

How to deal with *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*?

Cheng Guo - 9/22/2017



Photos shot by my travel mate.

Ailuropoda melanoleuca, according to the dictionary means something containing both black and white. However, it is not zebra. It is the giant panda. Last summer, I visited China Conservative and Research center for Giant Pandas in Wolong, Sichuan. Being a volunteer for three days, I came to understand the giant panda in greater depth.

The first thing I did every morning was to clean their waste from the previous day. The trainer would drive the pandas back to their cages before letting us enter their "playground." We had to clean the old bamboo out, both leaves and poles, along with their biological waste. Because pandas have short intestines, making their metabolism quick, their waste is green and not too

stinky. After cleaning everything out, we had to move fresh bamboo in for the pandas to eat. I was surprised that we had to do the same job every morning!

"Don't they eat the bamboo left from the day before?" I asked.

"They are noble," was all the instructor replied.

Adult pandas have long and sharp nails, brown eyebrows, and brown tails. They smile while they eat. Pandas have so many features that are usually not aware of. They are supposedly carnivores. Seriously. The one thing I clearly remember our instructor telling us over and over again during our time there is that we should not get too close to an adult panda, even when feeding them. Most domestic pandas only eat bamboo, shoots, carrots, and cake. Speaking of cakes, they are not real cakes. They are made of mashed beans and rice. The panda I was feeding in the picture was 11 years old, approximately a youth in the panda. As a domestic panda, he was well-trained. When the trainer told him, "come, eat", he would automatically come towards the cage wall, put one hand on the barrier (yes, that's how they are well trained), and open up their mouth waiting to be fed. The whole time I was told to keep my body at least a half meter away, because if a panda is frightened, the cage cannot contain them.

Meanwhile, in Panda Kindergarten, things are different. Panda Kindergarten is a place for pandas less than two years old. In their childhood, pandas are super lazy (they are also lazy enough even in their adulthood). I observed a baby panda closely while he was relaxing on a small hill. For 30 minutes, the only thing he did was turn over once. I am sure he was not sleeping for his eyes were open the entire time. But he did not do anything, even when a mosquito was flying around him.

You may be wondering why we put so much effort to take care of pandas. They are rare, of course, but they also need humans to take care of them. Some social activists claim that keeping pandas in a cage is mental torture. But the truth is: if we do not take care of them, they cannot survive in the wild. In 2010, Chinese scientists selected an adult panda and send it back to the wild. It was found dead a year later. Since then, Chinese scientists realized the importance of training them before returning them to the wild. At another Giant Panda Research Centre, not far from the one I visited, trainers

dress up as pandas to feed pandas for them to get rid of human care as quickly as possible.

Giant pandas are cute and rare. They should have a place to live. I just hope one day, pandas can find their home back in the wild and live happy lives.