

# Eats shoots and rarely breeds: giant pandas 'still at risk'

September 13 2016, by Julien Girault

---



Panda cubs sleep at the Chengdu Research Base in China's Sichuan province

The giant panda may have been taken off the endangered species list, but the emblematic black and white bear still faces a plethora of risks including epidemics and climate change, Chinese breeding centres say.

Every morning, with the dawn light shimmering on their patchy coats the

young residents of a panda breeding centre in southwestern China shred their favourite breakfast—bamboo.

The Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding was set up in 1987 when the animals were considered to be under increasing threat of extinction—a catastrophic scenario that seems to have been avoided for now.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) last week reclassified the [giant panda](#) from "endangered" to "vulnerable" on its "Red List" of threatened species.

There were 1,864 adult giant [pandas](#) in the wild in China in 2014, a 17 percent increase in 10 years, according to the IUCN.

"It is a positive message, it's not all gloom and doom," said James Ayala, a researcher at the base, in Sichuan province.

"But I still think it is too early to consider it a true success... we're not in the clear yet.

"It's like if your great grandma gets out of intensive care, you don't celebrate, she's still very old, very weak, and the chance of seeing her back in care is very likely."

## What's so special about pandas?

The highly specialised bear has been taken off the endangered list, but still faces serious challenges

### Anti-social with a highly developed sense of smell

Used by males to avoid each other, and to find females in mating season



### Insatiable appetite for bamboo

- Eats 12 hours a day
- Adult requires 12.5 kg of bamboo daily
- Sometimes eats birds and rodents

### A "sixth finger" used for holding bamboo stalks

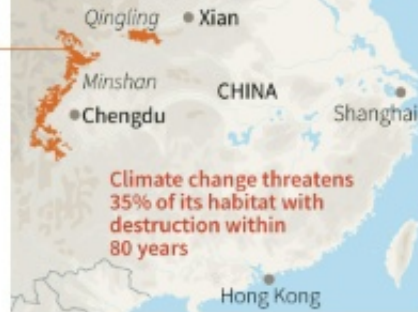
Developed from an adapted wrist bone

### Excellent mountain climbers

Known to climb up to 3,900 m. They are also skilled swimmers and good tree climbers



### Panda habitat



### Appeal of the panda

Why conservationists WWF chose the panda for its logo:

- Beauty and universal appeal
- Endangered status
- Good impact in black and white, thus saving on printing costs

Source: IUCN/National Geographic/Evolution/berkeley.edu/WWF

© AFP

What's so special about pandas?

The IUCN's general criteria are less applicable to pandas, he said, as their wholly bamboo diet means their survival is totally dependent on habitat, and [climate change](#) poses a huge threat.

Zhang Hemin, of the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda (CCRCGP), also in Sichuan, called the IUCN's reclassification "premature".

The wild giant panda population is split into 33 different groups, 18 of them consisting of fewer than a dozen pandas, leaving them at "high risk of collapse", according to Zhang.

Their separation also raises the risks of inbreeding, hence the importance of captive breeding programmes, which often use artificial

insemination—pandas are renowned for their sexual apathy.

Known as Papa Panda in China, Zhang runs an ultra-modern "panda hospital", home to Pan Pan, who at 31—equivalent to 100 in human years—is regarded as the oldest panda living in captivity and has sired at least 130 descendants.



Staff at China's Giant Panda Breeding Chengdu Research Base in Sichuan monitor the health of panda cubs

## **Zombie pandas**

China has around 420 pandas in captivity, according to official figures, and the Chengdu Research Base has seen more than 200 births in total, with over 20 so far this year.

Some of the cubs are then sent on to zoos overseas—a lucrative earner for authorities, who rent the animals out rather than giving them away.

"A target goal for us will be to have a large number of captive pandas to maintain genetic diversity so we could release them into the wild," Ayala said.

Beforehand, the animals are trained to recognise predators and socialise with their peers, but he acknowledged only seven to 10 pandas have been freed in a decade, saying the process is fraught with difficulty.



The giant panda may have been taken off the endangered species list, but the emblematic black and white bear still faces a plethora of risks including epidemics and climate change, Chinese breeding centres say



The animals raised in captivity "aren't ready to be released", said Yang Fuqiang, senior advisor at environmental NGO the Natural Resources Defense Council, adding: "We are far from understanding the behaviour and characteristics of pandas."

Moreover their bamboo forest habitat shrank dramatically during the last century as China developed economically.

Bamboo reserves were first established in China only in 1992, and there are now 67, protecting nearly 70 percent of the 1.4 million hectares of wild bamboo forest, according to the Forestry Administration.

But with global warming, more than a third of bamboo forests could disappear within 80 years, the IUCN warns.

The plant itself can be a risk factor, with most of its species having a life cycle that sees them flowering and dying off every 20 to 40 years —and they can take years to start regrowing.



China has around 420 pandas in captivity, according to official figures, and the Chengdu Research Base has seen more than 200 births in total, with over 20 so far this year

"Each time this happens, the population is extremely vulnerable because the pandas can't find any food," said Ayala.

The Chengdu facility was itself set up after around 250 giant pandas starved to death in the mountains of Sichuan in the 1970s and 80s, when he said that "researchers found pandas emaciated, walking like zombies".

"The priority should always be to focus on improving the habitat for the wild animals and expand it," said Ayala.

"If we don't do this, then there is no point in conserving the giant panda."



The bamboo forest habitat essential to pandas shrank dramatically during the last century as China developed economically

© 2016 AFP

Citation: Eats shoots and rarely breeds: giant pandas 'still at risk' (2016, September 13) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-09-rarely-giant-pandas.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.