

Helping

by Rachel Young

Pandas



One panda can eat as many as 40 pounds of bamboo in a single day!

Giant pandas once roamed throughout the bamboo forests of China. They spent almost all day eating, filling their round bellies with bamboo. There was enough land for wandering, and plenty to eat.

But as forests were cut down to make way for houses and roads, pandas had fewer places to live. Pandas eat only bamboo, and they eat a lot. Without big bamboo forests, pandas couldn't find enough food. The number of wild pandas shrank. The roly-poly black-and-white bears were in danger of disappearing forever.

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How could people help pandas? They began by saving old forests and planting new ones. They set up protected wild spaces called nature reserves, where no roads or houses could be built. Pandas and other animals were free to roam in peace.

Protecting pandas' homes was one step, but the number of pandas was still too low for the animals to be safe. It was important to make sure that more panda babies were born and grew up healthy. That was a big job.



Baby pandas are born helpless—weighing about as much as a stick of butter, so small you can hold one in your hand, blind, pink, and hairless. For three months, a panda mother holds her baby almost all the time, nursing the baby to help it grow strong enough to find food on its own.

This baby panda has started to grow fur. In a month, it will have a black-and-white coat like mom's.





Panda mothers often give birth to twins. But in the wild, it can be too hard for a panda mom to feed and hold both babies. The smaller twin may die.



At zoos and research centers, however, people can help the mother care for both twins. As she nurses one twin, helpers called panda keepers take care of the other, cuddling the panda baby and feeding it from a bottle. It's best, though, if the mother can spend some time with each of her babies. So every few hours the keepers switch the babies. That way, both twins get a chance to be fed and held by mom.



Now that scientists in China know how to help care for baby pandas, the number of pandas in the world has grown. So today the scientists have a new goal. They want to help pandas leave humans' care to go back to the wild.



But they can't just let the pandas go free in the forest. Pandas raised by keepers are not wild. They depend on their keepers, who make sure the pandas are healthy and have enough to eat. Wild pandas need to find their own bamboo to eat and safe places to sleep.

Baby pandas who are being trained to live in the wild can't get too used to their human keepers, or they may learn to look for people for help instead of living on their own.



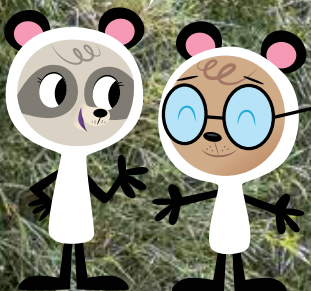


So keepers caring for these pandas wear special black-and-white panda suits whenever the pandas can see them. The suits are even covered with panda pee, so the keepers smell like pandas!

So far, only a few pandas have left their human helpers to live on their own. But one day, if more forests are restored and protected, there will be more safe places for pandas, and more giant pandas munching and munching bamboo under tall trees.



Hey, Click.
We're twins!



No panda is released into the wild unless the keepers are sure it knows how to take care of itself.