



A Panda-full possibility?

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Cute, cuddly, lazy and loved by millions around the globe. Pandas and their antics are very popular. Their very existence puts a smile on everyone's face and their playful nature demands the world's attention. "Panda babies will remind you of your children and make you fall in love with them," claimed Zhang Hemin, deputy director of the China Conservation and Research Centre for the Giant Panda.

"Some local people say giant pandas have magic powers. To me, they simply represent beauty and peace."

The giant pandas gave the world another reason to celebrate as they were taken off from the endangered species list and categorised as vulnerable. With this ecstatic news, people all over the globe got thinking. Pandas may not be extinct anytime soon, but can the same be done for the others?

This news was nothing short of a blessing to us. In a time where many species are stepping closer and closer towards extinction each day, the pandas are stepping back from it. But this success wasn't achieved in a day. In fact, the conservation of the giant pandas has been going on for decades now and the country leading this charge is none other than the People's Republic of China.

The giant panda's natural habitat is now confined within China's Sichuan, Gansu and Shaanxi provinces. The country has been breeding the pandas in captivity in different research bases of which the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding is the most recognised one. It is in these research centres where efforts are being carried out to learn more about the nature of these cute bears. Different wildlife organisations such as the WWF have been lending out help to

these bases in hope for some remarkable results. And none can deny that their efforts have been very fruitful. The last census report states that the number of giant pandas increased by 17 percent in the years from 2003-2014. The pandas bred in captivity aren't going to stay inside the centres forever. After they are mature and attain the capability to live on their own, they're then released into the wild, back to their natural habitat.

Back in August, Zhang said, "With the number of captive giant pandas topping 500, pandas won't become extinct even in a big catastrophe." He also added "Panda is not a pet. Their real home is in the wild. Although they may face various kinds of threats in the wild, they evolve and live better there. Keeping them captive forever is not our purpose." Zhang, who is more commonly known as 'Papa Panda' has played a pioneering role for the cause of the giant panda conservation and plans on doing so as long as he can.

When it comes to pandas, the complexities are endless. They are the only carnivores in the world that are vegetarians. Their diet consists of 99 percent bamboo which fails to provide them sufficient nutrition. They have difficulties in reproducing and are highly affected by the changes in climate. China's efforts have been fruitful in the sense that they have managed to nullify most of these complexities over the years and are now making further progress in to the scientific studies of the panda. The country's economy is also being benefitted thanks to these mysterious bears. Forbes, back in June of 2018, reported that China was generating 20 times more money than what they spend for the research and conservation of the adorable creatures. The acquired profits were mostly generated from zoos where the pandas are

displayed and from countries who have received pandas as loan. China's panda diplomacy may seem to be a scheme to generate profit, but at the end of the day, China has been using these profits for further research and development of the giant panda and other less popular animals.

Decades of trial and error, billions of dollars for research and the ceaseless efforts by different individuals and organizations have ensured the high success rate of the giant panda conservation program. Now, if similar programs were to be taken for other endangered animals, will it be possible to ensure their survival as well?

Initially, we need to have a more direct and global approach to some animals as enclosed conservation is not possible for them. For instance, the humpback whale or other species of large marine creatures cannot be taken care of in captivity that easily and hence, it's a lot wiser to protect their natural habitats from human intervention and pollution than to attempt conservation through captivity.

Animals like the deer, orangutan, rhinos, elephants and various species of tortoises are comparatively easier to breed in captivity. In fact, since these animals are threatened by man-made causes, programs similar to the giant panda conservation can prove to be very useful. Moreover, unlike the pandas, there is no known complexity involved in the breeding of these animals. The only threat in captivity is natural disease which, by proper research, can be taken care of. Captive breeding, therefore, is a worth a shot in this case.

Tigers, lions and cheetahs are predatory animals and to breed them in captivity is a mammoth task. Even in captivity, there is no guarantee of their survival. In between the last week of August and the

starting of September of this year, India's Nandankanan Zoo saw the death of a Royal Bengal Tiger and an African Lion. Their deaths resulted from diseases which the authorities said had 'no proven cure.' Wildlife protection organisations believe that the only way to help these animals beat extinction is to prevent people from interfering with their habitat and natural lifestyle.

Now back to the question, "Is it possible?" The answer is YES. It is definitely possible to prevent these animals from reaching the brink of extinction. Pandas are cute, but complex. It took a long time to understand their anatomy and behavioural patterns. Unlike the pandas, other animals may not be so complicated and can be easily taken care of before they're released into the wild. However, we must keep in mind that this sort of conservation is only a short term solution. Ultimately, the fate of these animals rest on the shoulders of humans and their willingness to preserve nature.

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