

## The Fate of the Giant Panda Bear

By William R. Polk

Sweet tempered and easily captured, the Giant Panda Bear was hunted almost to extinction in its natural habitat here in the Sichuan province of China. Not much good at making either love or war, it could neither reproduce well nor defend itself. Fifty years ago, its fate seemed sealed. Less than 1,000 remained alive.

The Chinese regard the Giant Panda as the national icon; so beginning in 1953, desperate efforts began to be made by a small group of ethnologists to save the few that remained. There was no hope of preserving the animals in the wild. Not only were they actively hunted, but they easily succumbed to diseases and failed to mate successfully. So in 1987 on the outskirts of the thriving city of Changdu, a unique combination of park, hospital and research station was established. Over the following years, some 63 of these beautiful and loveable bears were rescued, treated and then either released into the wild or kept for breeding.

Breeding Pandas has proved a major challenge. With so few animals left, inbreeding is a major danger. The loss of genetic diversity, the scientists believed, would quickly lead to weakened animals which would be even more susceptible to disease and less able to forage in their already deteriorating natural habitat.

More significant has proven to be the infrequency of encounters of suitable partners in the wild and the apparent aversion of females to copulation. Today, researchers believe they have found answers to both of these problems. They are holding about two dozen animals in captivity in conditions as near to their natural habitat as possible and they now use frozen semen for artificial insemination. Today, the Chengdu station maintains the largest semen bank for Giant Pandas in the world. The first infant that survived in captivity was a result of these two approaches.

However, survival of the first infant came only after severe setbacks. Due to hemorrhagic enteritis, large numbers of adults died and no cubs survived. After years of

research, the scientists identified the pathogen that was causing the deaths and developed a successful treatment for it. From that time, 1988, the survival rate markedly improved so that 20 Giant Pandas suffering from this disease have recovered.

Ironically, for all their trouble in mating, twin births are relatively common among the Great Pandas. In the wild, no twins survived since the mothers could not feed more than one cub at a time. In captivity, the first twins to survive were born in 1990; they survived because they could be raised by trainers and fed by bottle until they could chew their natural diet, bamboo.

Twins were not the only endangered babies nor were disease their only enemy: many of the panda mothers were ill-equipped psychologically to handle births. Many, even in captivity, roughly cuffed their newborn cubs, regarding them as unrelated and perhaps dangerous animals – indeed, the newborn cubs look not unlike young, hairless rats. So, occasionally, a trainer must dash into a cage, grab the tiny, pink infant and rush out before the mother can do further damage.

As the baby fattens on its milk diet, it quickly acquires the white and black fur that makes it seem the most cuddly and cleverly designed of toys. After being fitted out with an apron and gloves to protect not only clothing but the spreading of cold germs, I was allowed to hold one. It is a sublime experience for any animal lover. The baby appears big but is remarkably light. It clings tightly to the holder and searches for the nipple or treats it has learned to expect.

As the baby acquires the strength to climb, it is put in a protected area with the trees it uses as bench and bed. One of the remarkable sights in the park are Pandas sleeping peacefully on the most improbable of perches among the tree branches. When they climb down, they sit spread-legged like fat old men as they pull great bunches of bamboo stalks into their mouths. Then, more bear-like, they amble along the park paths, sniffing the markings of their fellows.

The Chengu researchers believe that the work they have done on the endangered Giant Panda is applicable to a number of other animal species. Among them just in China are the Golden money, the crested Ibis, the Red Panda and the South China Tiger. As the endangered

species list rapidly grows, the work done here may lay the foundation for a world-wide rescue effort. The only real question is, “is it too late for many endangered species.”

© William R. Polk, June 8, 2004