

Material #2

World | Animals

A Fond Farewell

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TFK Kid Reporter Ben Stern



BEAR STEPS The panda Tian Tian takes a walk in the grass at the National Zoo in September.

MARVIN JOSEPH—THE WASHINGTON POST/GETTY IMAGES

Want to see a panda up close? Time is running out. By early next year, there won't be any of the bears left in zoos in the United States. They're being sent back to China. For more than 50 years, the

country has loaned pandas to American zoos as a token of goodwill. But for now, that period is coming to an end.

"We are going to miss these bears so much," Trish Jarvis told TIME for Kids. She's an animal keeper at the Smithsonian's National Zoo, in Washington, D.C. The zoo is sending its pandas back to China in the coming weeks. "[Pandas] have been part of everyone's lives for over 50 years."



ON THE SCENE TFK Kid Reporter Ben Stern meets with zookeeper Trish Jarvis at the National Zoo in November

COURTESY BEN STERN

The China Wildlife and Conservation Association owns the bears. Its

loan agreement with the Smithsonian expires in December. Some observers say China may be taking its pandas back from the U.S. because of disagreements between the countries' governments over issues such as trade and technology.

The National Zoo's three pandas—Tian Tian, Mei Xiang, and their cub, Xiao Qi Ji—will be on a plane to China before the end of the year. Other zoos have already sent theirs back. The bears that lived at the Memphis Zoo, in Tennessee, went back in April. The San Diego Zoo, in California, said goodbye to its bears in 2019. The pandas at Zoo Atlanta, in Georgia, are to be returned early next year.

Pandas have been a symbol of friendship between the U.S. and China since 1972. That year, President Richard Nixon and First Lady Pat Nixon visited Beijing, China. Pat Nixon mentioned her fondness for giant pandas. The Chinese government offered two of the furry creatures as a gift to the American people. The bears went to live at the National Zoo.

Panda diplomacy has done more than bolster good relations between countries. It has been good for the bears. "They are ambassadors for their species," Jarvis says. Seeing them at the zoo

"gets people excited about saving this bear."

The giant panda was downgraded from **endangered** to vulnerable in 2016. Its numbers are increasing. An estimated 1,800 are living in their natural habitat in China. Jarvis says that people can continue to support panda conservation in many ways. "Reduce, reuse, recycle. Or you could donate [to wildlife organizations], whether it's time or money."



The Smithsonian's bears will travel to China on a FedEx plane. They'll be tucked away safely in crates. Zookeepers are preparing the bears by putting them in crates and feeding them their favorite treat, water sweetened with honey. This helps them adjust to the **confinement**.

To say farewell, the zoo recently held a nine-day celebration called Panda Palooza. There were panda-themed activities and conservation events.



FAREWELL TREAT Xiao Qi Ji eats a frozen fruit cake during Panda Palooza, in September.

ANNA MONEYMAKER—GETTY IMAGES

Jarvis says she'll always value the relationship she built with the pandas over the years. "Every bear is different," she says. "They're pandas, but they're like any other animal—your dog or cat. They have a personality."



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Giant panda populations face many challenges, such as habitat loss and low birth rates. Conservationists have worked hard to protect the species, and have started to see success. The population grew by 17% from 1994 to 2014. And the International Union for Conservation of Nature announced that giant pandas are no longer endangered. The animals are still considered **vulnerable**. Their natural bamboo habitat is threatened by climate change. —By Cristina Fernandez