



Panda Bears

The Giant Panda or Panda Bear is native to China and is China's national symbol. It is a very large animal that looks like a white bear with black arms, legs and ears and with black around its eyes. It has a round body and a round face with strong jaws to eat bamboo. On their backside is a wide, black stripe that goes across their shoulders. Also on their backside is a white tail that is one of the longest of all of the bears in the bear family. They used to live in the lowland areas of China. Farming and deforestation have driven them high into the mountain ranges. Though Giant Pandas appear soft and cuddly, they have very thick, wooly coats to keep them warm in the snowy mountains of China.

For many decades scientists argued that the Giant Panda was not really a bear but was in the raccoon family. There is another kind of Panda called a Red Panda and it does look more like a red raccoon. Most bears will growl and roar. A Panda Bear bleats, which is the baaaa sound a sheep makes. With more studies of their molecules, scientists now agree that the Giant Panda is a true bear. That Pandas have a thumb, and five fingers has always fascinated scientists. This thumb helps them to hold onto the bamboo that they love to chew all day.

When Giant Pandas are born, they are not giant at all. They are as small as an apple. When fully grown they can weigh up to 350 pounds. In the wild, a Giant Panda will live around twenty years. In captivity they may live to be over thirty years old. They used

to be endangered. This means that they were at risk of becoming extinct and there would be no more black and white Pandas. Thanks to conservation efforts, they are no longer on the endangered species list.

China considers the Panda to be a noble animal. Unlike so many other animals that have been driven to extinction, other than their urine, they do not use the Panda Bear or any of its parts for exotic or medicinal purposes. China also makes a lot of money from renting out the bears to zoos around the world. Any zoo that borrows a Giant Panda from China must pay \$1 million per year in rent. They may study the panda and try to impregnate the females, but any babies born are said to be the property of China and must be returned after the baby panda is old enough to leave its mother.

The reasons that Giant Pandas were endangered include the damage to their habitat and food sources, the fact that they are so popular with poachers who illegally kill them for their coats, and because the female only comes into heat about one time per year beginning when she is 4-8 years old. Giant Pandas will rarely have more than one baby at a time. When they do have twins, usually only one survives. So, they do not reproduce very quickly or easily. They also spend so much of their time eating that they do not have time to be social. They appear to be cute and cuddly, but they can be very aggressive and have killed humans out of irritation. They don't kill large animals for food but because they are annoyed.

Other than humans, Panda Bears have few wild predators. The babies and smaller bears may fall prey to snow leopards, wild dogs, or Asian Black Bears. Because of their lack of major predators, and their need to eat so much, Panda Bears may be active anytime, day or night. Their search for food is also probably why they do not establish a den as a home. They will wander and climb trees and take shelter in hollow trees. They do not hibernate, or sleep all winter, like other bears either.

While baby panda bears are one of the cutest animals on the planet, the newborn pandas are rather ugly. They have pink skin and only a bit of hair to cover it. They are very dependent on their mothers for food and care as they are blind and toothless at birth. They nurse 6-14 times per day for up to 30 minutes at a time. The mother will leave three to four hours per day to eat, which leaves the cub defenseless. At about two weeks old, the cub's skin will start to turn grey where it will one day have black hair. At about a month old, the cub will have fur with the black and white color pattern that we expect to see on a Panda Bear. The baby's fur is very soft, and it gets course as the baby ages. At about two and a half months old, the baby will begin to crawl. At six months old, they will start to eat some bamboo. They will continue to nurse for about a year and will live with their mother until they are about two years old.

Wild Pandas eat mostly bamboo shoots and leaves. They eat 20 to 30 pounds of bamboo per day. They have to eat so much because their food has a lot of fiber and not a lot of nutrients. Pandas are said to be very lazy. They do not hunt, but if a bird or rodent wanders by, they will grab it and eat it. In captivity, the Panda Bear will get to eat a wide variety of fruits and vegetables along with eggs and fish for protein. With how much the Giant Panda eats, and how high in fiber their diet is, imagine how much they poo. A Giant Panda will poo up to 40 times per day.

With all of that poo, companies are marketing panda poo in interesting ways. I have a greeting card made of paper that is made from the bamboo fibers in panda poo. Scientists are studying the microbes in panda waste to see if they could be used to create biofuels. The more that humans can find a way to profit from Panda Bears without hurting them, the better. I, for one, am very happy that Giant Pandas have been removed from the endangered list. While the majority of the world seems to enjoy their time on social media watching cat videos, I spend my time giggling over the panda-cams. Panda Bears are inarguably the cutest animals in the world.