Saving the Panda

July 9, 2005, was an important day at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C. The zoo had a new arrival that morning: Tai Shan, the first baby of Tian Tian and Mei Xiang, male and female giant pandas. Tai Shan's birth, like any panda's, was a cause for celebration. In the first three months that the cub was on public display following his birth, visits to the zoo increased by 50 percent over prior years.

Around the world, conservation centers and zoos like the Smithsonian are working to ensure that pandas survive, whatever the cost. But what makes these animals so special? Aside from their cuteness, their scarcity makes them important: giant pandas are extremely rare. Even other endangered animals—tigers, gorillas, Asian elephants—outnumber them, both in the wild and in captivity. Recently, China reported that about 1,590 of the black-and-white bears survive in the hills of Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu provinces. In captivity, there are only about 200: Some are in the U.S. and a few others are in Mexico, Japan, Thailand, Germany, and Austria. Most captive pandas, though, are in zoos and research centers in their native China.

Their shortage makes pandas precious, but caring for them isn't easy. The cost of hosting a giant panda at each zoo can exceed two and a half million U.S. dollars a year, and that's without babies. Add a couple of cubs (nearly a half of all panda births produce twins), and the bill approaches four million dollars. Of course, at any zoo, the arrival of a panda or the birth of cubs brings an increase in attendance, but the crowds rarely translate into sufficient revenue. Even with tickets and gift shop sales, no zoo has collected enough money to offset the costs of hosting one of these animals.



Why is accommodating these bears so expensive? At most zoos these animals get the best of everything: state-of-the-art habitats, the best doctors and keepers, the tastiest food, and a variety of toys to play with. In the U.S. alone, this level of care costs millions of dollars a year. Every year, each zoo also sends China a million dollars for the protection of pandas and their remaining habitat. China uses these funds to create education programs for schools near protected areas and to restore the panda's bamboo forests.

Given the enormous cost of caring for these animals, what exactly are the benefits of raising pandas in captivity? For one thing, it has led to a number of successful births. In recent years, the captive-panda population has increased dramatically. Record numbers of cubs have been born, with much better chances for survival rates. A decade ago, at the Wolong Nature Reserve in China, at least half the twins and many of the single cubs died as babies. Today, new care and feeding techniques have improved the chances for survival of captive pandas in zoos in China and around the globe. All those cubs have pushed the captive population closer to a magic number: 300. With that many pandas, says population biologist Jon Ballou, "we can have a self-sustaining[1] captive population and maintain 90 percent of known giant panda genetic variation for a century."

With panda numbers now on the rise, China's goal is to release captive pandas into special nature reserves[2] and to eventually boost the numbers of these animals in the wild. Scientists hesitate to do this just yet, though. As National Zoo biologist David Wildt says, "There may be as many wild pandas out there now as the habitat can support." However, many pandas born in captivity are being trained to be more self-sufficient and not to rely on their human keepers.

One day, we may be able to eliminate altogether the need to raise pandas in captivity. Though this hasn't happened yet, the work being done in China, the U.S., and other countries worldwide is helping to make the goal a reality, one panda at a time.

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Level B1
LIVEWORKSHEETS

Reading Ex. > Saving the Panda

A. Based on the previous article, match the word(s) in red with its closest definition below.

1. *be reluctant to do something* > _____
2. *counteract (something) by having an opposing force or effect* > _____
3. *by a strikingly large amount; greatly* > _____
4. *the state of being short supply* > _____
5. *return to a former condition, place, or position* > _____
6. *income, profits, earnings* > _____
7. *meet the needs* > _____

B. Answer the following questions. Use NO MORE THAN FIVE WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER in each answer.

1. When was *Tai Shan* born? _____
2. How many pandas are there *in the wild* and *in captivity* nowadays? (*approx.*) _____
3. What is the percentage of twins in panda births? _____
4. Which habitats are restored with the funds sent by the zoos? _____
5. What helps the rise of number of births of pandas in captivity? _____
6. Where will pandas be left when they are released? _____

C. Decide if the following statement are TRUE (T), FALSE (F), or NOT MENTIONED (NM).

1. Luckily, there is no need to raise pandas in captivity nowadays. _____
2. The Smithsonian Zoo hosts one of the highest numbers of pandas in the U.S. _____
3. The costs of care of raising a panda in captivity is nearly a million dollars annually. _____
4. A panda's birth may mean a higher income for a zoo in a short term. _____
5. China's zoos have more pandas in captivity than any other in the world. _____
6. Giant pandas' population is as big as other endangered animals' ones. _____

D. Complete the information using ONLY ONE WORD from the text.

1. The _____ of Tai Shan caused the increase of zoo visits.
2. The limited number of pandas makes them a _____ species.
3. Providing the best care to these black-and-white bears is extremely _____.
4. _____ oversees the collection of funds to protect their pandas.
5. Pandas need to be more _____ to survive in the wild.

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