

Small NGOs and Agenda-Setting in Global Conservation Governance: The Case of Pangolin Conservation

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Abstract

The study of global environmental governance suggests that agenda-setting power is concentrated in a handful of high-profile, leading nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The recent rise of interest in pangolin conservation constitutes a deviant case in this theoretical tradition. In order to explain the puzzle, I introduce a new theory of small NGO influence and illustrate the mechanisms through the case study of pangolin conservation. Based on in-depth interviews with conservation NGOs, I show how small NGOs raised the salience of pangolin trafficking in global conservation governance by appealing to the shared values of the people who are highly interested in conservation. Moreover, the targeting of traditional Chinese medicine as the driver of pangolin extinction, while unintentionally, helped raise the salience of pangolin trafficking by leveraging the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in the Global North. Finally, small NGOs were able to use their expertise to guide leading NGOs and state officials in rule-making processes. The findings offer a corrective to the hierarchical view of civil society, calling for more careful evaluations of small NGOs in global conservation governance.

Despite the ongoing catastrophic decline of biodiversity (Ceballos et al. 2015), many threatened species continue to suffer from the lack of conservation efforts. To raise a few examples, the proposal to grant the highest protection status to the saiga, a critically endangered antelope in the Eurasia region, was rejected at the Conference of Parties (COP) of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 2019. The Bramble Cay Melomys, a family of rodent in the Great Barrier Reef, was declared extinct by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2016 without receiving much publicity. A columnist for the *Guardian* wrote, "Perhaps not as charismatic as some endangered species, nevertheless this rodent ... should be

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getting as much attention as the panda, if not more.”¹ Clearly, the threat of extinction by itself cannot explain why some issues receive conservation efforts.

In this context, the conservation of pangolins (scaly anteaters) is a rare achievement for global conservation advocacy. The pangolin, a dog-sized mammal with brown scales, was an esoteric species even among conservationists before 2008. However, growing concerns for pangolin conservation eventually resulted in a universal ban on the trade of all pangolin species under the CITES in 2016. For many, the pangolin is not a “good-looking” animal. A British tabloid newspaper, *Daily Mail*, writes, “[The pangolin] will never win a beauty contest.”² Despite its lack of representation in popular culture, the pangolin became a major global conservation issue. Today, the pangolin is supposedly British prince William’s favorite animal. How did this happen in the issue area of wildlife and biodiversity conservation, where charismatic megafauna like pandas, elephants, and whales occupy much of our attention?

Why some species receive global support while others remain neglected is a problem of *agenda-setting*. Agenda-setting is a political process by which actors attempt to direct public attention to particular problems (Stone 1989). In an increasingly complex structure of global governance (Raustiala and Victor 2004), agenda-setting plays an important role by providing a focal point for international cooperation and contention. NGOs have been an integral part of environmental agenda-setting (Betsill and Corell 2008). However, existing research on NGO agenda-setting has focused overwhelmingly on the role of high-profile, “leading” NGOs, such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace (Luxon and Wong 2017; Stroup and Wong 2018). This trend is consistent across different issue areas in global governance. From arms control to human rights governance, leading NGOs are often seen as agenda setters, causing a “band-wagoning effect” among advocacy organizations, while small NGOs are understood merely as “followers” of leading NGOs (Bob 2011; Carpenter 2011; Murdie 2014).

The case of pangolin conservation is a deviant case in this theoretical tradition (George and Bennett 2005). “Leading” NGOs, such as WWF and The Nature Conservancy (TNC), were followers rather than leaders of agenda-setting. In the early stage of pangolin conservation advocacy, WWF’s role was primarily concerned with the provision of support for local initiatives. In 2018, WWF launched its own program to monitor online sales of threatened species, including pangolins. However, this initiative came well after CITES listed pangolins in Appendix I, the highest protection status under the treaty. Similarly, TNC and WildAid launched an antitrafficking campaign in 2016 after the CITES ban. Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth were not involved in pangolin conservation until very recently. In short, leading NGOs played a supportive role, but they had never been central players until concerns for pangolin conservation were legitimated at the global level.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jun/15/bramble-cay-melomys-hedgehog-extinction-connection-with-nature>, last accessed July 19, 2021.
2. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7985429/The-pangolin-blamed-spreading-coronavirus-critically-endangered.html>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

It was small NGOs—low-profile organizations with narrow issue foci—that set a new agenda in global conservation governance. Contrary to the common assumption in the study of advocacy networks (Carpenter 2014; Keck and Sikkink 1998), the influence of small NGOs was not about their connection with leading NGOs. Instead, I argue that the agenda-setting power of small NGOs is based on their ability to target a narrow subset of the public that is genuinely interested in wildlife conservation. This subset of the public is called the *issue public* in the public opinion literature (Henderson 2014; Hutchings 2003; Krosnick 1990). Although most members of the public do not pay close attention to politics (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992), members of the conservation issue public pay intense attention to issues and politics of conservation. My case study offers an initial probe into this new explanation. It illustrates that pangolin advocacy by small NGOs successfully appealed to the values shared among the conservation issue public in the Global North, which then legitimated concerns for pangolin trafficking in CITES-related meetings.

Below, I review the literature of environmental governance and NGO agenda-setting to identify the need to theorize the influence of small NGOs. I then define small NGOs by situating them in the broader NGO population and explain how small NGOs might exercise influence in ways that are different from leading NGOs. Finally, I provide an empirical illustration through the single-case study of pangolin conservation. The implication is important: the study of global environmental governance may have overestimated the agenda-setting power of leading NGOs at the expense of entrepreneurial efforts by small NGOs.

Literature Review

Research on agenda-setting in environmental governance and elsewhere has highlighted the importance of ideas. Although the salience of a particular issue tends to rise and fall over time due to the nature of public opinions (Downs 1972; Jones and Baumgartner 2005), some issues persist in the public agenda. In fact, the public salience of environmental issues has continuously grown despite Downs' (1972, 32) prediction that "the intensity of public interest in environmental improvement must inexorably decline." While the obvious impact of environmental degradation on human lives might seem to explain the growing salience of environmental issues, the scale of harm does not necessarily explain why some issues become more salient than others. For example, public opinion research finds that the salience of air pollution does not correspond to actual air quality (Ader 1995). As Stone (1989, 282) puts it, "our understanding of real situations is always mediated by ideas; those ideas in turn are created, changed, and fought over in politics."

Empirical research on transnational relations has featured NGOs as "entrepreneurs" of new ideas (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Nadelmann 1990). Those entrepreneurial NGOs persuade the elites and the public to consider

seriously certain environmental issues (Busby 2010). A substantial literature focuses on the framing strategies of NGOs. A successful framing strategy depends on how ideas find some fit with the dominant social structure (Bernstein 2002). By invoking certain values or norms shared among the public, NGOs capture the attention of target groups that would otherwise be uninterested in environmental actions. For example, Epstein (2008) argues that antiwhaling activists in the 1970s leveraged the Cold War discourse to legitimate their concern for whaling. Similarly, framing plays an important role in explaining political outcomes, such as the expansion of NGO networks and the willingness of states to ratify environmental agreements (Allan and Hadden 2017; Busby 2010).

Another line of research has focused on the attributes of NGOs. Although NGOs are sometimes treated as a monolithic category of “civil society,” recent research demonstrates a variation in NGOs in terms of social and economic resources. Stroup and Wong (2017) show that a handful of leading NGOs, such as WWF, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth, enjoy high levels of social recognition, while others struggle to receive any attention. Scholars argue that such social recognition manifests as agenda-setting power (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2014). Balboa (2018) shows that the strength of leading conservation NGOs is their ability to influence policy agendas at the global level, while they may not be effective at implementation at the local level. Wapner (1995) argues that Greenpeace, one of the most visible NGOs in the world, raised the profile of antiwhaling activism through radical media stunts.

However, empirical research on NGO agenda-setting has relied overwhelmingly on the observation of leading NGOs despite the growing number of low-profile, small NGOs participating in global environmental governance (Bush and Hadden 2019; Hadden 2015). Although there are anecdotes of successful small NGO advocacy, small NGOs do not play a significant role in theoretical arguments. For example, the beginning of antiwhaling discourse can be traced back to a small NGO named Project Jonah (Epstein 2008), but academic research tended to focus on the media stunts by Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Bondaroff 2014; Wapner 1995). In other words, the lack of agenda-setting power on the part of small NGOs is often an assumption rather than an empirical claim. Given that recent research highlights the limitations of leading NGOs (Balboa 2018; Hadden 2015; Stroup and Wong 2017), the omission of small NGOs is highly problematic. In order to better understand the role of small NGOs in global environmental governance, we need a theory of small NGO influence.

Theory of Small NGO Influence

Defining Small NGOs

Although the study of transnational advocacy networks assumes that small NGOs are “followers” (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2014; Murdie 2014), recent

research on NGOs shows that small NGOs do not simply bandwagon for credit claiming (Bush and Hadden 2019). I introduce a conceptual framework that situates small NGOs within the broader NGO population based on two dimensions: *specialization* and *organizational scale*. First, *specialization* here refers to the breadth of issue foci. Specialization is a concept developed in the study of organizational ecology. Organizational ecologists argue that small organizations can fend off market domination by large organizations by focusing on particular issues (i.e., niche) (Carroll 1985). For example, small craft brewers survive in a market dominated by big corporations like Anheiser-Busch and Miller Brewing (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000). In the study of NGOs, Bush and Hadden (2019) suggest that sector concentration may encourage the founding of specialist NGOs (e.g., Pandas International) rather than generalist NGOs (e.g., WWF).

Second, *organizational scale* refers to the level of *visibility* of an organization. In the study of advocacy NGOs, organizational scale is typically measured by social concepts, such as authority, legitimacy, and network centrality, which are then used to explain why NGOs can be influential or not (Balboa 2018; Carpenter 2014; Stroup and Wong 2017). While these concepts should also correlate with economic indicators, such as revenue and expenditure, they are rarely used because of poor data availability. I use the concept of visibility here in order to separate organizational scale from behavioral implications attached to concepts like authority and legitimacy. Generally speaking, the distribution of visibility among NGOs is highly unequal. Stroup and Wong (2018) find that, among tens of thousands of international NGOs, only fourteen enjoy high levels of recognition from multiple audiences, while the vast majority of NGOs receive none.

Table 1 summarizes my argument. The upper row indicates leading NGOs, such as Greenpeace and WWF, which are widely known among the public. The upper right category denotes a special case of leading NGOs, where specialist NGOs have high visibility, such as case of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. The lower left corner denotes the conventional assumption about small NGOs as followers (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2014; Murdie 2014). Follower NGOs can act opportunistically thanks to generalist issue foci. However, the study of organizational ecology suggests that many small NGOs have narrow issue foci in order to survive in the advocacy market (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2019). Thus, the term

Table 1
Definition of Small NGOs

<i>Visibility</i>	<i>Issue Foci</i>	
	<i>Generalist</i>	<i>Specialist</i>
High	Leading NGOs	Leading NGOs (very few)
Low	Follower NGOs	<i>Small NGOs</i>

small NGOs here has a very specific meaning: *low-profile organizations with specialist issue foci*.

Theory of Small NGO Influence

I argue that small NGOs are able to influence the agenda of global conservation governance because their campaigns can target the subset of the public that is interested in conservation. The point of departure for my theory is a focus on the *demand* for advocacy information. In the public opinion literature, it is well established that most members of the public are inattentive to politics (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). This does not mean, however, that individuals are uninterested in any issue. As Converse (1964, 245) puts it, “different controversies excite different people to the point of real opinion formation.” In this intellectual tradition, groups of people who are interested in particular issues are called *issue publics* (Krosnick 1990). Members of an issue public are different from the rest of the public in that they are knowledgeable and motivated to acquire new information in issue areas of their interest (Henderson 2014). Important to agenda setting, issue public members are more likely to express their opinions and be mobilized for their “own” issue than the rest of the public (Hestres 2014).

Intense attention paid by the issue public helps ensure the accountability of political elites, even when most of the public does not pay careful attention to politics (Hutchings 2003). While the concept of the issue public originated from the study of domestic politics, it may extend to global governance for two reasons. First, national delegates are ultimately responsible for the consequences of international meetings, as states must sponsor and vote on proposals submitted at international organizations (IOs), including CITES. As two-level game theory suggests (Putnam 1988), national delegates are held accountable by domestic audiences, and the issue public in particular, for the outcome of international meetings. Second, personal curiosity toward particular issues is not contained by national borders. With the rise of cross-border communications, scholars note that transnational publics are indeed emerging in issue areas like human rights and environmental protection while rejecting the presence of the global public as a whole (Crack 2008; Grant and Keohane 2005). Thus, while the conservation issue public may be substantially outnumbered by those who are not interested in conservation, it is a primary source of public discourse that constitutes the global conservation agenda.

Krosnick (1990) raises three factors that motivate curiosity among issue public members: self-interests, group identities, and core values. In the context of northern conservation advocacy, self-interests are idiosyncratic, as most individuals in the Global North do not have direct material interests in threatened species. By contrast, social identities and core values among pro-environment individuals are well documented in the literature on environmental attitudes (Manfredo et al. 2009; Uyeki and Holland 2000). As the genuine curiosity

toward conservation is indeed motivated by social identities and core values, campaigns that tap into such normative aspects are likely to resonate with issue public members. For example, in the study of antiwhaling campaigns, Epstein (2008) argues that antiwhaling activists appealed to the values of capitalism and democracy by leveraging the images of Soviet whalers during the Cold War.

I suggest that there are two reasons why small NGOs have an advantage over leading NGOs in affecting the agenda of conservation governance. First, small NGOs can target the issue public alone, as they do not require high visibility for organizational survival. In other words, if someone supports a small conservation NGO, she is likely to be a member of the conservation issue public. Small NGOs are thus able to frame their causes in ways that resonate with the identities and values of the issue public. By contrast, leading NGOs must appeal to diverse groups of people, such as corporations and governments, in order to maintain their organizational scale (Stroup and Wong 2017). As a result, leading NGOs cannot be entrepreneurial but must focus on salient issues in order to avoid the risk of alienating existing supporters. Counterintuitively, although leading NGOs have superior visibility, the inattentiveness of non-issue public members mitigates the disparity between leading and small NGOs in terms of agenda-setting power.

Second, specialization can increase the credibility of small NGOs through costly commitments and expertise. Although early research emphasized NGOs as principled actors (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Nadelmann 1990), recent research shows that principles alone do not guarantee credibility (Gourevitch et al. 2012; Prakash and Gugerty 2010). In order to ensure credibility, leading NGOs to use various accountability platforms (e.g., Accountability Now!) (Gugerty and Prakash 2010). However, small NGOs typically cannot afford them because of the high administrative costs associated with these additional accountability mechanisms (Stroup and Wong 2017). Instead, small NGOs tie their hands on certain issues in order to signal their unwavering commitment, in the same way that state leaders use domestic audiences for costly commitments (Fearon 1997). Having an inflexible agenda risks organizational survival in a changing environment (Minkoff and Powell 2006), but this very cost makes a commitment credible. Such a costly commitment over time develops expertise, which in turn allows small NGOs to have power over larger NGOs and policy makers and guides them into certain courses of action.

Case Selection and Methodology

My empirical research focuses on the case of pangolin conservation to achieve two objectives. First, pangolin conservation is a deviant case in light of extant theoretical expectations (George and Bennett 2005). Existing research asserts that small NGOs free-ride on leading NGOs' advocacy achievements (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2014; Murdie 2014). For example, Keck and Sikkink (1998, 134) depict WWF's acknowledgment of tropical deforestation as a pivotal

moment for the conservation of the Brazilian Amazon. More explicitly, Allan (2020) argues that gender- and justice-based activism became popular at climate summits because leading NGOs adopted such climate frames. In empirical research, small NGOs may be mentioned in passing (if at all), but much of the substantive focus still remains on states, IOs, and leading NGOs, which are characterized as influential actors (Busby 2010; Hadden and Bush 2020; Jinnah 2014; Stroup and Wong 2018).³ By contrast, I show that small NGOs took initiative in raising awareness of pangolin conservation at the global level. My case study illustrates two ways in which small NGOs targeted the conservation issue public in the Global North. First, small NGOs emphasized the magnitude of pangolin trafficking, appealing to the values of issue public members. Second, pangolin campaigns targeted the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) community as a primary driver of pangolin consumption, which overlapped with the rise of anti-Chinese attitudes in the Global North.

Second, pangolin conservation illustrates the political consequence of small NGO agenda-setting. My case study shows how small NGOs leveraged growing concerns for pangolins in order to list all pangolin species in CITES' Appendix I, the highest protection status under CITES. Although CITES was established to protect endangered species in 1975, listing decisions have always been political (Epstein 2006; Gehring and Ruffing 2008). Among many threatened species, only those that receive political interest are discussed at CITES. The issue of pangolin trafficking had received very little attention before 2008. As the salience of pangolin trafficking increased, however, small NGOs used their expertise to offer policy recommendations to leading NGOs and national delegates at CITES-related meetings.

My case study adopts semistructured interviews, as the activities of small NGOs are by definition difficult to observe from publicly available sources (see Appendix A to this article for interview methods). I also reviewed primary and secondary sources to corroborate interview data and to trace the development of pangolin advocacy at the global level. Finally, I measured the issue salience of pangolins among the public as the outcome of interest. Instead of focusing on what is discussed at CITES, I used issue salience to capture the notion of agenda-setting as a continual process. As Betsill and Corell (2008, 193) point out, agenda-setting is "an ongoing process rather than a distinct stage of policy making that ends once negotiation begins." By observing changes in issue salience, my case study traces the gradual growth of concerns for pangolin trafficking in global conservation governance rather than treating the agenda as a binary outcome (i.e., whether or not pangolin conservation is on the "agenda").

Operationally, I used the count of newspaper articles as an indicator of issue salience. News coverage offers a fine-grained measure that matches the

3. Exceptionally, Hadden (2015) provides rich data on small NGOs mobilized for climate change summits. In the discussion of agenda-setting (1988–1994), however, Greenpeace and WWF are featured.

concept of agenda-setting as a process. Moreover, the count of newspapers is generally consistent with social media indicators. Harrington et al. (2018) find similar trends in the social and editorial media coverage of pangolins, except that temporary spikes were more dramatic in social media coverage. The scope of newspapers collected is global, including all English-language newspapers stored in the ProQuest database between 1998 and 2017.⁴

Pangolin Conservation Advocacy

Background

The pangolin is a dog-sized mammal and has eight subspecies ranging across Asia and Africa. All pangolin species share common traits; they are nocturnal, slow moving, and covered with brown scales. Because of these unique characteristics, pangolins have been consumed by humans for many centuries. One of the major uses of pangolins is TCM. The TCM community believes that pangolin scales have a variety of medical effects, such as improving blood circulation, curing clotting, and even healing cancer (Aisher 2016). With the growth of the Chinese economy, the consumption of pangolin scales has increased dramatically, posing a serious threat to wild pangolin populations. Another major use is as bushmeat (wildlife meat), which is consumed mainly in West and Central Africa (Boakye et al. 2015). As Africa's population is expected to increase significantly over the next decades, pangolin consumption in the region could grow further.

When CITES came into effect in 1975, all pangolin species were listed in either Appendix II or III along with many other species based on scientific evidence. However, listing decisions quickly became so political that some aggrieved states threatened to leave CITES altogether (Gehring and Ruffing 2008). CITES uses three appendices to categorize species based on the levels of trade restrictions. Appendix I *bans* the trade of listed species, while Appendix II *restricts* the trade through quotas (including zero quotas). Appendix III requires exporters to obtain permits from the country of origin. CITES does not regulate the domestic consumption of protected species. However, the impacts of appendices are not limited to the regulation of wildlife trade. Because listings in Appendix I or II (but not III) require a two-thirds majority vote by the Parties, listing has a normative effect on all Parties involved in CITES (Epstein 2006). In 2019, for example, Kenya and Israel proposed to list the mammoth, an extinct species, in Appendix II in an attempt to reinforce the norms against elephant poaching.

Asian pangolins received zero quotas in 2000 when Nepal's proposal to list in Appendix I was objected to by China, Japan, the European Union, Switzerland,

4. The ProQuest database includes more than 660 titles. See <https://tls.search.proquest.com/titlelist/jsp/list/tlsSingle.jsp?productId=10000247>, last accessed July 19, 2021, for specific titles included in the database.

and even TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade monitoring organization. Although Appendix I would have had similar regulatory effects to zero quotas, Appendix I listing was blocked for its greater normative impact. Ironically, illegal pangolin trade persisted due to the lack of awareness about pangolin trafficking at the global level. Although TRAFFIC was publishing reports on pangolin trafficking, these had received very little attention (Interview 1021). As TRAFFIC publishes many reports on wildlife trade, reports on pangolin trafficking did not stand out. Moreover, the IUCN's *Red List*, the world's most authoritative source for the endangeredness of species, rated all pangolin species as "Least Concern" until 2008. The lack of awareness about pangolin trafficking meant that agenda-setting work was needed.

"Leading" NGOs Did Not Lead

Existing research on advocacy networks posits that leading NGOs play a critical role in agenda-setting (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2014; Hadden and Bush 2020). In the case of pangolin conservation, however, leading NGOs did not launch pangolin conservation campaigns until the issue was legitimated under CITES. For example, TNC, one of the largest conservation NGOs, partnered with WildAid to campaign against pangolin consumption in China in 2016,⁵ but by then, the inclusion of pangolins in Appendix I had been proposed within CITES.

As leading NGOs must appeal to diverse social groups to maintain their organizational scale (Stroup and Wong 2017), they were not able to focus on the issue of pangolin trafficking, an issue that is relatively less known among the mass public. For example, WWF Japan explained its campaign's focus on tigers:

It's true that we intentionally disseminate more information on tigers since it is a relatively easy way to direct public attention to broader environmental problems. But it would be incorrect to say that we do not care about other species. Honestly, we just don't have enough resources. Generally, information dissemination about environmental problems requires a fair amount of expertise and knowledge, but not many people have them. (Interview 1061, translated)

In 2018, WWF partnered with TRAFFIC and the International Fund for Animal Welfare to launch their own campaign called the Coalition to End Wildlife Trafficking Online. In this initiative, WWF collaborated with big corporations, such as Google, Microsoft, and eBay, to monitor online sales of threatened species, including pangolins.⁶ However, the campaign was not an

5. <https://wildaid.org/jackie-chan-fights-for-pangolins/>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

6. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/coalition-to-end-wildlife-trafficking-online>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

attempt at agenda-setting; instead, it focused on the implementation of the CITES bans. In fact, the campaign does not focus on pangolins alone but includes the “usual names,” such as elephants, rhinos, and tigers, to ensure buy-in from non-issue public members.

The Beginning of Global Pangolin Advocacy

Instead of “leading” NGOs, the first movers in pangolin conservation advocacy were small NGOs—low-profile organizations dedicated to pangolin conservation. At the early stage of pangolin advocacy, the lack of issue salience motivated conservationists to organize a specialist group for pangolins. In the United States, two conservationists started a group called Save Pangolins in 2008. The founders of Save Pangolins had been working on pangolin conservation in their respective organizations on a voluntary basis, but they realized that a coordinated effort was necessary to raise awareness of pangolins (Interview 1031). While maintaining their jobs, they decided to formalize their efforts to advocate for pangolins. One interviewee reflected on his experience:

In 2007, 2008, there was hardly any information on pangolins available, and very few organizations doing conservation work about pangolins. So one of the first things that we did was to build our website, savepangolins.org. And at the time it was the only website dedicated to pangolins. (Interview 1030)

Another effort emerged in the United Kingdom. An Oxford-trained conservation biologist became interested in pangolins during his field trip to South Africa. After working with conservationists in Southeast Asia (2006–2009), he realized that there was no leadership to organize pangolin conservation efforts globally (Interview 1022). In 2012, he reached out to a British conservation activist and established Pangolin Specialist Group (PSG) under the Species Survival Commission (SSC) of the IUCN.⁷ While the SSC is affiliated with the IUCN, it is a volunteer-based network and does not pay members directly. The start of this group had no agenda-setting effect since there were more than 140 Specialist Groups under the IUCN SSC at the time.⁸

To be sure, local initiatives were taking place. In Southeast Asia, the Carnivore and Pangolins Conservation Program (CPCP) was founded in 1995. CPCP was the first local organization to specialize in pangolin conservation. However, its programs were largely limited to training patrol groups in Vietnamese national parks and educating Vietnamese citizens about the plight

7. Technically, SSC PSG was “reactivated” since it was first established in 1996. However, it had been inactive due to the lack of interest in pangolin conservation until 2012. The leadership of PSG is entirely different from the predecessor.

8. <https://www.iucn.org/commissions/ssc-groups>, last accessed August 10, 2021.

of pangolins in local forests. Efforts to internationalize the problem of pangolin trafficking were rare, as Vietnam was, and to a large extent still is, a major source of pangolin consumption. As the founder of PSG pointed out, “there was a growing awareness of the threats that the species was facing, but there was no concerted leadership to try and solve this problem” (Interview 1022).

In South Africa, conservationists formed an organization called African Pangolin Working Group (APWG) in 2011. APWG wanted to bring together conservationists interested in pangolins in the African region. The group started as a network of researchers rather than activists, so their programs tended to focus on wildlife rescue and education. Today, APWG is involved with international advocacy for pangolin trafficking, but at the time, their programs were limited to local areas.

Once PSG was established, those scattered efforts began to connect with one another. The founders of Save Pangolins were invited to serve as vice-chairs of PSG, and so were the founders of CPCP and APWG. They joined SSC PSG on a voluntary basis. Although each organization’s capacity to reach out to the public was limited, the network of these small NGOs played a key role in expanding global efforts for pangolin conservation.

Appealing to the Issue Public

The small NGOs discussed above are centered on technical expertise in that most members are professionally trained as conservation biologists. They are experts of the biological aspects of pangolins, but the plight of pangolins must be put in an accessible language in order to raise public interest. Even for the issue public, raw information about pangolins, such as scientific reports and trafficking data, is too much to consume just for curiosity’s sake; they are still dependent on the supply of information (Hestres 2014; Hutchings 2003). While the issue public is not directly observable in this case study, the supporters of small NGOs, such as PGS and Save Pangolins, are located primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom. We also know their characteristics from previous research on wildlife attitudes. Manfredi et al. (2009) find that individuals who deeply care about wildlife tend to support the value of mutualism in which animals are treated as a human-like existence rather than a food source. Consistent with Inglehart’s (1997) postmodern values, this value system is underpinned by high levels of education, income, and urbanization. In social psychology, they are referred to as people from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies (Henrich et al. 2010).

Given the WEIRD-ness of the conservation issue public, two factors explain the success of small NGOs in pangolin advocacy. First, the leadership of PSG created a catchphrase, “the world’s most trafficked animal,” which emphasized the scale of harm inflicted upon pangolins. This framing was a conscious effort to make pangolins relatable to humans, appealing to the

mutualism held among the issue public. An interviewee discussed the process of deciding the marketing strategy for pangolin advocacy:

We know pangolins are primarily nocturnal, but we're not going to sell them as a species or raise the profile of the species if we keep them as nocturnal which inevitably do less well than species you can see during the day. We need some simple photos of pangolins in daylight so people can see them. ... I specifically remember being on the phone with him [PSG affiliate] when I was doing my PhD and we were thinking about figures we could use to come up with some taglines to market the species. (Interview 1020)

In essence, PSG sought support from the issue public by creating relatable images of pangolins. The catchphrase successfully cultivated interest in pangolin conservation. Shortly after SSC adopted this catchphrase, the British newspaper the *Independent* adopted the catchphrase and published an article featuring pangolin trafficking.⁹ Many news outlets, including CNN and the *New York Times*, thereafter used the catchphrase when they reported on the issue of pangolin trafficking.

Second, the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in the Global North coincided with the period of pangolin advocacy campaigns. As Figure 1 shows, unfavorable attitudes toward China among the public generally increased from 2002 to 2018 across all G7 countries.¹⁰ This structural condition helped small NGOs spread the message of TCM being the main driver of pangolin trafficking. To be sure, small NGOs did not *intentionally* exploit the anti-Chinese sentiment in the Global North or the issue public, but existing research documents implicit racial bias in conservation advocacy that tends to blame people of color (Neumann 2004). With an emphasis on “exotic” practices among Asian consumers, the pangolin advocacy was, whilst unintentionally, able to tap into the stereotype of “Asian super consumers,” a stereotype often held among Western conservation communities (Margulies et al. 2019). The targeting of TCM thus emphasizes the difference in values between Asian consumers and the conservation issue public. For example, many conservationists were outraged by the World Health Organization’s (WHO) listing of TCM in its official catalog of medicines. They criticized the listing as “an egregious lapse in evidence-based thinking and practice,” revealing the fundamental disagreement in what is acceptable as scientific data.¹¹

This strategy may not have been possible for leading NGOs operating in multiple countries, including China. For example, when TNC and WildAid launched a demand reduction campaign for pangolins in 2016, they had to revise the content of their Chinese-language ad upon the request of the Chinese

9. <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/the-plight-of-the-pangolin-one-of-the-planets-most-extraordinary-and-intelligent-animals-is-being-8876471.html>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

10. Conversely, favorable attitudes toward China declined over time (Appendix B).

11. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-world-health-organization-gives-the-nod-to-traditional-chinese-medicine-bad-idea/>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

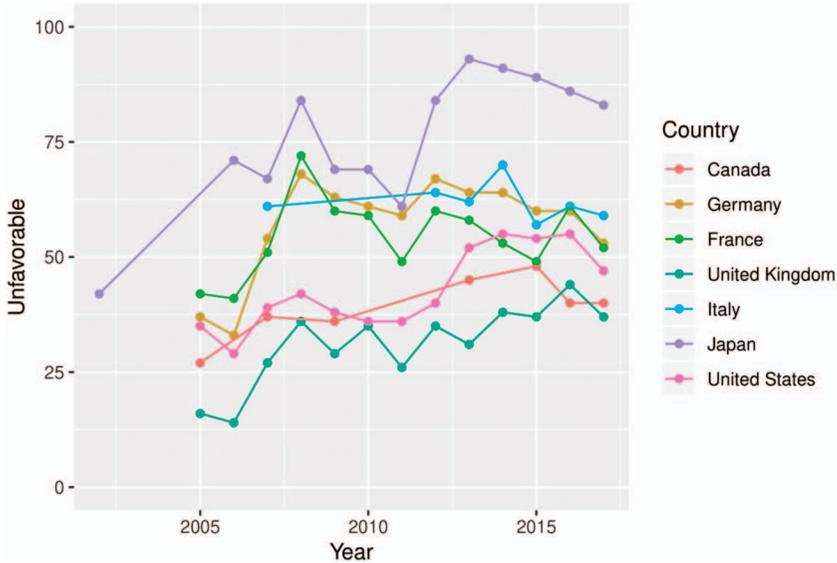


Figure 1
Public Attitudes Toward China in G7 Countries

From Pew Research Center (2019).

government. An interviewee mentioned, “Originally the ad said ‘don’t buy pangolin scales.’ We were forced to change it to ‘don’t buy illegal pangolin scales’” (Interview 1043). For the Chinese government, the problem is not the demand created by the TCM community but illegal trade. By contrast, small NGOs operating primarily in the Global North did not have to face such challenges.

Small NGOs targeted the TCM community from the very beginning of issue emergence. In 2009, Save Pangolins wrote, “There is high demand for nearly all of their body parts, principally from China” in describing the threats posed to pangolins.¹² Scientific publications, too, referred to TCM as the main driver of pangolin consumption. Challender et al. (2015, 249) argue that pangolin trade “is of serious concern to policymakers at present as a result of rising demand for traditional Asian medicine.” ZSL, another key player in the pangolin conservation network, also emphasized the practices of TCM as a threat to the pangolin population. Their first article on pangolin trafficking in 2013 mentioned, “Hunting for illegal international trade takes place, predominantly in Asia, where the meat of the animals is consumed and their scales used in traditional medicines.”¹³ Although ZSL did not entirely ignore pangolin

12. <https://web.archive.org/web/20090712124742/https://www.savepangolins.org/threats>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

13. <https://www.zsl.org/conservation/news/rescued-pangolins-released-with-support-from-zsl>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

consumption in the African bushmeat, it did report on the use of pangolins in TCM more frequently.

As a result, pangolin-related discourse became increasingly focused on TCM. Over time, the issue salience of pangolins increased significantly thanks to the activism (Figure 2). More importantly, however, the association between pangolins and TCM in newspaper articles became clear, while bushmeat remained as a relatively low-profile issue. Figure 3 shows the ratio of pangolin-related articles that include “China AND medicine” or “bushmeat” against all pangolin-related articles between 1998 and 2017. Note that this bifurcation became clear *after* 2008—the period when organized advocacy for pangolin conservation began to pick up in the Global North. To be sure, the trend may be a reflection of objective conditions in pangolin trade where China is the primary source of demand. However, the magnitude of local consumption in Africa is not negligible and is expected to grow further (Interview 1028). One field researcher noted that, in West Africa, “people, they usually hunt pangolins, and the bushmeat is eaten locally,” despite the ban on pangolin hunting (Interview 1051). Another field researcher also mentioned, “Lots of species like gorilla, chimpanzee, and elephant, that people know a lot about, and they try to avoid them because they know that it is illegal to eat them, but for pangolin, I think there’s not enough education and awareness” (Interview 1071).

Moreover, objective conditions rarely offer a sufficient explanation in agenda-setting (Stone 1989). Many species are in fact threatened by growing wildlife consumption in China, but not all of them became salient conservation

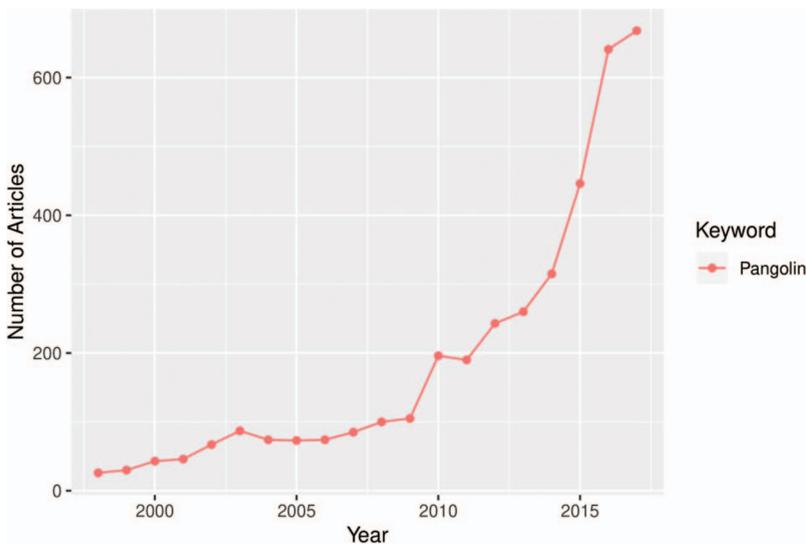


Figure 2
Number of Newspaper Articles That Include Pangolin (1998–2017)

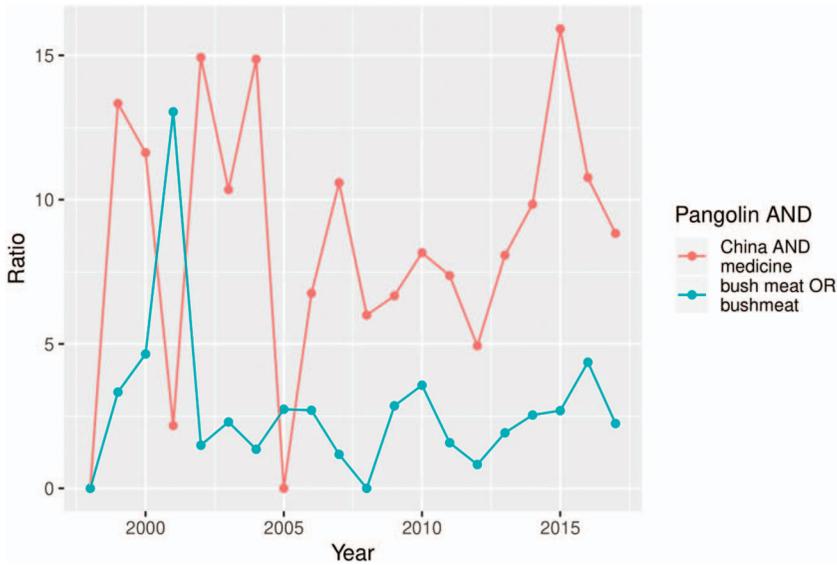


Figure 3
Ratio (%) of Pangolin-Related Articles: TCM Versus Bushmeat

The legend describes the queries used to retrieve newspaper articles from the ProQuest database. Note that the ratio is zero in 1998 because there was no publication with either keyword.

issues. For example, the saiga antelope has been threatened by growing Chinese consumption but has not received as much attention as pangolins despite its greater urgency for conservation based on IUCN's *Red List*. The crucial difference is the lack of organized advocacy for the saiga among the northern issue public. To date, Saiga Conservation Alliance has been the only NGO specialized in saiga conservation. It operates primarily in Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Russia, and Uzbekistan (the saiga's range states) instead of the Global North. There is a specialist group under IUCN's species survival commission, but it focuses on endangered antelope as a whole, rather than on saiga specifically, and groups together several geographically distant species. In short, unlike pangolins, saiga conservation advocacy does not target the northern issue public.

Toward International Policy Change

Increasing issue salience legitimated concerns for pangolin trafficking at CITES, which in turn allowed small NGOs to exercise their influence via expert knowledge. Although the issue salience of pangolin trafficking was still substantially smaller than megafauna, some issue public members were aware of pangolins by 2012. For example, one of the resolutions at COP 16 (2013) mentioned pangolins for the first since 2000: "The Secretariat is concerned about the number of media reports related to large-scale seizures of pangolins that came to its

attention and will continue to monitor the situation" (CITES 2013). One interviewee also noted, "That [resolution including the pangolin] for me is a small but crucial moment" (Interview 1024). In the following year, the CITES Pangolin Working Group, which consists of both state and NGO members, was established to collect information about pangolins and draft resolutions for the Secretariat.

In 2015, in light of growing awareness of pangolin trafficking, NGOs, the United States, and twenty-nine pangolin range states held the Range State Meeting in Vietnam.¹⁴ The meeting showed how the expertise of small NGOs allowed them to act as credible information providers at international meetings. During the three-day meeting, experts from small NGOs, such as Save Vietnam's Wildlife (formerly CPCP), APWG, and PSG, provided technical advice to state officials. In particular, scientists from Save Vietnam's Wildlife and PSG had independent time slots to present their findings on pangolin conservation. Reflecting on the meeting, an interviewee from PSG noted, "We were there really just as providers of technical and scientific information and data. And that's very much our role when we contribute to CITES as well" (Interview 1025).

A few leading NGOs also participated in the meeting, but their influence was mitigated by the relative lack of expertise. Unlike some of the small NGOs, representatives of leading NGOs, such as Natural Resources Defense Council and WWF Vietnam, did not receive independent presentation slots. Instead, they were simply participants of working group meetings. For example, an interviewee from Save Pangolins mentioned, "We consult with some of the larger international NGOs ... on issues with regards to how to deal with pangolins in captivity" (Interview 1032). The role of leading NGOs was more focused on the provision of logistic and organizational support for the meeting (Interview 1026).

In sum, the growing salience of pangolin trafficking gave small NGOs the opportunity to influence international policy with their expertise. The salience of pangolin conservation helped small NGOs in two ways. First, it legitimated small NGOs' claim that they needed more attention and resources for pangolin conservation. During the COP 17, the lack of awareness of pangolin trafficking was repeatedly pointed out (CITES 2016). Although advocates for pangolin conservation emphasized the "lack" of awareness, it is this emerging issue salience that legitimated their demand for further support. Second, issue salience signaled that pangolin conservation is becoming an attractive cause to advocate for risk-averse actors, including corporations and leading NGOs. In 2015, for example, Google Doodle featured the pangolin to celebrate Earth Day (April 22). In the following year, COP 17 passed the resolution to include all pangolin species in Appendix I based on the recommendations of the Range States Meeting, in which small NGOs acted as pangolin specialists.

14. <https://www.fws.gov/international/pdf/first-pangolin-range-states-meeting-report-8-3-2015.pdf>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

Conclusions

To date, much of the research on agenda-setting in global environmental governance has focused on the role of leading NGOs. Small NGOs may have been mentioned in passing, but they were never at the center of theoretical or empirical investigation. In this article, I have argued that small NGOs—low-profile organizations with narrow issue foci—play an important role in agenda-setting in global conservation governance. Empirically, I have used a case study of pangolin conservation to illustrate how small NGOs appealed to the values of the conservation issue public. Moreover, implicit racial bias well documented in conservation advocacy helped raise the issue salience of pangolin trafficking in the Global North. Additional comparative research with other endangered species, such as saiga antelope, would further strengthen my argument.

Although existing research has not considered small NGOs as an important actor in global environmental governance, it has provided scattered references to their influence. In the 1970s, small NGOs initiated antiwhaling activism by leveraging the Cold War narrative (Epstein 2008, 140). More recently, small NGOs frustrated by the failure of mainstream environmentalism adopted a justice framing for climate change and successfully expanded the coalition of NGOs (Allan and Hadden 2017; Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2019; Hadden 2015). Similarly, antimicrobead activism was initiated by small NGOs, such as the 5 Gyres Institute and the Dutch Plastic Soup Foundation, framing microbeads as “toxic, pointless and circling back onto dinner plates” (Dauvergne 2018, 585). My article sheds new light on those empirical cases, interpreting that the smallness of first-mover NGOs enabled such framing strategies to be possible and even to succeed.

More generally, my theoretical framework generates testable implications about successful advocacy. While existing research has offered rich insights into what kinds of frames worked in a given context, it does not give us many tools to predict successful framing a priori. By identifying the characteristics of the relevant issue public, my theoretical framework allows us to think about how NGOs and other stakeholders can most effectively influence public interest in particular environmental problems. For example, when conservation NGOs run campaigns in the local areas of conservation, in many cases, the issue public is neither Western nor high income. In the context of local pangolin conservation, we might expect that the sustainable use of pangolins better appeals to the issue public rather than the current antitrafficking frame. Again, small NGOs may have an advantage here because shifting a frame is not an easy task for leading NGOs (Stroup and Wong 2017). The “local” pangolin campaign by TNC and WildAid, for example, sought to reach out to both global and local audiences by featuring Jackie Chen, a celebrity well known in both China and the West, and publishing the videos in both languages.¹⁵

15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0i9HjbdcTM> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9X4FhWFmRo>, last accessed July 19, 2021.

Finally, my article calls for a fair evaluation of small NGOs to encourage entrepreneurship and accountability in global conservation governance. There are serious environmental issues that leading NGOs simply neglect. Critics argue that WWF's support for palm oil masks criminal activities tied to some of the palm oil industries (Huismann 2014). Others noted that TNC failed to criticize oil industries when a massive amount of oil spilled in the Gulf of Mexico (Hari 2010). More recently, researchers warn that cryptocurrency mining is environmentally harmful because of the large amount of electricity required for mining computation (Masanet et al. 2019; Mora et al. 2018).¹⁶ Leading environmental NGOs have been quiet on this issue so far; Greenpeace even accepted donations via bitcoin until May 2021.¹⁷ By contrast, small NGOs are not constrained by the status quo bias, and so they have a more transformative potential in their advocacy agendas. With an appropriate framework to analyze the influence of small NGOs, we can better understand the limits and opportunities for global environmental advocacy.

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16. Although the exact scale of CO₂ emissions is debated, no source rejects an increasing amount of emission. Some estimate that bitcoin mining consumes as much electricity as Australia's total electricity consumption.
17. <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/greenpeace-now-accepting-bitcoin-donations/>, last accessed: July 19, 2021.

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Appendix A: Interview Data

I asked a set of questions at the beginning of each interview and proceeded to open-ended questions about specific activities and programs. As small NGOs may not be formally registered as charities, I began with online searches for pangolin-related NGOs to recruit the initial set of interviewees. I then expanded my contacts through their suggestions and introductions. The interviewees were initially contacted via email to arrange an in-person or online meeting. A total of twelve interviewees were recruited from ten NGOs (see Table A-1 for data used in this article). The length of a meeting ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, and NGOs were represented by the employees who had in-depth knowledge about their conservation programs. I also interviewed them multiple times when follow-up questions were necessary. I stopped recruitment when the interviewees provided similar stories.

Table A-1
ID and Names of NGOs/Programs

ID	Name
1020	PSG
1021	PSG-Save Pangolins
1022	PSG
1024	PSG
1025	PSG
1026	PSG
1028	PSG
1030	Save Pangolins
1031	Save Pangolins
1032	Save Pangolins
1043	WildAid
1051	Mentor-Pop (Field)
1061	WWF-Japan
1071	Mentor-Pop (Demand)

Appendix B: Public Attitudes Towards China in G7 Countries

