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# Buying a pangolin is shockingly easy

Online wildlife traders are operating so brazenly that they even sell critically endangered animals such as pangolins. They use local express buses as part of their delivery network, and no thanks to social media, delivery can be made within 24 hours. > See reports on page 4 by The Star's award-winning R.AGE team



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# E-shopping for endangered animals

## Buying protected wildlife from online platforms is as easy as order, pay and pick up

**PETALING JAYA:** Ordered online, deal sealed and pangolin delivered – all within 24 hours.

Undercover journalists from *The Star*'s award-winning R.AGE team recently rescued two critically endangered pangolins, while exposing local wildlife trafficking networks which are driving precious species into extinction.

Buying endangered species from these networks is shockingly easy thanks to their use of social media, and delivery can be made within 24 hours by hiding and transporting the animals using local express buses.

In sting operations to expose the syndicates' modus operandi, R.AGE worked with Wildlife Department (Perhilitan) enforcement officers to set up the purchase of two pangolins, which are known as the world's most trafficked mammal.

This operation is part of R.AGE's latest documentary.

The purchases were made with an online pet trader known as Kejora Pets, which advertises exotic animals such as dusky leaf monkeys and Asian leopard cats as domestic pets on social media.

When R.AGE's undercover journalists approached Kejora Pets to purchase a pangolin as part of its work with the Global Environmental Reporting Collective, one was offered within a week, and another not long after.

Incredibly, the journalists were asked to collect the pangolins at the busy Terminal Bersepadu Selatan transport hub in Kuala Lumpur.

After dropping passengers off at the terminal, buses usually proceed to an open-air depot where drivers park the buses before their next journey and that's where the journalists were asked to collect the pangolins, in the middle of the night.

The first collection was completed without incident, with R.AGE given the honour of naming the pangolin when it was handed over to Perhilitan for tagging and release.

The pangolin, a female, was named Randi.

While ordering the second pangolin, the journalists were able to trace the supply to a home in Kuantan, and followed the bus driver from the Kuantan Sentral Terminal.

Immediately after exiting the terminal, the driver stopped the bus to collect a blue storage box from a car waiting by the road, placing it into the bus' luggage compartment.

The storage box was received by a separate team of R.AGE journalists at the bus depot in KL several hours later.

In both instances, the driver appeared to be familiar with conducting such deliveries, and was aware that he was delivering a live animal, although he did not know the species.




**Precious cargo:** A R.AGE journalist picking up a pangolin which he ordered via an online platform. (Below) A pangolin rescued from an online wildlife trader is handed over to Perhilitan officers.



"Is it a snake? Or a tortoise?" asked the driver when met by undercover journalists during the delivery, and went on to say how much he charges.

"Usually around RM20 for a box, but for live animals like this, RM30."

Even though chat messages and bank account details of the trader were documented, authorities are still unable to act because the trader never personally handles the animals.

"These online sellers act like middlemen," explained Perhilitan Director of Enforcement Dr Pazil Patah.

"They have agents who send the animals directly from the poachers to the customers.

"So even though he advertises it, posts photos of it on social media and all that, the animals are never in his possession.

"Under current laws, the crime is only for possession of wildlife."

R.AGE journalists also infiltrated the Telegram channel of Kejora Pets, where he is known to be most active.

Animals found to be on sale included sun bears, gibbons, and otters.

One post was advertising what appeared to be a black jaguar. Another post showed photos and videos of masked men bottle-feeding a litter of three lion cubs, which Kejora Pets was touting for RM60,000 each.

Critically endangered animals like these and the pangolin are usually the domain of wildlife trafficking syndicates, who smuggle wildlife across borders to countries where they can fetch higher profits.

"These online traders are different from the syndicates," said Dr Pazil.

"Syndicates usually use runners to collect pangolins in large quantities, but these online traders can start advertising even if they have only one animal. They don't have to collect large quantities."

However, Dr Pazil added that it is possible that both syndicates and online traders get their wildlife from the same hunters.

R.AGE was in the process of setting up one more transaction where undercover journalists would receive a live pangolin from the seller in person.

However, a Facebook post complaining about Kejora Pets went viral, after which its Telegram channel became inaccessible. The seller also stopped responding to messages.

This is not the first time Kejora Pets has gone silent. According to a former wildlife trafficking researcher who has been observing the trade since 2014, every time Kejora Pets' social media account received attention from conservationists or the authorities, he simply closes the account and starts another one.

"Although the account name is different, the bank account details are the same, it's the same person," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Trying to catch these online wildlife traders is like trying to catch a shadow," said Elizabeth John, Senior Communications Officer of Traffic.

"Anyone can start a social media account, under any name, not necessarily their own.

"Making the necessary connections that can prove a case in court is really very difficult."

According to Perhilitan and the Ministry of Water, Land and Natural Resources, amendments to the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 have been drafted, which will prohibit advertising and promotion of protected wildlife.

The amendments have already gone through public and stakeholder consultations, and are expected to be tabled in Parliament in the near future.

Until these new laws come into force, these traders remain free to operate.

"People need to understand that it is against the law to keep exotic animals in their homes," said Minister of Land, Water and Natural Resources Dr Xavier Jayakumar, when interviewed about the wildlife trade in Malaysia.

"The only person who can give you permission (to keep exotic animals at home) is myself. I have to sign off on it. Otherwise, it is illegal and you will pay the penalty if caught."

Elizabeth agrees that the customers are as much to blame as the traders.

"The most important thing in the fight against this trade is for people to stop buying," she said. "As long as there is demand, there will always be supply."

For more stories:
**See *StarLifestyle***

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# R.AGE goes undercover to expose pangolin trafficking

**PETALING JAYA:** *The Star*'s R.AGE team has been working to expose the underground world of pangolin trafficking since its exclusive report on Sept 25, which revealed the involvement of a group of corrupt Malaysian policemen in the international pangolin smuggling trade.

The report was part of an international investigation by the Global Environmental Reporting Collective (GERC), which triggered an investigation by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

It revealed not just allegations of the bribing of border officers, but of cases where officers assisted in the smuggling itself.

MACC deputy chief commissioner (operations) Datuk Seri Azam Baki was quoted in a follow-up story calling on those with information on smuggling activities to share it with the commission.

"We have conducted undercover work and exposed corruption practices at our border (in the past), but we have never looked into corruption in wildlife smuggling specifically," he said.

The GERC investigations, which spanned 13 countries with R.AGE as its Malaysian reporting partner, saw similar reports being published in partner countries including Hong Kong and Thailand.

The collective's corresponding report, which was launched simultaneously, revealed an international pangolin trafficking trade fuelled by an overwhelming demand from China.

This demand has driven the animal to the brink of extinction in countries as far away as India, Indonesia and Cameroon. Demand is also building up at home.

*The Star*'s report on Nov 30 also revealed that traders are openly promoting illegal wildlife products online, including pangolin, tiger and elephant parts – all of which are protected under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010.

They are also listed on Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, meaning any commercial trade of these animals and their body parts is illegal.