

Animal Politics: The Ethical Quandary of Panda Diplomacy

From [Ed Boks/Animal Politics](#)

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A recent New York Times article "[Welcome Back Pandas](#)" reported on an agreement to bring a new pair of pandas, Bao Li and Qing Bao, to the Smithsonian’s National Zoo in Washington, D.C. before the end of 2024. This follows the return of three giant pandas—Tian Tian, Mei Xiang, and their cub Xiao Qi Ji—to China in November 2023, after residing at the National Zoo for twenty-three years.

The departure of the three pandas was thought to have marked the end of a significant chapter in U.S.-China relations, often referred to as "*panda diplomacy*"—the practice where China loans pandas to foreign zoos as a symbol of goodwill. Their departure was part of a broader trend of China recalling its pandas from Western zoos amid strained diplomatic relations. However, it is hoped this new agreement will signal a renewed era of panda diplomacy and a potential thaw in relations.

As we reflect on these developments, it provides an opportune time to examine “panda diplomacy” through the lens of [compassionate conservation](#) and the broader history of zoo conservation efforts. This perspective allows us to critically assess both the effectiveness of zoo-based conservation programs and the ethical implications of using animals as diplomatic tools

The History and Evolution of Zoo Conservation

Zoos have historically been seen as places of entertainment, where exotic animals were displayed for public amusement. Over time, however, the role of zoos evolved in response to growing public scrutiny. Today, modern zoos emphasize conservation, education, and research. They now claim to be “sanctuaries” for endangered species, breeding programs, and centers for public awareness about wildlife conservation. Despite these claims, substantial evidence reveals many species have not thrived in captivity, and numerous breeding programs have fallen short of their goals. The ethical implications of keeping animals in captivity for these purposes remain a significant concern.

For instance, elephant breeding programs have faced significant challenges, with high infant mortality rates and health issues among captive elephants. The Pittsburgh Zoo, for example, has been criticized after several elephant calves died shortly after birth. These criticisms highlight broader issues in elephant breeding programs, where high infant mortality rates and health issues are common due to inadequate space, social structures, and environmental enrichment.

Similarly, orangutans in captivity often suffer from psychological stress and exhibit abnormal behaviors, with limited success in breeding programs. The Toronto Zoo has struggled to maintain the health and well-being of its orangutans. Despite efforts to improve conditions, including opening a new outdoor habitat designed to better meet the needs of orangutans, the challenges in maintaining their health and well-being are well-documented.

Polar bears are another species that struggle in captivity due to their need for large territories and specific environmental conditions. Zoos have faced difficulties in providing adequate space and climate control, leading to health and behavioral issues. The Central Park Zoo in New York has been criticized for its small and inadequate polar bear enclosure, which fails to meet the species' complex needs.

Additionally, breeding programs for big cats like tigers and lions have faced significant challenges, including inbreeding and genetic issues. The Copenhagen Zoo faced international backlash after euthanizing a healthy young giraffe named Marius to prevent inbreeding, highlighting the ethical dilemmas in captive breeding programs.

The Ethical Dilemma of Panda Diplomacy

Panda diplomacy, while seemingly benign, raises significant ethical questions. The practice involves loaning pandas to foreign zoos, often in exchange for political or economic favors. While it may foster international goodwill, it subjects these animals to the stresses of captivity and long-distance travel, which can have detrimental effects on their well-being.

From a conservation perspective, the effectiveness of panda diplomacy is debatable. Since 1972, less than 20 panda cubs have been born outside of China, highlighting the challenges associated with captive breeding. For example, the National Zoo's first pair of pandas, Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing, had five cubs over 20 years, none of which survived due to health issues.

Attempts to reintroduce captive-born pandas into the wild have largely been unsuccessful. Of the 10 pandas released into the wild since 1983, six were recaptured after significant weight loss, and one was found dead. These pandas often lack the necessary survival instincts to thrive in the wild.

Hosting pandas is a significant financial burden for zoos. Pairs of pandas are loaned to zoos for \$1 million a year, and if any cubs are born, zoos must pay an additional \$600,000. This financial strain has led some countries, like Finland, to consider returning their pandas due to mounting costs.

Real conservation efforts for pandas should focus on mitigating habitat destruction. China's efforts to create conservation areas have had mixed results. Problems include reserves that are too small and fragmented, and prioritizing economic development over environmental conservation.

From a compassionate conservation standpoint, using wildlife as diplomatic tools is inappropriate. It commodifies animals, reducing them to mere instruments of political agendas. This practice contradicts the principle that individual animals have inherent value and deserve to be treated with respect and compassion.

Compassionate Conservation: A New Ethical Framework

Compassionate conservation is an ethical framework that prioritizes the well-being of individual animals while also considering the needs of species and ecosystems. It is built on five main tenets: first, do no harm; second, individuals matter; third, inclusivity; fourth, peaceful coexistence; and fifth, careful stewardship. This approach challenges traditional conservation methods that often justify individual suffering for the perceived greater good of species or ecosystems.

In the context of zoos, [compassionate conservation](#) advocates for practices that minimize harm and prioritize the welfare of each animal. This perspective is particularly relevant when considering the ethical implications of using animals as tools for international diplomacy.

A Plea for Ethical Conservation Practices

In light of the many failures of panda diplomacy and the challenges faced by captive pandas, I urge officials to reconsider the transport of Bao Li and Qing Bao to the National Zoo this year. Instead, let us join forces with China to rehabilitate and preserve the pandas' natural environment. Collaborative conservation initiatives can be more effective and ethical, focusing on habitat preservation, anti-poaching measures, and environmental education, without compromising animal welfare.

By redirecting resources and efforts towards these goals, we can achieve diplomatic objectives while ensuring the well-being of these magnificent creatures. The return of panda diplomacy should prompt a reevaluation of how we approach wildlife conservation and international diplomacy. It is an opportunity to advocate for ethical practices that align with the principles of compassionate conservation.

Who to contact regarding Panda Diplomacy:

Smithsonian's National Zoo

- **Director of the National Zoo:**
 - **Email:** NZP-Feedback@si.edu
 - **Phone:** (202) 633-4888
 - **Address:** Smithsonian National Zoological Park, 3001 Connecticut Ave NW, Washington, DC 20008

Chinese Embassy in the United States

- **Ambassador Contact:**
 - **Email:** chinaembpress_us@mfa.gov.cn
 - **Phone:** (202) 495-2266
 - **Address:** Embassy of the People's Republic of China, 3505 International Place, NW, Washington, DC 20008

Members of Congress

- **To contact your local senators and representatives:**
 - Use the following websites to find contact information:
 - [Find Your Representative](#)
 - [Senate Contact Information](#)

Animal Welfare and Conservation Organizations

- **World Wildlife Fund (WWF):**
 - **Email:** info@worldwildlife.org
 - **Phone:** 1-800-960-0993
 - **Address:** World Wildlife Fund, 1250 24th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037

By reaching out to these contacts, you can effectively promote the plea to prioritize ethical conservation practices and collaborative efforts to rehabilitate panda habitats in the wild.

Ed Boks is a former Executive Director of the New York City, Los Angeles, and Maricopa County Animal Care & Control Departments. [He is available for consultations.](#) His work has been published in the LA Times, New York Times, Newsweek, Real Clear Policy, Sentient Media, and now on Animal Politics with Ed Boks.