

Huge Victory for Pangolins in Sabah

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Great news from Sabah, Malaysia! Last month, the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment Sabah announced that the Sunda pangolin, the only pangolin species found in the state, has been upgraded to a 'totally Protected' species in Sabah. The new law listed pangolins in Part 1 Schedule 1 of the Sabah Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1987, meaning it is now forbidden to hunt, consume, possess, or sell pangolins or their parts and offenders could be faced with the maximum penalty upon conviction. Sunda pangolin traffickers in Sabah now face a minimum fine of MYR50,000 to MYR250,000, or a minimum imprisonment term of 1 year to 5 years, or both.

Elixa Parjang, who is the Pangolin Conservation Officer for Danau Girang Field Centre, and also a member of the IUCN SSC Pangolin Specialist Group, welcomed the announcement, stating 'the upgrading of protection status of pangolins is a huge victory for this scaly mammal, which is listed as a Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List'. Previously, pangolins in the state were listed as 'Protected', meaning that hunting with a permit was still allowed, even though the species is reportedly among the most trafficked wildlife in the world.

In 2015 Elixa and her team, consisting of Sabah Wildlife Department and several conservation non-governmental organizations, strived to draft the Cabinet paper on the protection of pangolins in Sabah. Realizing that the pangolin was facing extinction, she and her team felt there was a pressing need to strengthen the law to protect its remaining population. Elixa believed a deterrent sentence should be given to wildlife traffickers not just a 'slap on the wrist', and all wildlife traffickers should be brought to justice by being prosecuted and convicted so that these offenders would think twice before committing any crime.



Elixa Parjang tracking a GPS-tagged pangolin. Elixa Parjang

The first pangolin workshop to be held in Sabah, in 2014, discussed the conservation of pangolins in the state. One of the main aims was to conduct in-depth research on the pangolin population in Sabah to better understand its status. Elixa is currently pursuing a doctorate at Cardiff University and she is based at Kinabatangan, Sabah studying these scaly mammals. The research is funded by Houston Zoo, with additional support from Ocean Park Conservation Foundation and other organizations. Elixa's research is focusing on landscape ecology and the behavioral response of the Sunda pangolin to habitat fragmentation and degradation using a multi-disciplinary approach, including camera trapping, sign surveys, surveys on local knowledge and satellite telemetry. She started her research in 2016, and will finish in 2022. Elixa plans to organize a pangolin workshop and produce a Sunda Pangolin State Action Plan upon completion of the research.

Meanwhile, apart from doing research, Elixa and her education team are also focusing on public education and raising awareness. Up until 2018, more than 500 primary school students from three districts, as well as more than 300 secondary school students learned about pangolins. Elixa is also actively participating in public talks both locally and internationally, working closely with the local media such as newspaper companies and radio stations to highlight the plight of the pangolin in the state.



Elixa Parjang giving a pangolin awareness talk to primary school students. Elixa Parjang

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Archives

- March 2018
- February 2018
- January 2018
- July 2017
- February 2017
- December 2016
- November 2016
- October 2016
- September 2016
- June 2016
- May 2016
- April 2016
- March 2016
- February 2016
- January 2016
- July 2015
- June 2015
- December 2014
- July 2014
- June 2014
- May 2014
- February 2014
- June 2013
- March 2013
- January 2013
- November 2012
- October 2012
- September 2012
- June 2012