

GIANT PANDA



notes

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The Giant Panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) is a Threatened Species whose future is uncertain. The elusive nature of this bear makes it difficult to study in the wild which means that not a lot is known about their behaviour.

Giant Pandas are heavy-bodied with large heads and rounded ears. The black and white coats give them an appearance which is unique among bears. The fur on their ears, muzzle, legs and shoulders and the fur around the eyes is black while the rest of their body has white fur. This fur is thick to protect from the cold, damp climate in which they live.

Male Giant Pandas grow larger than females: males weigh 85 to 125kg and females weigh 70 to 100kg. The Giant Panda is a medium sized bear with a body length of 160 to 190cm and a 10 to 15cm tail.

Although it is classed as a carnivore, the Giant Panda's diet consists of about 99% bamboo with the remaining 1% made up of other plants and meat. Their broad, flat molar teeth, strong jaw muscles and opposable thumb are all adaptations to aid in the holding, crushing and eating of bamboo. The digestive system of the Giant Panda is not designed to efficiently break down the cellulose in bamboo, so they must eat large amounts – 12 to 38kg of bamboo shoots, leaves and stems per day – to meet their energy needs. Therefore their survival is linked to the existence of good feeding areas with large amounts of bamboo.

Once found in southern and eastern China and neighbouring Burma and Vietnam, the Giant Panda now has a much more restricted range. Farming, forest clearing and other development have forced the Giant Pandas from the lowland areas they

once inhabited. Today they are restricted to the scattered temperate forest of 6 mountain ranges across South-Western China in the provinces of Sichuan, Gansu and Shaanxi. These forests are often covered in heavy clouds and rain and dense mists are common. The Giant Panda has the most restricted distribution of all bear species and more of their habitat is disappearing as settlers push their way higher up the mountain slopes.

The Giant Panda's breeding season is very short: in fact the female is only in season (ready to mate) for 72 hours each year. Mating takes place from March to May and the females give birth from August to September after a gestation of 97 to 163 days. During the mating period the male and female will usually be together for only two to four days, after which the male will have nothing further to do with his mate. The female will give birth to one or two cubs and occasionally up to four, but it is rare for more than one to survive to adulthood. The cubs are born blind and helpless, with a thin layer of fur and are fully dependent upon their mother for the first few months of their life. Most cubs are completely weaned at 9 months and will leave their mother when she conceives again or at about 18 months of age. Giant Pandas live for 10 to 15 years in the wild, but have been known to reach up to 30 years of age in captivity.

A typical day for a Giant Panda involves feeding, resting and seeking food. It mainly feeds on the ground, but will also climb trees. Although most of its water is obtained from bamboo, the extra it requires comes from the rivers and streams at which it drinks most days. The Giant Panda is a solitary animal, living alone except during mating and when the female is raising cubs. At other times it can communicate with others through scent marks and calls.

Giant Pandas, unlike other bears who live in cold climates, do not hibernate. This is because they cannot store enough fat on a bamboo diet. During the colder months they will sometimes migrate to lower land where it is slightly warmer.

The most recent research suggests that

there are approximately 1600 Giant Pandas left in the wild. This makes them one of the most endangered species in the world. Their low reproduction rate means they can not easily recover from population loss.

The largest factor threatening the survival of the Giant Panda is loss of habitat. The growing human population and unsustainable use of natural resources has seen the Giant Panda's habitat fragmented into isolated patches separated by large distances. The Giant Pandas cannot migrate between these blocks of habitat so they have difficulty finding new feeding areas during bamboo die-back periods, when food is scarce. They were once hunted freely for their fur, meat and body parts, but now the Giant Panda is fiercely protected by the Chinese government. People caught poaching or smuggling Giant Pandas face long prison terms or even the death penalty.

While the future of the Giant Panda remains uncertain, there have been steps taken to aid their survival. In China, the government has established over 50 reserves which protect approximately 61% (about 980) of the remaining population.

At Adelaide Zoo, Zoos SA will also have an important role in the future of this amazing species through a breeding program, support for conservation research, education programs and by raising public awareness.

In many ways, Giant Pandas symbolise the thousands of wild animal species whose future existence is under threat. By raising the profile of Threatened Species in Australia, we hope to motivate people to reflect on personal choices they make and actions they can take which will have a positive impact on the planet's biodiversity.

