

Activity 12

Giant Panda Song

Objective & Overview:

Through song, students will create lyrics relating to giant pandas and zoos.

Teacher Background Information:

Many times, people wonder about zoos and their purpose. Why keep animals in zoos? Why put them on public display? The answers below and your students' songs may help answer these questions.

Why have giant pandas in zoos?

Many Zoo visitors come to see the giant pandas because they are rare and unusual. The public's enjoyment of the giant pandas is important to the Zoo because without public support and awareness many endangered species, including giant pandas, could quickly disappear. But just exhibiting an animal is not everything: Many modern zoos also dedicate themselves to breeding endangered species and educating the public about the plight of wildlife and what can be done to improve it.

Overall, there are four main reasons why zoos have giant pandas:

- To learn more about giant panda natural history, including their breeding behavior, nutritional needs, and daily habits.

- To create a genetically diverse zoo population that improves the species' odds against extinction. Zoo birth rates and survival rates have increased in recent years. However, the zoo population is not yet self-sustaining, and is not yet large and diverse enough to support a *reintroduction* program. Right now, about 60 percent of giant pandas living in zoos were born in breeding facilities and not in the wild. This includes the Zoo's Tian Tian and Mei Xiang. The remainder come from the wild.
- To potentially provide a pool of giant pandas that can be reintroduced into wild habitat to help repopulate areas where giant pandas have disappeared or are about to disappear.
- To educate the public about the need for conserving giant pandas and the world's biodiversity.

How many giant pandas are living in zoos?

About 120 giant pandas live at zoos and breeding facilities in China, while fewer than 20 others live in zoos in other parts of the world. These include a pair and their one offspring, which was born via *artificial insemination* and is the first giant panda born outside of China in a decade. Pairs also live at the San Diego Zoo and Zoo Atlanta. Others live at zoos in Mexico City (where the first out-of-China giant panda was born in 1980), Japan, and Germany.

How long have giant pandas been kept at zoos?

In 1936, Chicago's Brookfield Zoo became the first North American zoo to have and exhibit a giant panda. Two more giant pandas were brought to the Brookfield Zoo in the 1930s, and others to the Bronx Zoo and St. Louis Zoo. In 1941, the Bronx Zoo acquired a pair. No other giant pandas were sent from China to the United States until 1972, when Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing arrived at the National Zoo.

What about the National Zoo's giant pandas?

Tian Tian and Mei Xiang arrived at the National Zoo in December 2000 at ages 3-1/2 and 2-1/2, respectively. They were born at a Chinese breeding facility.

The National Zoo's first giant pandas arrived in 1972, as a gift from China. The first successful breeding between the two occurred in 1983, but their cub died of pneumonia few hours after birth. Ling-Ling became pregnant two other times (once with twins), but the cubs died within a few days, either from bacterial infections or lack of oxygen. Other zoo panda cubs have died of similar infections in zoos in Spain, Mexico, and China, and Zoo scientists and their colleagues hope to find out if immunities passed from a mother to her cub through milk may play a strong part in protecting future zoo cubs.

The male Hsing-Hsing lived to 29 years and was one of the oldest giant pandas known; the female Ling-Ling died at age 23. Zoo scientists and keepers learned many things from almost three decades of studying and caring for the pair. The many lessons they

learned will be carefully applied to the care of Tian Tian and Mei Xiang.

Directions:

1. Note: This activity might be best aimed at students grade 4 and maybe grade 3. Tell your students that they will be performing for each other on behalf of endangered giant pandas. Stress that this activity has nothing to do with singing ability, and everything to do with creativity and originality.
2. Students should select a favorite or familiar song and listen to that song a number of times before starting on their lyric writing. They should also be thinking about what they have learned about giant pandas.
3. Students should write lyrics that follow their chosen song. They don't have to cover the entire song. You decide how long you think your students can hang in there. Maybe just a few verses. The lyrics should replace the song's original message with the story of the giant panda, its behavior, appearance, plight, and the role zoos play in helping save this rare animal.
4. Have students perform their songs in class. They should be reminded to be respectful of all performers. Remind them that everyone will get their chance at the limelight.