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Suzanne's Annual Trip to See the Pandas



Beautiful Panda

I labor all year at a desk and a computer and only get to spend a precious few days in China with our beloved pandas. A few days of holding, cuddling and photographing pandas keeps me going for another year until my next visit.

My 2008 trip was just a few short weeks after the horrific earthquake, which damaged the Wolong Panda Center. When I was there, most of the pandas had not yet been evacuated, and when I arrived, the remains of Mao Mao had not yet been uncovered.

The drive was horrible and dangerous but I had no reservations about going. The mood of the staff was overall one of being thankful for being alive and concern for the pandas. Although it was a short visit it was an extremely important visit as I was to learn on this year's trip.

For complete details of my 2008 trip, see <http://www.pandasinternational.org/archives.html> >>

Following my June 2008 trip, all the Wolong pandas were safely relocated to other wildlife centers, reserves or zoos. Most were taken to the Bifengxia Panda Center, Wolong's sister program. The following is a tour of the Bifengxia Panda Center and my visit.

BIFENGXIA PANDA CENTER — September 2009

Bifengxia is part of the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda in Ya'an City that opened in 2003. This base was established as a safeguard for captive Giant Pandas at the Wolong Center. The threat of an outbreak of disease or infection was of great concern because if an epidemic was to occur among the captive pandas at the Wolong Center, it could have destroyed the entire population. Splitting the pandas into two separate populations was planned to prevent this from occurring. When the new Wolong Center is built, the pandas will once again be split.

I don't think anyone could have imagined the role Bifengxia would play following the earthquake of 2008.

Supplies Delivered

Just before my 2009 trip, I received an email from Dr. Wang with a long list of items he needed me to bring to the Panda Center. With quick delivery from several suppliers, we were able to get all the items to Pandas International in time for me to hand carry them to China.

I arrived in Chengdu, found my good friend Wu Ping ("Peter Wood") and we immediately took off for Bifengxia. I had previously mailed the supplies I hand carried from Beijing to Peter in Chengdu, so his little SUV was crammed full of boxes and my suitcases.

Upon arriving at the administration building we found Dr. Tang and progressed to the hospital where the supplies were unloaded.

With your help I was able to deliver the following to the Bifengxia hospital

- The earthquake damaged the VetScan and equipment used in semen collection, so a new VetScan and semen collection device were delivered earlier this year and the damaged ones returned to the US. Both the VetScan and the semen collection device were returned to their manufacturers and repaired. I then delivered the repaired equipment to Bifengxia.
- Reagents – for scientific testing (Reagents are always a bit of a challenge as they must be kept cold while traveling. I had no problem getting from the US to Beijing with my little cooler and ice bricks, but the airport security leaving Beijing for Chengdu would not let me take the ice bricks on the plane and took them away. So I left the customs area and went to KFC and successfully begged for a bag of ice for the trip to Chengdu.)

Other supplies delivered

- Needles, darts, connectors and supplies for the DanInject Immobilization device
- Pediatric stethoscope
- Medicines
- Surgical tape Vetwrap, and sponges
- Catheter Guards, Catheter needles, and Syringes of various sizes
- 350 boxes of worming paste

Those of you who have followed Pandas International for some time know that worms are a major problem for pandas. (Info about a wild panda malnourished due to an infestation of worms below)

Dr. Wu had also emailed me that they needed a generator for the hospital because the electricity in the Bifeng Gorge tends to go out frequently. The lack of power causes major problems for the pandas being treated in the hospital and for the cubs in the nurseries. So with the help of my friend Wu Ping, I was able to purchase and arrange delivery of a large generator while I was there. To the staff's delight, the generator arrived the day after I left for the United States.

The Hospital

When I toured the hospital with Dr. Tang, there were two pandas being treated in the hospital.

One was an old panda, named Yong Ba, brought back from Shenzhen due to health problems. Her condition has improved now that she is back in Bifengxia and she looked content. The staff continues to monitor her very closely because Yong Ba is having some eye problems, which might be cataracts.

The other panda in the hospital was one rescued from the wild. Her injuries resulted in the loss of her left front paw, but she is now doing well under the care of the veterinary staff at the hospital. Due to loss of her paw, she cannot be returned to the wild so she will be cared for at Bifengxia. Hopefully, she will become a mother in the future and an important part of the breeding program.

A third panda had been rescued from the wild and treated in the hospital. The staff was pleased with the panda's recovery and felt comfortable moving her to another enclosure. This panda was extremely malnourished because of a major infestation of worms. When rescued near Bei Chuan, she weighed only 50kg (110 lb), which Dr. Wang said was underweight for her age. She was so underweight it took over 6 months for her to be considered a healthy weight. In her recovery from malnourishment she became so accustomed to human care that it was determined that she could

not be returned to the wild, so she will remain at the Panda Center.

Her story illustrates the importance of worming the pandas and explains why I carried so many boxes of worming paste. The paste will ensure that none of the pandas at the Panda Center will get infected with worms.

The veterinarians and I discussed how they determine if and when a rescued panda can be returned to the wild. They said it depends on the amount of time the panda must remain in captivity for treatment. Dr. Wang felt if they were in captivity for treatment for an extended period then they could not be returned to the wild.

The Breeding Center

Bifengxia was originally planned for mostly sub adults and seniors. There was a small breeding center but not nearly large enough for all the pregnant females which had to be evacuated from Wolong in 2008. A new breeding area was rapidly constructed to house 14 females.



Tien Tien cradles one cub while its twin is in the nursery

I was privileged to tour the maternity enclosures. When I visited there were 12 pandas in this area with their cubs. Pandas which had delivered included Hua Mei, Gong Zhu, Bai Xue, Xi Mei, Na Na, You You, Hai Zhi, Tien Tien, Zi Zhu, Le Sheng, Ying Ying and Ye Ye. After I left the Center Guo Guo delivered twins on September 27th.

Na Na and Tien Tien also delivered twins. So during my visit one twin was with each mother and the other was in the nursery. It was great to see the incubators purchased by Pandas International through member donations being occupied by the cubs of 2009.

When I first entered the breeding center, I was in the monitoring room where 14 different pandas can be viewed via cameras. Pandas International was able to supply two Sony cameras for monitoring earlier this year.

There was one other female that was not pregnant but in need of extra care in this area of the Center. As with the panda in the hospital, she too had been rescued in the wild and was not yet healthy enough to be moved into an open enclosure. When she was rescued and brought in, she was paralyzed in the hind legs from an injury to her spinal cord. It is thought that she either sustained her injuries from a severe fall or from a falling rock, either way it is most likely due to the earthquake. After intensive care, she is doing much better and can get around on her own. Hopefully, she will make a full recovery and become a mother in the future.

The Nursery

Perhaps the greatest reward I get for volunteering the entire year in an effort to save this magnificent animal is the privilege to hold a young cub. There were only two cubs in the nursery this year because were only two sets of twins born . On the day I visited, I got to hold one of the male cubs born to Na Na. He was 60 days old and flourishing in the care of the nursery staff.

The other cub in the nursery was one of the female cubs born to Tien Tien and she was just 35 days old.

The quality of the nursery staff and the state of the art incubators supplied by Pandas International have dramatically improved the survival rate of captive born pandas. While in the nursery, staff members must do all the chores Mom would be doing with their twin in the breeding center.

The Center is working to improve its twin "swapping" program. They have now discovered that after about 4-5 months both cubs can be with the mother full time.



My greatest joy

The Kindergarten



Are these all mine?

The one year olds in the kindergarten appear to be thriving thanks to dedicated caretakers, nutritious panda bread, lots of carrots and most importantly, milk formula. I always tried to be at the kindergarten at feeding time because I find it to be one of the most fun activities when visiting the Panda Center as they are most active during this time. They finish their bowls of milk in record time and then try to see if their neighbors have any left. Panda bread and carrots are also a big hit!

Bamboo is introduced to them more as a learning activity rather for actual food, but it seems pretty fun to play with. (photo of two with bamboo)

When they are not eating, most of the cubs like to hang out in trees or on the platforms in the enclosure. Lots of tires and toys are in the enclosure for enrichment.

I have a 2 1/2 inch stack of photos of these comical toddlers.



What is this stuff?

The Enclosures



I love bamboo!

Once the cubs leave the kindergarten, they are housed in large enclosures comprised of an indoor and an outdoor area. The health and well being of the pandas are the top priority of the Center. Their nutritional needs are addressed with a healthy supply of vitamin enriched panda bread, treats of tender bamboo shoots and carrots and, of course, a huge supply of fresh bamboo.

The enclosures also include enrichment objects and activities, which provide for mental and physical stimulation in order to improve their quality of life.

The pandas are also trained with treats to extend their arms on specially designed trays so the staff can administer medical tests without causing much stress on the pandas. One panda kept sticking its arm out towards me in hopes of a treat, reminding me of my dogs going to the treat jar and raising their front leg to "shake."



OK, I put my arm out — Where is my treat?

Adoptions



Spending time with Harvey

I was at the Panda Center during the annual "Hug your Cub" event the Center puts on for everyone who has adopted a panda. I adopted "Harvey" (Official name – Qing Qing) in memory of my father on my first trip in 1999. It was a wonderful afternoon when I got to feed him his panda bread! Harvey has grown into a large and healthy panda. All adoptions provide monetary support for the daily activities at the Center.

Breeding

The focus of the Panda Center is to conduct research on the breeding practices of the giant pandas. The Wolong and now the Bifengxia Center is the largest breeding center in the world. There are basically three problems with panda reproduction: mating, conception and survival. Mating through both natural and artificial insemination is done in the spring.

There is no pregnancy test for pandas so the only way to confirm if a panda is pregnant is with an ultra sound test. I was fortunate to get to observe Dr. Wang while he administered an ultrasound to Guo Guo. The females are trained to enter a cage and lay on their backs with their front paws on the bars of the cage. During the entire procedure the caretaker constantly feeds small bits of apple, the ultimate treat, to the female. If the panda removes her paws from the bars the caretaker yells to the veterinarian who quickly pulls his hand out of the cage.

Unfortunately, one of the two ultrasound machines is no longer working and the one they are using is an inexpensive model made for humans not animal. Dr. Wang expressed the need for one with a color monitor, sound and video recording capabilities.

The Staff

The earthquake and relocation of the pandas had a huge impact on the staff. The Wolong staff have been basically uprooted and are now a long way from family and friends. Dr. Li expressed concern about some of the staff who are far from home and he feels they need travel assistance in order to be able to have a holiday with their families.

When the pandas were evacuated, the staff left their homes and went with them. Bifengxia, a smaller center than Wolong, did not have enough space for pandas or staff. Some of the staff now stay at the Center in dorm-like accommodations while others have found housing in near by Ya'an City, but there is still a shortage of staff housing.

I have always felt it was imperative to acknowledge the dedication and commitment the staff shows in their care of the pandas. I want the staff to feel that they are an invaluable and intricate part of saving the pandas.

So on this trip, I hosted a staff appreciation dinner to pay tribute to their efforts and recognize the fact that they too have had their lives disrupted. I think the staff members able to attend enjoyed the evening and appreciated the gesture.

Farewell Dinner

On the last night, the Bifengxia Center hosted a wonderful banquet for all the "Hug My Cub"

volunteers. It was a very special night and I was presented with a beautiful glass award for service to the pandas. In addition, I was given an award for Pandas International.

Throughout the evening everyone thanked me for my support and mentioned numerous times how they appreciated my coming in 2008 so soon after the earthquake. I was told repeatedly "You were the first organization to come." I could tell my visit in 2008 over the difficult mountain pass had made quite an impression on them!



Celebrating the staff

Go to the panda club web page for the **Hug My Cub event** >>

Status of Wolong

The rebuilding of Wolong is unfortunately behind schedule due to flooding and mudslides in the area. The 2008 earthquake left many of the mountainsides bare making for a dangerous season when the spring rains came in 2009. Deaths were reported among road construction workers in the area. While I planned to visit the construction site, Dr. Li said the road was too treacherous for travel.

Dr. Li did share with me the plans for the "new" Wolong Center and it looks great. (More about the new Center in a future newsletter.)

Reintroduction

Reintroduction will need to be delayed until the Wolong Center can be rebuilt and new training enclosures completed. Therefore, reintroduction will not proceed until at least two years after Wolong Center is completed.

The China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda plans to gradually reintroduce pandas into the wild in order to increase the genetic diversity of the native wild panda population and ensure the long-term survival of the species.

Current Needs

Formula

The next major request is for the Esbilac milk formula. In order to ensure the cubs have enough formula for their first year, I will need to order the formula no later than December first. The current cost of the formula with air freight is \$200.00 for a 10 kg bag and they will need 100 bags.

When I toured the nursery and the storage area for the formula with Professor Huang Yan, he told me they are extremely careful with the dry formula. Huang explained that the formula is kept off the ground in a climate controlled room. Every bag is inspected and smelled to be certain it is good before it is given to the pandas. They will make sure the older bags are used before the new. (Photo with bags of formula)

Ultrasound

The other major item needed before next spring is a new ultrasound machine. One of the two they have is very old and currently not working. The other does not produce clear enough images for the veterinarians' research. An ultrasound is the only proven method to confirm a panda's pregnancy.



In addition, the veterinarians will need advanced training on the new ultrasound machine. I showed Dr. Wang information on the Universal MyLab5 portable machine . Veterinarians in the US have told me this is a very good portable machine, with both sound and color monitors. Additionally, the company provides an excellent training program for its use.

So I may be asking our supporters with lots of mileage to donate miles in order to bring Dr. Wang and others to the US for this invaluable training.

Second Immobilization Device

Dr. Wang also requested a second immobilization device as there had been a problem when the one device was in the field for use with an injured wild panda and a panda at the Center also needed to be anesthetized.

Future

Visiting the Panda Center is a wonderful time and I am proud to see the hard work of Pandas International making a real difference for the pandas and the staff that care for them. But I always leave feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the needs the Center has looking to the future. It is at these times I am thankful to have dedicated supporters that will help me raise enough money to fulfill these requirements.

With your continued support, the future will bring a beautiful new Wolong Panda Center equipped with everything they need.

Thanks

I would like to say "Thank You" to all the staff at the Center who went out of their way to help me, show me around, answer my questions and accommodate my requests. A special thank you also goes to Wu Ping for arranging my travel, getting the generator and being a great friend to me, the pandas and Pandas International. Also, thank you to my friend Annette Yuen, who was an email friend prior to meeting me at Bifengxia and became a real life friend whose help with translations and information proved invaluable.

2010 will be the 10th anniversary of the formation of Panda International, so I invite you all to join me in a trip to see the pandas!

[Click here to view more of my latest trip >>](#)

Suzanne Braden

Director, Pandas International

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