

China to train pandas to survive in wild

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(AP) -- China plans to build a center where giant pandas born in captivity will be trained to survive in the wild, state media reported Thursday.

The \$8.8 million (60 million yuan) center will be located in Sichuan province's Dujiangyan city, according to Zhang Zhihe, the head of the Chengdu Research Base of [Giant Panda](#) Breeding, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

The facility is expected to house three to five giant [pandas](#) when it is completed within five years. The center will include 21.5 acres (8.7 hectares) of an experimental zone, along with 2,800 acres (1,128 hectares) of woodlands, Zhang said.

Groundbreaking for the new center starts at the end of the month, Xinhua said.

Giant pandas are among the world's most [endangered species](#). Some 1,600 pandas live in the wild, while more than 300 pandas are raised in captivity in China.

Zookeepers hope to slowly train pandas to reduce their dependency on humans. In the initial five to 10 years, they will still live in cages in the experimental zone. After that, pandas that adapt well will switch over to living in caves and be trained to forage for food, but they will still receive frequent checkups and participate in artificial breeding.

From there, they will transition to living in a largely "natural" zone with little human contact, before being released into the nearby large natural reserve, Zhang said. The entire process would require a minimum of 15 years, he said.

China had started a giant panda training project in 2003 to teach the animals to live in the wild, but that project suffered a big setback. Xiang Xiang, a male panda who had been trained for three years, was found dead in a remote part of the Wolong Nature Reserve in 2007, a year after he had been released into the wild.

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