

IB/MACS/TOPS

CLASS 8 HANDOUT

Pandas have always aroused interest and love. In Ancient China, they were thought of as rare and noble creatures. The mother of one Chinese emperor was buried with a panda skull in her tomb, and the grandson of another emperor is rumoured to have given Japan two pandas as a token of goodwill. In the 1970s, loans of pandas to American and Japanese zoos marked the first signs of friendship between those countries and the People's Republic of China, giving rise to the term 'panda diplomacy'. However, nowadays the panda is also known to be an endangered species.



Pandas have been the target of poachers since ancient times for many reasons, including their warm fur. Sometimes their habitat is destroyed by those who want to clear land for agriculture. This deforestation, as it is called, is sometimes legal, sometimes not, but the effect is the same for the panda. A population explosion in China in the mid-twentieth century increased the need for land, often panda habitat, for housing. Around the same time, there was a famine in China which led to increased hunting of wildlife, including pandas, for food. When people are living under such conditions, it is hardly surprising that conservation issues are not high on their agenda. China's rapid economic expansion in relatively recent times means that some of the panda's habitat has also been removed to make way for industrial development. Even when their habitat is not completely destroyed, it is increasingly fragmented by roads, railways and other infrastructure that is part of this economic expansion.



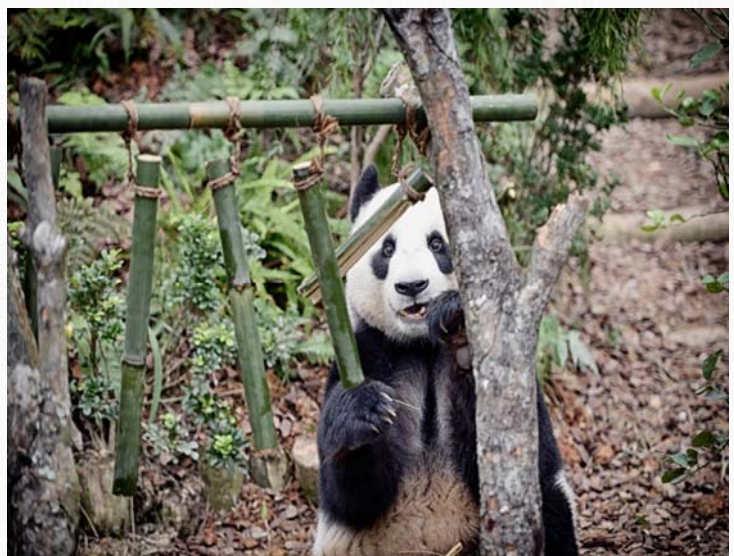
Although pandas have been known to eat fish, bananas and eggs, their staple diet is bamboo, around a kilo each day, and there are problems finding this large amount. As their habitat is encroached upon, pandas are forced to move higher and higher into the mountains, where there are fewer types of bamboo available to them.



Pandas are further endangered by the fact that, when a cub is born in the wild, it lives with its mother for up to three years, and so each female produces only a few cubs in her lifetime. Furthermore, they are not keen to breed in captivity, despite many efforts by zoologists to encourage them to do so; for example, Bao Bao has lived in Berlin Zoo for 25 years without reproducing. Although nature reserves do exist to protect pandas, the staff are often inexperienced and lack knowledge about how to manage such reserves. Conservation attempts are sometimes hindered by economics; the cost of keeping a panda is up to five times more than that of keeping the next most expensive endangered animal, the elephant.



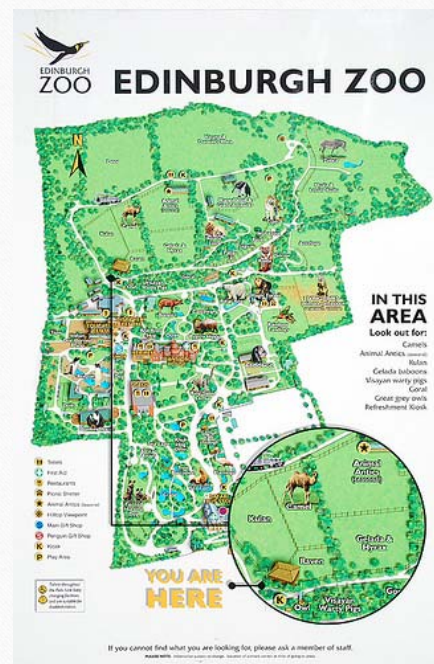
Nevertheless, we might be encouraged by what is being done to protect this universally loved animal. Conservation reserves have been opened to prevent their numbers declining. Two decades ago there were thirteen of these reserves, and by 2006 the number had risen to forty. At the same time, laws have been passed to limit ownership of guns to prevent poaching, and to remove people living on territory which has been reserved for these adorable creatures.



Conservation organisations, for example the World Wildlife Fund, have worked tirelessly to protect the panda. The WWF has campaigned for an increase in the area of panda habitat under legal protection. Sometimes pandas become isolated by the encroachment of towns on their territory, and the WWF has campaigned for the creation of green corridors to link isolated pandas. In various parts of China, patrols have been established against poaching and illegal deforestation, manned by experienced and trained personnel.



Some zoos borrow pandas to raise public awareness of the panda's plight by educating visitors who flock to see them; an example of this is Edinburgh Zoo which, in January 2011, secured the loan of two pandas. Some of these zoos insist that they will pay the loan fee only if China spends at least half of it on work on panda conservation. The WWF has used the panda as its logo since the organisation's foundation in 1961, thus further raising the profile of the panda and the need to conserve it.





A teenage boy called Miles tells the story of a night when he went out on the mudflats by the sea with his friend Phelps.



My friend Phelps waded into the sea up to his calves. He was wearing waist-high rubber waders, so I didn't worry about him getting wet, but the mud usually softened the further out you went, and I told him that. 'Thanks, Dad,' he said, without looking back. I didn't say anything when he went in above his knees. He rolled up his sleeves, reached down and came up with a bright orange starfish. 'Nice,' I praised. 'Let me take a look.' I reached out, hoping to get him to come back.



'I'll just get one more,' he said. He bunched his sleeves higher and went on. Suddenly it looked as if he'd skipped a step on a staircase. Water rose past his thighs. He tried to turn and retreat, but the more he struggled the lower he sank. His waist was almost under water. 'I'm stuck,' he said.



I took off my boots and stepped into the water to my knees, then dived and dug around his feet. The mud felt as loose and light as flour. Then I pulled up his left leg and that's when I felt the mud grab hold of my right foot and panic rip through the length of me. I'd been temporarily stuck often enough to know that, if I shifted my weight onto my left foot to extricate my right foot, I might never breathe again. Then Phelps grabbed my hair and neck and, exerting all of his force, pulled me free as if I were a kitten. This selfless act had made the situation worse. I was now free but the water was up to Phelps's breastbone.

When other people had got stuck, it was when they were crossing soft exposed mud, with the typical rescue involving laying down wooden planks that the person could crawl free on. However, Phelps was more than knee deep in mud.



When I told him my ideas, he pleaded with me not to leave him. The tide was coming in. Another hour and it would be over his head. He screamed for help. But nobody lives by the mudflats. I pulled on my boots and ran back along the beach. Earlier that night I'd seen a piece of plastic piping washed up on the shore. It was still there. I grabbed it, then sprinted back and tossed it to Phelps. 'Practise fitting it to your mouth so that you can breathe through it,' I said. 'I'll be back in a flash,' though I didn't really know how long it would take me to find anyone to help. Then I ran, though I felt ashamed for leaving him.



The closest house was a mile away, and the man who answered the door looked so old I considered running on to the next house. But after he calmed me enough to fill him in, he found a coil of rope and an inflated raft, and then we ran back toward the mud. Once we burst onto the beach, it was impossible to tell from the tranquil water or the reassuring daybreak in the east that anything horrific was happening. I could see no sign of Phelps. Nothing. I was in full side-aching panic...