

Towards Effective Pangolin Conservation in Benin

By Stanislas Zanvo, Deputy Coordinator of the IUFRO Working Party Wildlife Conservation and Management. Dr. Zanvo received an Outstanding Doctoral Research Award at the IUFRO World Congress in June 2024. [news24-4-awards-special.pdf](#)



Pangolins are known as the world's only truly scaly mammal and the most poached mammal, feeding an international illegal trade marked by unprecedented demand from Asia. There are currently eight species of pangolins, four in Africa and four in Asia, all threatened on the IUCN Red List and elevated to the rank of charismatic megafauna in terms of priority species in conservation.

Of the three species of pangolins (white-bellied pangolins, black-bellied pangolins and giant pangolins) present in West Africa, only the white-bellied pangolin is present in Benin, following the local extinction of the giant pangolin. However, this white-bellied pangolin in Benin represents the Dahomey Gap lineage, different from the five other lineages observed throughout the species' range. Their populations in Benin are restricted to patches of natural forests distributed across a highly fragmented landscape, and degraded mainly by agriculture and urbanization. They are also threatened by unprecedented poaching pressure for local animal

protein needs, the use of organs, particularly scales, in traditional medicine, and a regional trade connected to international trafficking networks.

It is in this context that Dr Stanislas Zanvo and the Laboratory of Applied Ecology have been engaged since 2018 in ongoing efforts to conserve the species through a series of scientific studies using a multidisciplinary approach combining genetics, social sciences and ecology to fill the gaps in scientific knowledge, which is crucial for informed management and effective conservation of the species. Dr. Zanvo is also working with the communities surrounding the natural habitats to develop and implement interventions essential for an effective conservation of this species.

The situation of pangolins in Benin, particularly the white-bellied pangolin, highlights the complex interplay of ecological, social, and economic factors that contribute to the decline of this critically important species. Dr. Stanislas Zanvo and the Laboratory of Applied Ecology are addressing these challenges through a multidisciplinary approach, which is crucial for effective conservation. Here are some key points and potential strategies that could further support their efforts:

Dr. Stanislas Zanvo's investigations into the white-bellied and giant pangolins in Benin have provided critical insights into the species' historical and current distributions, as well as the factors driving their decline. His work has also uncovered the complex dynamics of the regional pangolin trade, particularly the Asian diaspora is an important link, inciting local hunters and intermediaries to poach pangolins by offering purchase prices 3 to 8 times higher than those paid by local customers.



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Dr Zanvo and his team (MSc Maurice Foundie Agbimakou and committed local actors) are currently conducting a rescue, rehabilitation and post-release monitoring campaign using telemetry and camera trap surveys in the dense semi-deciduous Lama forest, southern Benin. Dr. Zanvo and his team have already rescued eleven individuals in a 40-day period. These individuals included adult and sub-adult males and females, a baby pangolin and its mother, and a pregnant female. Of these, four vigorous, wound-free individuals were tagged and released in the Lama forest (source forest) at presence stations confirmed by camera traps set up in the canopies for monitoring. The rest of the rescued pangolins (wounded, baby pangolin and her mother) were released in the semi-deciduous forest island of the Zoological Garden at University of Abomey-Calavi, where anthropic pressures and predators are non-existent. These individuals will be released in the next months in the Lama forest when they are healthy.



Baby pangolin and mother rescued in the surrounding village of the Lama forest and released in the Zoological Garden of the University of Abomey-Calavi © Stanislas Zanvo



Rescued, tagged and released individual of the white-bellied pangolin in the Lama forest © Maurice Foundie Agbimakou

Also, at the same period, we identified a total of 41 specimens of white-bellied pangolins in traditional medicine markets in southern Benin. This is an evidence that pangolins are valuable resources for traditional medicine.



Specimens of White-bellied pangolin on stalls in the traditional medicine markets © Stanislas Zanvo

These interventions are evidence of the extent to which pangolins are targeted for poaching, and this calls for a behavioural change on the part of local actors, particularly hunters, whom we have gradually undertaken behaviour campaigns.



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