

Natural History Note

Some notes on the occurrence and conservation status of *Manis temminckii*, the pangolin, in Maputaland, Kwazulu/Natal

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Smithers (1983) records the pangolin, *Manis temminckii*, as present in northeastern Natal, while Smithers (1986a) describes its distribution as widespread but sparse in the subregion, including northeastern Natal. Rautenbach *et al.* (1980) describe it, in Maputaland, as a rare and retiring animal about which very little is known. They refer to Pringle (1974) for occurrence and he, in turn, cites several local residents who said it was present. Dixon (1964) lists the mammals of Mkuze Game Reserve and comments that there had been no sightings of *M. temminckii* for the last ten years. He records one capture, in 1942, in which the animal was translocated to Hluhluwe Game Reserve. No other confirmed records appear to be known to science and thus the latest known occurrence was probably prior to 1954. In the South African Red Data Book (Mammals) Smithers (1986b) describes the pangolin as vulnerable, due to habitat destruction and susceptibility to pesticides, but states that they are protected in the Reserves of northern Natal.

Pangolin scales are often seen as part of the accoutrements of iSangomas in Maputaland but the origin of the scales is unclear and most such material recently obtained comes from Mozambique or even further north.

As a result of the lack of recent information, combined with its high conservation importance, and use by iSangomas, attempts were made to establish its present distribution and

abundance in Maputaland. Photographs were shown to local residents and many were asked for any information on the species in the area. Most had no knowledge of the animal but the community living east of the Pongolo River, north of the present tar road, knew of the animal which they called *Halagavuma*. One record was established, from the Bhekabantu area in about 1965 when one adult animal was seen at around midday by a herd boy. Friends were called and the animal was beaten to death with sticks and the body left in the veld. Tradition has it that a sighting of the animal will lead to drought and so it is seen as bad luck.

On 14 May 1998, one adult *M. temminckii* entered a homestead in the siThabazini area, just southeast of the Tembe Elephant Park. No one present knew what it was and, as the area was in some turmoil due to the activities of alleged witches, it was beaten to death, partially burnt, and the body eventually given to park staff who identified the animal. Unfortunately the animal was, by this stage, rotten.

The only other possible record obtained was from a conservation officer who reported sighting three animals, an adult and two juveniles, a few kilometres north of Manzengwenya in the Coastal Forest Reserve in the late 1980s. According to Smithers (1983), only one young is born at a time but although identification is easy the

status of this sighting is not clear and there have been no subsequent sightings. The Coastal Forest Reserve is a relatively narrow strip of land to which many people have access to collect resources. There is also a high density of people living outside, and in some areas inside, the reserve and the future of any pangolin which may have been there is, at best, insecure.

There are two large, well-fenced nature reserves in Maputaland which are heavily and routinely patrolled on foot. Ndumo Game Reserve is extensively driven after dark during culling operations, as is Tembe Elephant Park, but to a lesser degree. Conservation staff were queried about sighting pangolin, or their distinctive tracks, but no information was obtained.

It seems likely that pangolin were formerly more widespread in Maputaland but the few remaining are at low densities in isolated areas. It seems unlikely that any remain within the fenced and protected Maputaland reserves. In Tembe Elephant Park, which was fenced in 1983, several other sparsely distributed mammals, such as leopard, spotted hyaena, sidestriped jackal, aardvark and porcupine, were not recorded for several years after fencing, but sightings and tracks of these are now occasionally made. This suggests that populations of these species, within the area fenced, were probably very small, and individuals were secretive. Due to protection, numbers have increased and individuals are now less scared. Pangolin probably occurred until recently in the area of the Tembe Elephant Park, but the last individuals were probably killed before fencing was completed.

At the time of fencing there were 39 homesteads within the area proclaimed for the park, while a large area of similar habitat directly south of the reserve had no surface water and thus almost no human habitation. The latest record was on the northeastern periphery of this area and it seems likely that a small number of pangolin probably persist

within the area south of the Tembe Elephant Park.

Smithers (1986b) suggested, as a conservation measure, that individuals be caught and translocated to reserves in the same area. If there are none presently in the Maputaland reserves this would add a degree of urgency to this measure. Although habitat destruction and pesticides may not be a serious threat to pangolin in Maputaland, the hunting of the animals for medicinal reasons combined to their being killed casually could easily lead to their extinction in the region.

A high conservation priority should be attached to re-establishing breeding nuclei in Tembe Elephant Park and Ndumo Game Reserve.

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