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United States Finds China's Pangolin Trade Undermines Wildlife Treaty

Certification Could Result in Ban on Wildlife Imports From China

WASHINGTON— The U.S. Department of the Interior has [announced](#) that China's failure to halt its trade in endangered pangolins diminishes the effectiveness of an international wildlife treaty. Following the certification, which was published late Friday, President Biden must decide by late October whether to impose a trade embargo against China to prompt its compliance.

Pangolins are the most heavily trafficked mammals in the world. The scaly mammals are consumed in China as a luxury meat, and pangolin scales are used in traditional Chinese medicine. The [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#) bans the international pangolin trade, yet trade continues in China because of legal exemptions and poor enforcement.

"We're delighted the U.S. government is finally pressing China to crack down on its devastating pangolin trade," said Sarah Uhlemann, international program director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Pangolins face imminent extinction, yet the Chinese government continues to promote pangolin scales in the traditional Chinese medicine trade. If we want these oddly adorable creatures to survive, China must act now, and U.S. sanctions could be the wake-up call China needs."

The Interior Department's decision responds to a [2020 petition](#) by conservation organizations requesting China's certification for CITES violations under a U.S. law called the Pelly Amendment. Upon certification, the Pelly Amendment requires the president to decide within 60 days whether to embargo "any product" from that nation to prompt compliance. If the president fails to impose sanctions against a certified nation, then an explanation to Congress is necessary.

"This certification opens a window in which China has an opportunity to respond to global concern about ongoing illegal trade in pangolins to China by closing its domestic markets which continue to fuel rampant exploitation," said Erica Lyman, clinical professor of law at Lewis & Clark Law School. "The failure to shut down the trade, sale and consumption of pangolin scales in China should result in the strongest possible condemnation from the U.S. and the rest of the international community. While China

has taken token steps to address the pangolin crisis since the COVID-19 outbreak, these steps are insufficient. Both the United States and China need to show leadership on the issue and do more to protect pangolins and end the illegal trade.”

Despite CITES’ ban on international pangolin trade, [approximately 600,000 pangolins](#) were illegally traded between 2016 and 2019 alone. Pangolin scales are legally sold in China for use in traditional Chinese medicine, where the scales are marketed to increase blood circulation and lactation. [Research](#) by the Environmental Investigation Agency into the online availability of traditional Chinese medicine products containing pangolin scales in 2022 identified a minimum of 52 products manufactured by Chinese companies.

“EIA has monitored the illegal trade in pangolins for many years and launched a campaign to highlight their plight in 2018,” said James Toone, EIA UK deputy campaign lead (Pangolins). “Demand for pangolin parts and derivatives for use in the traditional Chinese medicine industry is a significant threat to the species. Without action taken to stop the use of pangolins and their derivatives by companies manufacturing medicinal products, pangolins face potential extinction. Reforms in 2022 by the People’s Republic of China to laws designed to regulate the use of pangolins and other endangered species do not go far enough — research from 2023, soon to be published by EIA UK, shows that more than 50 products manufactured by companies and readily available online still contain pangolin derivatives. More needs to be done by the government of China to implement fully the most recent CITES resolution and close its domestic markets that fuel illegal trade in pangolins.”

In 1993 President Clinton used the Pelly process to certify and ban wildlife imports from Taiwan for its rhino trade, which violated CITES. Taiwan promptly closed its domestic rhino market.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

The Global Law Alliance for Animals and the Environment at Lewis & Clark Law School is a champion for wild animals and wild spaces across the globe, working to protect animals and the environment through the development, implementation, and enforcement of international law.

The Environmental Investigation Agency UK (EIA-UK) investigates and campaigns against environmental crime and abuse. Our undercover investigations expose transnational wildlife crime, with a focus on elephants, pangolins and tigers, and forest crimes such as illegal logging and deforestation for cash crops like palm oil. We work to safeguard global marine ecosystems by addressing the threats posed by plastic pollution, bycatch and commercial exploitation of whales, dolphins and porpoises. Finally, we reduce the impact of climate change by campaigning to eliminate powerful refrigerant greenhouse gases, exposing related illicit trade and improving energy

efficiency in the cooling sector.