from before China's ban.
- This decrease is attributed to the border closures, shifts in law enforcement priorities, or decreased reporting on wildlife seizures.
- This decrease may also be credited the decline to the disappearance of public transport due to the national lockdown.

**Source: The Indian Express**

