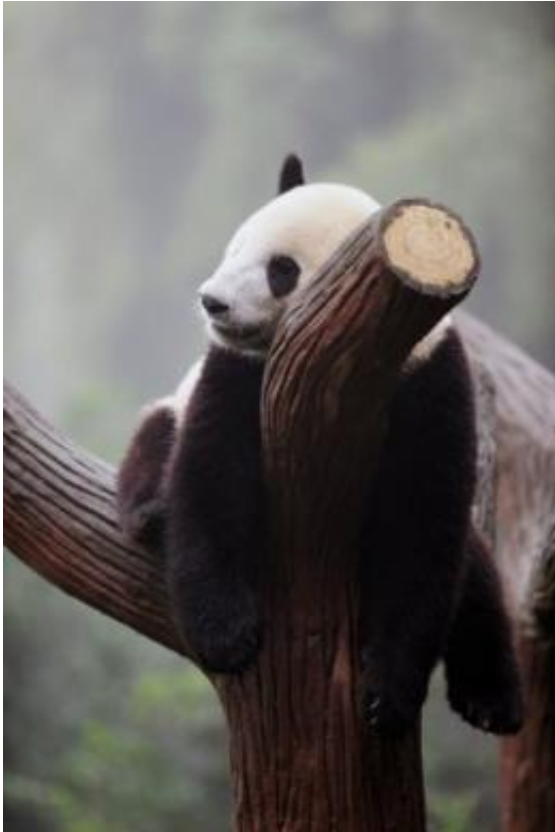


China launches global search for six panda keepers

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A giant panda rests at a panda reserve in Chengdu, southwest China's Sichuan province. Pandas are viewed as a national treasure in China. A Chinese panda centre has launched a global search for six people who would spend a month looking after the endangered animals

A Chinese panda centre said Tuesday it had launched a global search for six people who would spend a month looking after the endangered animals, as part of an awareness and conservation campaign.

"Project Panda," launched by the Chengdu Panda Base in the southwestern province of Sichuan and the WWF, aims to give six winners of a global contest a chance to study pandas' behaviours and provide hands-on assistance.

The keepers will be able to witness the birth of baby [pandas](#) and their development, the base said in an email to AFP.

"We hope that through this project more and more people will join our mission to protect pandas and will realise the importance of preserving wild habitats," said Zhang Zhihe, head of the Chengdu Panda Base.

The winners will also trek into the mountains around Chengdu, Sichuan's capital, to study wild pandas in their natural habitat, and will report on their daily work by blogging to people around the world, the base said.

Over the next six weeks, animal lovers from around the world will be able to log onto a website, www.pandahome.com, to apply for the position. A panel of experts will select 12 finalists, which they will then whittle down to six.

There are just 1,600 pandas left in the wild and nearly 300 others are in captive-bred programmes worldwide, mainly in China, according to official reports.

After having successfully managed to make the animals mate in captivity, researchers are now looking at ways to send captive-bred pandas into the wild to boost the number of animals roaming free.

Four pregnant pandas bred in captivity were released into an area of Sichuan forest last month to prepare their future cubs for life in the wild, state media reported.

But this task is a difficult one, and so far, the only attempt at releasing a captive-bred panda into nature has ended tragically.

Xiang Xiang, a male cub who was trained to adapt to the wild and released in 2006, was found dead

10 months later, apparently killed by wild pandas native to the area.

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