China & its Pangolin Protection

Why in news?

China accorded pangolin the highest level of protection and removed its scales from its list of approved traditional medicines.

What is China's latest decision?

- The Chinese State Forestry and Grassland Administration had issued a notice upgrading its protection of pangolins.
- It has also banned all commercial trade of the endangered mammal.
- The move came about after the 2020 edition of the "Chinese Pharmacopoeia" excluded traditional medicines made from four species.
- This 2020 edition also listed alternatives sourced from species which are not endangered.

What does Covid-19 have to do with China's decision?

- Back in February 2020, the reports linking the transmission of the virus to wet markets in Wuhan had emerged.
- So, China banned the consumption of wild animals, including pangolins, in an attempt to limit the risk of diseases being transmitted from animals to humans.
- Before its latest decision, China has removed health insurance cover to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) recipes with pangolin products.
- Also, pangolin meat is considered a delicacy in China and Vietnam.
- Their scales, which are made of keratin are believed to improve lactation, are considered to promote blood circulation, and remove blood stasis.
- These so-called health benefits are so far unproven.
- The mere suspicion of unproven link between pangolins and Covid-19 has increased public discussion on health risks from human-wildlife interactions.
- These discussions have raised awareness of the exploitation of pangolins.

What makes pangolins the most trafficked animals in the world?

- **Eight species** of pangolins, the scaly insectivorous creatures, are distributed across Asia and Africa.
- They have long been hunted for their meat and scales, which indigenous tribes in central and eastern India are also known to have worn as rings.

- Two of these species are found in 15 states in India, although their numbers are yet to be completely documented.
- The creatures are **strictly nocturnal**, repelling predators by **curling up into scaly spheres** upon being alarmed.
- The same defence mechanism however, makes them slow and easy to catch once spotted.
- They do not occur in large numbers and their **shy nature** makes encounters with humans rare.
- Their alleged health benefits in TCM prompted a booming illicit export of scales from Africa over the past decade.
- Conservation of pangolins received its first shot in the arm when the 2017 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) enforced an international trade ban.

Are the animals trafficked from India as well?

- Law enforcement authorities in India have made seizures of pangolin scales **from 2012 onward**.
- Once the demand for pangolins in China is known, indigenous tribes in India supply it to customers through middlemen in Bhutan and Nepal.
- Once Pangolins are caught, killed and skinned, the exchange of scales typically takes place at Siliguri (West Bengal) or Moreh (Manipur).
- Poachers use only trains and buses to avoid detection, and carry as much as 30 kg of scales at a time.
- **TRAFFIC study 2018** found that 5,772 pangolins had been detected by law enforcement agencies in India between 2009 and 2017.
- The Madhya Pradesh Police's Special Task Force is the leader in tracking pangolin poachers and traffickers.
- It was formed in 2014 specifically to crack down the illicit export of the endangered creatures.
- Given the fluctuating demand for scales, the price ranges between Rs 30,000 and Rs 1 crore for a single animal.

How will China's decision impact pangolin trafficking?

- Some experts say that the immediate impact would be pangolin scales losing their legitimacy in TCM.
- However, some say that the history of the ban of wildlife trade in China is not encouraging.
- There is a continued availability of **tiger bone wine** — believed to have health benefits — despite its ban on tiger products in 1993.
- The price of the **elephant ivory** plummeted by two-thirds after China banned it.

- The same trend would apply to pangolin scales.
- India, where the trade largely remains local, has been registering a decline from before China’s ban.
- This decrease is attributed to the border closures, shifts in law enforcement priorities, or decreased reporting on wildlife seizures.
- This decrease may also be credited the decline to the disappearance of public transport due to the national lockdown.

Source: The Indian Express

