

The Panda

Maybe you have seen pandas on television or in captivity at a zoo. They are black and white bear-like animals that are beloved and revered in China and around the world. It is unknown whether pandas are related to bears or raccoons, but we do know that they are very rare. Sometimes, they are called giant pandas or panda bears. Pandas are solitary creatures but they do communicate with one another. They scratch messages in tree bark or rub against an object to leave a smell from their scent glands.

Pandas live in the lofty mountains of China and Tibet. They used to live in lower places, but migrated to the mountains when the bamboo forests were sacrificed for farms and towns. Bamboo, a kind of grass, is the panda's main source of food. When bamboo is in short supply, as it often is, pandas die.

The Chinese people help pandas when there is not much bamboo growing by going into the mountains with nets to catch the starving pandas. They feed the pandas sweet potatoes, sugarcane, meat, and corn. They also have planted different varieties of bamboo in hopes of keeping a steady supply of the plant for the pandas.

Giant pandas weigh about 200 pounds, the size of a large man. But pandas consume more food than people, about 20 to 40 pounds a day. They spend anywhere from 10 to 16 hours a day feeding. They do not get fat from eating so much food because their bodies dispose of the food quickly.

A baby giant panda weighs about four ounces when it is born. When it is about six months old, it begins eating bamboo. A baby will stay with its mother until it is about 18 months old. At that time, the mother will drive off the panda cub as she prepares to mate again.

The average life span of a panda is about 15 years, although in captivity, they have been known to live between 26 and 29 years.

Unit 9

- The panda has been close to extinction. How far do you think people should go to save endangered animals?

- Why do you think pandas are so averse to socialization?

- How would studying evolution help scientists to determine the panda's link to bears and raccoons?