



Popularity has led to pandas being both hunted and conserved in the wild.

CONSERVATION

China's national treasure

The panda's plight shows how protection often vies with economic necessity, finds **Jane Qiu**.

Since the West first 'discovered' the giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) in 1869, the beast has emerged as China's biggest icon and as the face of global conservation. Pandas have been sent on diplomatic journeys and their image has adorned everything from chocolate to electronic goods.

In *The Way of the Panda*, science journalist Henry Nicholls charts the rich and curious history of the animal. He skillfully interweaves the species' rise to global fame with China's development as a nation since the late nineteenth century. And he explains how the panda's popularity has led to it being

both hunted and conserved in the wild.

At the centre of the tale is a female panda called Chi Chi. Intended to be sold to Brookfield Zoo near Chicago, Illinois, in 1958, she fell foul of politics when a US trade ban with Communist China blocked the deal. She was eventually obtained by London Zoo, where she became the focus of panda fervour. Greeted by millions of zoo visitors and appearing on television, Chi Chi became a household name. Her failed breeding attempts with An An, a male panda in Moscow Zoo, inspired cartoonists and journalists worldwide, who exploited

the parallels with the cold-war chill between the United Kingdom and Russia. In 1961, Chi Chi was immortalized by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), when she was used as the basis for its panda logo.

Eighteen years later, WWF became the first international conservation agency to hold talks with China after the Cultural Revolution. This led to the start of the groundbreaking China-WWF research project on wild pandas in 1985. Traps and radio collars revealed the secret world of these elusive creatures: their foraging behaviour, their sex life, mother and cub relationships, and their communications, mostly through odour and vocalization. The WWF recorded the distribution of bamboo species across China, and intervened to protect the animals during periods when the bamboo forests flowered



The Way of the Panda: The Curious History of China's Political Animal

HENRY NICHOLLS
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and died. Today, there are thought to be about 1,600 pandas in the wild, mainly in the Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu provinces.

As Nicholls astutely explains, the panda's popular appeal has been both a blessing and a curse for the animals' survival in the wild. After the panda's existence became known in the West, specimens were sought, dead or alive, by explorers, trophy hunters, taxonomists and animal collectors. In Sichuan, the provincial government banned the capture of pandas in 1938 amid the turmoil of the Sino-Japanese war. But they continued to be taken from the wild to satisfy the demand of zoos and diplomatic missions. Symbolizing friendship and goodwill, pairs of pandas were presented to US President Richard Nixon after his state visit to China in 1972, and to Hong Kong when it rejoined China in 1997.

The level of adulation given to pandas in zoos has distorted our view of them. Because they have had difficulty breeding in captivity and have highly limited, specific diets, pandas are often assumed to be inept, a species at an evolutionary dead end that might become extinct without human help. Yet scientists who study pandas in the wild have a very different picture. Wild pandas breed readily, have sophisticated foraging and communication skills, and are ferociously territorial. Nicholls argues that unless this distinction is acknowledged, we will "conserve the virtual rather than the real giant panda".

Indeed, as the number of pandas in captivity grows — and it is now around 300, thanks to artificial insemination and research into their reproductive behaviour — their wild counterparts are coming under increasing

► pressure. Human population growth, farming and the construction of dams and highways threaten panda reserves across China. Programmes to return captive pandas to the wild are a distraction from what really matters: protecting wild pandas, which are endangered not by their biology but by the loss and fragmentation of their habitat.

Nicholls acknowledges the enormous challenge China faces to balance economic development and conservation. He is right to point out that the country has made extraordinary leaps: it has added another 60 panda reserves covering more than 70% of suitable habitat; introduced tougher enforcement of blanket logging bans within nature reserves; and invested tens of billions of dollars in a series of policies, such as the Natural Forest Protection Programme and the Sloping Land Conversion Programme, to encourage forest protection and restoration.

Yet Nicholls does not sufficiently explore the substantial gap between these well-intentioned conservation plans and their incomplete implementation in practice, a problem that plagues many areas of development in the country. Despite China's pledge to protect the environment, economic development frequently takes precedence at the provincial level. Consequently, panda habitats are often destroyed or fragmented to make way for major infrastructure projects such as dams and highways.

Tourism is also a threat. For example, Jiuzhaigou, part of the pristine Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuary — a World Heritage Site — is visited by millions of tourists each year. Nicholls notes that even when ecotourism is deliberately introduced to provide local people with a livelihood that is not damaging to nature reserves, economic benefits often go to investors based outside the community. Hotel and restaurant owners tend to import skilled workers rather than train locals. Hence, he points out, local people often continue to chop down trees or convert forests into farmland.

Through this engaging tale of the panda's plight, Nicholls highlights how conservation pressures are often pitched against economic ones. At the recent United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity summit in Nagoya, Japan, there was broad acknowledgement that radical steps to reform economic and social development are necessary to protect natural resources. Such a strategy could be the best hope for the giant panda and other species that face extinction. ■

Jane Qiu writes for Nature from Beijing.

HISTORY

Catching up with the Sun

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Louis XIV of France named himself the Sun King to bolster his authority.

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