



Rebecca Spindler, Toronto Zoo

## Giant panda

*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*

**Description:** The giant panda is a small black and white bear with an infantile appearance brought about by its shortened muzzle and large black fur eye patches. Most of its torso and head are white with a black saddle across its back, black fore and hind limbs and black ears. It can weigh up to 275 pounds.

**Range:** Giant pandas live in the mountain ranges in the provinces of Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu in Western China.



**Habitat:** Giant pandas are found in mixed deciduous/evergreen montane temperate forest, with a bamboo/rhododendron understory, between 3,000 and 10,000 feet altitude.

**Diet:** Giant pandas live almost solely on a diet of bamboo, up to 33 pounds a day, and will very rarely eat other plant matter or scavenge the meat of dead deer or takin.

**Social Organization:** Pandas are basically solitary, although neighboring males and female are likely to be familiar with each other and interact occasionally. Males have large territories that overlap the smaller territories of several females.

**Reproduction:** Pandas become sexually mature at between 4 and 6 years of age. Females are in estrus for only one to three weeks out of the year, usually from March to May, and in that brief period are at peak receptiveness for only a few days. Litters range from one to three cubs but usually only one survives. Cubs are weaned at around 9 months but may remain with their mothers until 18 months or older.

**Conservation Status:** Pandas are extremely endangered, with little more than 1000 individuals remaining in very fragmented and isolated habitat islands. The Giant Panda is listed as an Appendix I species in CITES.

**Threats to Survival:** The Panda's main threat is deforestation, the insularization of its remaining habitat and poaching.

**Zoo Programs:** Giant pandas do not breed well in captivity. There are currently about 110-120 giant pandas in captivity with the majority of those in China. In North America only two zoos, San Diego and the National Zoo in Washington, currently have Giant pandas but AZA is hoping to contribute to captive breeding through the development of a North American satellite population.

The Chinese government recently approved a 10 year plan to enhance existing reserves, build new reserves and create habitat corridors between reserves. This program was developed by World Wildlife Fund and the Ministry of Forestry and is estimated to cost \$50 - \$100 million. The money to carry out this conservation program is not yet available, but AZA hopes to assist in fund-raising for implementation of this project. The giant pandas are the recognized international symbol of endangered species. However, there is limited public education about panda biology and conservation at this time. AZA is developing a plan to enhance education about pandas and conservation, both in North America and in communities within panda habitats.

**Reintroduction:** Giant pandas that were captive for brief periods, usually for medical treatment, have been released back into the wild. There is currently no formal reintroduction program however, because the captive population is not yet self-sustaining.