

Activity 4

Giant Panda Pretend

Objective & Overview:

Students will play the part of giant pandas in the wild, gaining an understanding of how dwindling habitat can limit giant panda activity.

Teacher Background Information:

How do giant pandas spend their days?

Wild giant pandas spend much of their days seeking and eating bamboo and resting. Scientists believe that giant pandas migrate seasonally, heading for lower elevations in winter and moving back up to higher elevations when the weather warms up. Giant pandas detect other pandas' presence via vocalizations and scent-marking. They often rub and roll around on the ground, behavior that scientists believe may help them leave their scent as a signal to other local giant pandas. Although solitary, wild giant pandas seem to know their neighbors and likely have occasional encounters with them.

Why are giant pandas rare in the wild?

Once more widespread but probably still rare both in lowland and highland areas over much of eastern and central China, giant pandas are now endangered with extinction due to the following factors:

- **habitat destruction**—the greatest threat, due to China's growing population, cities, farms, and timber industry.

- **habitat fragmentation**—as remaining habitat is carved up, giant pandas stuck in smaller forest patches face a greater threat of extinction. One threat is that giant pandas become cut off from other supplies of bamboo. This is the main threat focused on in this activity.
- **poaching**—although penalties for killing giant pandas are severe in China, some are still hunted illegally.
- **slow reproduction**—giant pandas breed slowly and cannot quickly replenish depleted populations.
- **trapping**—traps set to catch musk deer and other animals sometimes catch giant pandas instead.

What is being done in China to save giant panda habitat?

The giant panda is a protected species in China. It receives the highest degree of protection afforded an animal, and penalties are severe for its capture or killing. Since 1963, 33 giant panda reserves have been set aside to protect these endangered animals and their habitat. China has also set up panda breeding centers and drawn up an official National Plan for the Conservation of Giant Pandas and Their Habitats. The Chinese government aims to double the size of reserve acreage, link reserves via corridors of natural habitat, and relocate farms when necessary in order to create connected habitats. National Zoo scientists work closely with Chinese scientists and

conservationists on their ongoing efforts to learn more about, protect, and improve the situation for giant pandas.

What is the National Zoo doing to help?

The National Zoo has embarked upon a ten-year research and training plan that aims to ensure the giant panda's survival both in zoos and in the wild. Zoo scientists help train Chinese scientists in panda research and medical and conservation practices geared toward protecting giant pandas and their habitat. Meanwhile, at the Zoo, Tian Tian and Mei Xiang are the "Washington ambassadors," helping zoo staff and the public to better understand the mysterious giant panda. All hope that they will mate and help the National Zoo become a satellite panda breeding center.

Materials:

- large mats, taped areas of the classroom floor, or some other scattered areas where kids can play and pretend that they live in islands of habitat
- your students' imagination

Directions:

1. Before class, go around the room and split it into five or six easily demarcated zones. These can be marked by chairs or other furniture, signs such as "Panda Reserve," large mats, or masking tape on the floor.

2. After a visit to the Zoo's giant pandas, digest the Teacher Background Information above and explain in simple terms to your students that giant pandas are rare as well as unusual animals that must live in forests, where they find shelter and food (mainly bamboos). Touch on the multiple threats that all giant panda populations face.

3. Tell the class that each student will pretend to be a giant panda and that as giant pandas, they need several things:
 - food (pretend bamboo)
 - shelter (forest)
 - other giant pandas

4. Split the class into isolated panda populations and station them at the habitat islands you've created.

5. Explain to the students that they are now giant pandas living in isolated forests separated by open farm areas that they cannot cross. Have them play together and pretend to be isolated giant pandas for a few minutes.

6. Ask them if they think they would like to be stuck in such a small area for long. Would they like more habitat in which to roam, seek food and other pandas?

7. Explain quickly that one way people try to protect pandas is by linking patches of forest via forest corridors--strips of habitat, like bridges--that join one forest to the next. Create an imaginary bridge from one forest to the nearest one and keep joining them until all of the pandas are united for a few minutes of all-panda play.