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Pandas: China's Ambassadors

Giant pandas are one of China's most precious national treasures. Learn how pandas became a symbol of China and one of the most popular animals in zoos around the world.

China Showcase Library Learn about China, through its history, people, places, and culture. Supported by original material developed by National Geographic Learning and People's Education Press, the China Showcase Library presents non-fiction reading selections on a variety of fascinating topics.

The audio for this reader is available for download at ELTNGL.com/csl

Upper Intermediate
2200 headwords

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Before You Read

The story takes place in Sichuan, in Southwest China, at the Wolong Nature Reserve which is about 130 kilometers northwest of Chengdu, Sichuan’s capital city, and the Dujiangyan Panda Base, which is about 50 kilometers northwest of Chengdu.

A. International Stars. Read the sentences. Then complete the paragraph with the correct form of the underlined words.

An ambassador represents her/his country in another country.
To breed means to cause animals to have babies.
When a baby is cute, it is nice to look at.
A sensation is something that causes excitement or great interest.
Something that is worldwide is something that happens all around the Earth.

One of the biggest hits in zoos (1) _____ are the pandas. These animals are seen by millions of people every year, and when new pandas arrive on loan from China, it is often a national (2) _____. One example is the Ahtari Zoo in Finland, which received its first panda pair in January, 2018. The Finnish (3) _____ to China came to the Dujiangyan Panda Base in Sichuan to see the pandas off, and the pandas were welcomed in Helsinki by the international press. One purpose of such panda loans is (4) _____. When a new panda cub¹ was born in Adventure World in Wakayama, Japan in August 2018, they had a national contest to name the (5) _____ new girl. They finally chose the name Saihin, out of over 120,000 suggestions.

¹cub: a young bear, lion etc.



B. Panda Facts. Read the panda facts and look at the photos in this reader. Then answer the questions below.

Panda Facts	
Height at shoulder	60-80 centimeters
Weight	60-80 kilograms in the wild; 80-120 kilograms in zoos
Size at birth	approximately 100-200 grams, and 15 centimeters long
Life span ²	14-20 years in the wild; up to 30 years in zoos
Diet	mostly bamboo , ³ but will eat meat; loves apples, carrots
Habitat ⁴	Southwest China
Conservation status ⁵	vulnerable ⁶

1. Have you ever seen a panda? If so, where? What was the experience like?
2. What do you know about pandas?
3. What would you like to learn about pandas?

²life span: how long something is usually expected to live

³bamboo: a plant from the grass family that can be used to make buildings and furniture

⁴habitat: an area where a plant or animal usually lives

⁵status: situation

⁶vulnerable: in danger

In 2016, something quite extraordinary happened. The giant panda, which had for more than fifty years been the best-known icon of the World Wide Fund⁷ for Nature (WWF), an international wildlife protection organization, was taken off the **endangered species**⁸ list. While the giant panda is not quite out of the woods yet—it is still listed as a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)—its removal from the endangered list is a rare and welcome victory in the fight to save wildlife. Apart from breakthroughs in scientific research, one of the main factors in this victory was the expansion of the protected areas for the giant panda's habitat. There are now 67 giant panda reserves in China, most of them in Sichuan, and these allow pandas to live and breed undisturbed by humans.

 Track 1



⁷**fund**: an organization that manages money set aside for a specific purpose
⁸**endangered species**: a plant or animal which has such a low population that it may soon die out



There are around 2,000 giant pandas in the wild today, with around 500 living in zoos or breeding centers. While at one time it was thought that giant pandas were related to **raccoons**⁹—in part because of their black markings—in 1985, **genetic**¹⁰ tests proved that giant pandas are in fact members of the bear family.

⁹**raccoon**: a small mammal that has black markings around its eyes

¹⁰**genetic**: related to DNA

Infer Meaning

1. Why do you think the panda was made the symbol of the WWF?
2. What is a possible reason why the animal was endangered?



These cute animals weigh only about 100-200 grams at birth, and are born pink, blind, and nearly without hair. However, within weeks their characteristic black and white hair begins to grow, and their eyes open for the first time. They start eating bamboo at the age of six months, and by eighteen months they are no longer drinking milk. They stay with their mothers for about two years before striking out on their own, and they are not fully grown until they are about four.

Pandas may have been the basis of the mythical creature, the *pixiu*, which was famous for fiercely protecting people from evil and bringing them good fortune. According to one legend, the Yellow **Emperor**¹¹ trained pandas to fight in battle. While this makes for an interesting story, it is hard to imagine how it can be true. What's more, the *pixiu* had wings and a horn (or sometimes two), so it did not really look like a panda, and some researchers note that it was not until the 19th century that clearly identifiable art work and descriptions of the panda came into existence. It could be that, because pandas lived in such remote areas, humans did not come into much contact with them until the 19th century.

¹¹**emperor:** the ruler of a group of countries or a large country

A. Multiple Choice. Answer the questions below by choosing A, B, C, or D.

1. In the first paragraph, it says that “the giant panda is not quite out of the woods yet.” What does this mean?
A. Many pandas still live in forests.
B. The panda is still an endangered species.
C. It is no longer an icon of the WWF.
D. The panda is not yet completely safe.
2. When animals or people strike out on their own, what do they do?
A. They go and live independently.
B. They no longer drink milk.
C. They have become full adults.
D. They make their own families.
3. In the passage, which of the following is the panda NOT a symbol of?
A. China’s pursuit of peace and friendship between countries
B. the WWF
C. The IUCN
D. hope for all animal species worldwide
4. What does the passage mean on page 10 when it says that pandas are “China’s ambassadors to the world”?
A. They are government officials who represent China.
B. They are a symbol of China.
C. They are supporters of China.
D. They are unofficial representatives of China.
5. How did Ami Vitale know that she had been a success in earning the pandas’ trust?
A. She wore a panda suit to make the pandas think she was one of them.
B. A panda showed Ami her cub.
C. She took some photographs.
D. She no longer disturbed them.

B. Complete the Chart. Complete the chart below with words from the passage.

Pandas				
Conservation	Development	Legend	Media	Location
WWF icon	Birth: 100-200 grams; pink, blind, nearly (2) _____	The basis for the <i>pixiu</i>	<i>Kung Fu Panda</i>	Select zoos around the world
Taken off (1) _____ list in 2016	Within weeks: black and white hair; eyes open	The Yellow Emperor (5) _____	A-list movie stars including (7) _____	Wolong: learn about pandas in a deeply (9) _____
IUCN: vulnerable	6 months: (3) _____	Had wings and a horn	A celebration of (8) _____	Dujiangyan: serve (10) _____
67 reserves in China	18 months: stop drinking milk	Not really (6) _____	First <i>Kung Fu Panda</i> movie made \$631 million	
	4 years: (4) _____			

C. Answer the questions. Use information from the passage to answer the questions below.

1. Why might there be no clearly identifiable art work and descriptions of the panda until the 19th century?
2. What shows the success of pandas as China’s ambassadors to the world?
3. What other symbols of China can you think of? How do they differ from the panda?

The Endangered Siberian Tiger

Track 2

One of the most endangered animals in the world is the Siberian tiger, known as the Northeast Tiger in China. There are less than 500 of these beautiful animals still living in the wild.

The Siberian tiger is the largest of all tigers. An adult male can grow up to 3.3 meters in length and weigh as much as 300 kilograms. Generally, the fur of the Siberian tiger is not as brightly colored as other tigers, and instead of having black stripes, its stripes are dark brown.

Long ago, Siberian tigers were common all over Northeast Asia and the Russian Far East. However, today they are found mainly along the Chinese-Russian border and possibly in North Korea. The main reasons for their decrease in numbers are poaching and the disappearance of their natural habitat. When people build cities and cut down trees, it means the tigers have fewer sources of food and less space to live in.

Fortunately, steps are being taken to save this magnificent creature. For example, in

recent years both China and Russia have set up nature reserves and have begun working together to protect the Siberian tiger, and as a consequence numbers are on the rise.

There is also a fairly large population of Siberian tigers in zoos. It is hoped that some of these tigers can be reintroduced to the wild. Of course, they would need to learn how to hunt and take care of themselves, and this is easier said than done. Another big issue is the problem of space. An adult Siberian tiger requires up to 100 square kilometers of forest to live in. At present, there just is not enough unspoiled forest available to support reintroducing very many Siberian tigers into the wild.

In addition to the Chinese and Russian governments, private conservation groups are also working to protect the Siberian tiger. They are shutting down the black market for tiger goods and supporting research on the Siberian tiger and its habitat. If you wish to do something to help the Siberian tiger, you could contact these conservation groups.

 **Word Count:** 347
Time: _____