

China launches operation to free pandas into wild

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A panda climbs a tree in its new enclosure at the Chengdu Giant Panda Field Research Centre. China released six, young captive pandas into semi-wild enclosures as part of a project aimed at helping the endangered bears adapt to the wild and eventually set them free.

China on Wednesday released six young captive pandas into semi-wild enclosures as part of a project aimed at helping the endangered bears adapt to the wild and eventually go free.

Previous attempts by Chinese authorities to release pandas into the wild have proved unsuccessful. The last bear that was set free in 2006 was found dead after 10 months, apparently killed by wild pandas.

This time round, scientists are releasing the six pandas in stages in a bid to increase their chances of survival, as they try and bring the number of endangered bears in the wild up from the current 1,590.

On Wednesday, Xing Rong, Xing Ya, Gong Zai, Ying Ying, Zhi Zhi and Qi Qi -- aged between two and four -- ambled slowly into their new enclosures in the southwestern province of Sichuan to the flash of cameras.



A panda eats bamboo in its new enclosure at the Chengdu Giant Panda Field Research Centre. China has released six, young captive pandas into semi-wild enclosures as part of a project aimed at helping the endangered bears adapt to the wild and eventually set them free.

They will stay in their enclosures in Dujiangyan for a minimum of two months before being let out in a much larger hillside valley nearby, which has been fenced off. Eventually, if all goes well, they will be released into the wild.

Qi Dunwu, head of [animal behaviour](#) at the Chengdu panda base near Dujiangyan, told AFP the valley had been kitted out with [security cameras](#) to enable vets to observe the pandas without disturbing them.

The bears will be left to fend for themselves to learn crucial survival skills, and scientists plan to gradually reduce [human interactions](#) until they can live in the wild without any assistance.

There have already been 10 attempts at setting pandas free over the past 30 years, and only two are thought to have been successful as the bears find it very hard to survive on their own, the official [Xinhua news agency](#) said.

Of the 10, Xiang Xiang -- the panda that was set free in 2006 -- was found killed, another is also believed to have died, and six of the animals were sent back to the Chengdu base after they lost too much weight, it said.

But scientists hope that releasing six strong, young [pandas](#) together -- unlike previous attempts to release the bears individually -- will help them survive.

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