



SURVIVAL OF THE CUTEST

As the WWF celebrates 50 years of conservation, Stanley Johnson — intrepid father of Boris — goes in search of the fund's elusive icon, the imperilled giant panda

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to see a giant panda in the wild. Not in a zoo. Not in a research station. In the mountains of central China, the only place on Earth where they survive. Though pandas once frequented much of central China, nowadays they are to be found in only three provinces: Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu. In the mid-1980s, I visited Sichuan, taking a cargo boat down the Yangtze through the Three Gorges. While my fellow passengers filled their breakfast bowls with rice from a pail, I'd pop up on deck with my eyes skinned, hoping that, just as the sun was rising, I might see a giant panda having its own breakfast on the banks of the river. No such luck.

WWF, formerly the World Wildlife Fund, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, adopted the panda as its emblem in 1961, but the Chinese had long before then recognised it as a national symbol. Chinese postage stamps are issued with the giant panda image. Wherever you go, shops and street markets are full of cuddly panda toys. But all these are poor substitutes for the real thing.

My wife and I visited China in 2001, but that trip took in Shanghai, Beijing and other east-coast locations — not panda habitat. I decided to concentrate on other endangered animals, such as the gorilla. At the end of February this year, I had just returned to Britain from climbing Mount Kilimanjaro to raise funds for the Gorilla Organization, when the telephone rang. It was a specialist travel agent based in Cirencester, inviting me to see the giant panda in the wild. “We’re planning to take a small group to Shaanxi Province,” said Paul Craven, who would be leading the trip. “In the Qinling Mountains you have some of the highest density of pandas in the whole of China. It’s hard work, mind you. How fit are you? Some of the peaks are over 3,000 metres. We’ll be pushing through the forests from dawn to dusk. There’ll be snow on the ground. Of course, that can make the tracking easier.” Frankly, he made Kilimanjaro sound like a cakewalk. Paul admitted that he himself had never seen pandas in the wild, though he had once seen panda poo in a Sichuan reserve, >>>



and chewed bamboo shoots. “The panda eats shoots and leaves!” I commented – the sum total of my knowledge of the creatures at that point.

Ten days later, we landed in Xian, capital of Shaanxi Province. Joining Paul and me were Robin and Mary, and Keith, who was travelling on his own. His wife was quite happy not to come on this one, he told me. “My wife feels the same,” I said. “It’s a bit of a long shot, isn’t it?”

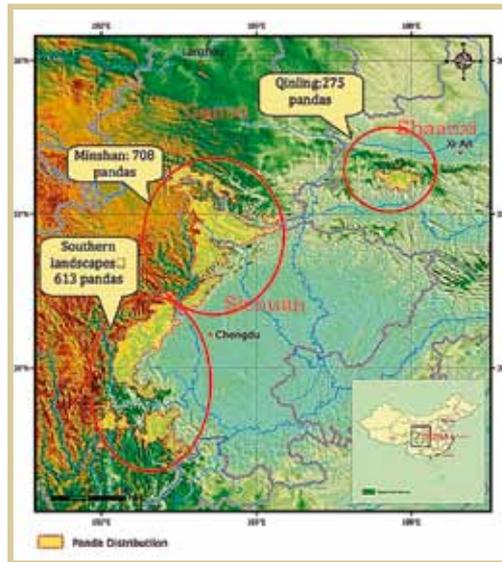
Giving Xian’s terracotta army a miss, we headed by minibus straight for the hills with a local Chinese guide, Cheng. He stood microphone in hand at the front, as the sleek black new Chinese-made Nissans and BMWs overtook us on both sides along a new highway. “Xian is 100km from the Qinling Mountains. The mountains form a watershed between north and south China. The water that falls on the northern slopes flow into the Yellow River. The water that falls on the south side flows into the Yangtze.”

The motorway started to snake through the mountains. Some 500 bridges, tunnels and viaducts cut through panda territory. Our first three days were to be spent in Changqing Nature Reserve, the last five in Foping Nature Reserve. Though not contiguous, both are key habitat for the Qinling giant panda, which some experts were claiming was so distinctive as to merit being called a sub-species in its own right.

Though so much has changed in China, some things have remained the same. Water buffalo are still used to plough the fields; the eaves of village houses were laden with cobs of maize, hung out to dry in the chill air. The friendliness of the people amazed me. Gone was that sense of being a stranger in a strange land. If you smiled, they smiled back. If you waved, they waved back. Maybe this spirit of goodwill is as new to them as it is to us.

In Changqing we saw a least of score of crested ibis, a bird that only a few years ago was on the verge of extinction. And we saw lots and lots of panda poo. Giant pandas eat for more than 12 hours every day, but most of what they eat is undigested. Researchers can examine the bite marks on the stalks of the bamboo in the droppings and work out how many pandas there are and where they live.

After three days, I had begun to think that droppings were all I was going to see. Soon after eight each morning, we headed off for the hills with two guides, Zhang and Qi. Before it was declared a nature reserve in 1995, Changqing had been logged, and there were still old tracks through the forest. If you were lucky enough to find one, this could make progress easier. But sometimes,



you just had to put your head down like a charging bull and hope your rucksack did not become fatally snagged in the undergrowth.

From to time, Zhang or Qi would examine some droppings, and shake their heads. Our escort, Cheng, interpreted the gestures for us. “They say this is two-week-old poo, maybe older.” Late one afternoon, we saw a pile of panda poo that looked very fresh. We gathered round excitedly, taking out our binoculars. “Watch for a movement in the bamboos!” Cheng whispered. “They shake the bamboo as they eat.” Once, we heard a rustling below us as we paused by a ravine, but it turned out to be a pair of golden pheasants pecking among tree roots.

My mood that night was despondent. There hadn’t been an official survey of giant pandas in China since 2004 when experts came up with a total of 1,600 – 1,600 in the whole of China! Would our luck be better in the next reserve? Paul tried to boost our spirits. “Foping is around 300 square kilometres. It’s thought to have nearly 100 giant pandas. That’s almost a third of a panda to each square kilometre.” At this point, I told him, I’d settle for a quarter of a panda or even an eighth.

Our minibus took us to a mountain pass, from where we walked 8km to the Foping Research Institute. At dinner we mixed with research staff and other ‘eco-tourists’, including a party from Canada led by Tom, who wore a badge saying “Grizzly Bear Tours”. “Our grizzlies are hibernating at this time of year.” Tom explained, “Giant pandas don’t hibernate. Apart from eating bamboo shoots and leaves, they sleep –



around 10 or 12 hours a day.” Matthias, a Swedish photographer for National Geographic, told me that two days earlier he had seen a panda – from a distance. “Here in Foping?” I asked. I shook Matthias’s hand and took his photo. I could always say I had met a man who had seen a panda in the wild even if I didn’t see one myself.

Our first full day in Foping was perfect for tracking. The sun shone as we headed towards the first of the several valleys we would explore. The panda is on the whole a solitary animal. The general rule is one valley per panda. We had new guides, He, Pu and Hu. Pu and Hu were authorised to scout in the mountains around and above us. If they spotted a panda, they would summon us by mobile phone. It seemed a fine system. but the call from the spotters never came.

Pu and Hu were still out in the field when Paul checked his watch. It was around 6pm and the sun was beginning to set. We were heading back to base camp when suddenly Zheng passed me on the narrow track. “They’ve seen a panda in a





Sichuan Province: a mother and baby giant panda and (previous pages) a cub hangs out in a tree. Far left: the giant panda's last habitats. Below: Chia-Chia and Ching-Ching, a gift from China to Ted Heath, arrive in London

tree!" he hissed. "Go back! Back up the hill!" We retraced our steps and he gestured that we should go down a slope through the bamboo, then up the dry bed of a creek. Mary saw it before I did — a large white mass of fur, 40ft up a tree, almost directly above us. Moments later, I too saw the animal. From time to time, it waved a paw but otherwise it remained motionless. Our presence seemed not to bother her in the slightest.

But the best was yet to come. March is mating season for pandas. Seconds later, a fully grown male panda poked its head out of the bamboo 20 yards away and gazed balefully at me. The size of

2000s, the total number of nature reserves reached 62, with a total area of 3.2m hectares, covering 71% of the giant panda population and 57% of its habitats." But that meant 43% of the giant panda's habitat and 29% of its population were less effectively protected. There are around 18 small populations of pandas. Even if commercial logging had been brought under control in protected areas, habitat fragmentation and degradation continued as a result of road construction, mining, dam building and mass tourism. WWF's reason for helping to conserve the giant panda goes far beyond the species

"GOD BACK! BACK UP THE HILL!" HISSED HISSED ZHENG. 'THE'VE SEEN A PANDA IN A TREE!' MARY SAW IT BEFORE I DID, A LARGE WHITE MASS OF FUR

the animal stunned me (an adult male can be 5ft tall when standing and weigh 13-20 stone), but so did the fact it was there at all. Not only was there a female panda directly overhead, but a large male panda, looking decidedly grumpy, was heading in my direction. I was so shocked, I completely screwed up on the photography front. I pointed my camera at the approaching male, tried to press the button for the zoom, but somehow turned the camera off instead.

Two days later, I found myself in WWF's Beijing office being briefed by Chang Youde, a panda specialist. "In the 1970s the first national giant panda survey in China estimated that there were 2,459 individuals in the wild." Youde told me. "In the 1980s, orders were issued to prevent poaching, selling and smuggling of rare wildlife. In the 1990s, the giant panda was one of the top 15 conservation priorities in China. And in the

itself. Its objective is to protect the landscape where the pandas live, thereby also protecting the thousands of other species living alongside them, and the natural resources and ecosystems on which, ultimately, humans also depend.

"This is our vision," Youde told me. "By 2030, a viable giant panda population lives in well-managed forests of the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, which in turn provides ecological services to the people living in its vicinity and further downstream." That vision means so much, not just for the future of the panda, and the people of China, but for the rest of the world too.

China's phenomenal economic progress has brought tremendous environmental pressures — but the Chinese government is attempting to redress some of the damage. Reforestation, and saving and enhancing biodiversity are goals of its environmental strategy. To the Chinese, the

Giant panda is far more than an evolutionary curiosity. It is a unique, necessary component of the country's environmental rehabilitation plan.

The WWF works alongside the Chinese authorities to integrate all the giant panda's habitats into a network to protect it at landscape level. Youde clasped my hand. "Let's join hands to protect this beating heart, its functional ecosystems like forest, grassland, wetland, lakes and their relevant key species at landscape level so we can leave a living future for giant pandas."

"How far is the Chinese government committed?" I ask Su Chunyu, a very senior official in the ministry of forests, who works in a large Soviet-style building. Among all the bustle and glitz of modern Beijing, these symbols are a reminder of the still all-encompassing power of the Chinese government. There was a time when a panda hide could be sold for \$10,000. Su shook his head emphatically. "There is no trade in panda skins. It is completely banned." I was not surprised to hear him say this — trading in panda skins carries the death penalty.

There will be no trophy hunters either, no rich Americans coming over with high-powered rifles. The Chinese Government will see to that too. Men like Su, like Youde, realise that saving giant panda is China's own responsibility and opportunity. It is part of the battle to save China itself from the scourge of success ■

Stanley Johnson travelled with Steppes Discovery, www.steppesdiscovery.co.uk. For information on WWF visit www.wwf.org.uk

xxxxxxxxx launches his own shopping channel, free of marketing speak, at: www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/brands



A SYMBOL OF HOPE

When the World Wildlife Fund was born in Morges, Switzerland, on April 29, 1961, it needed a logo that could speak for itself across language barriers. The British naturalist Peter Scott worked on some drawings and the famous 'panda' logo was born. Scott's logo has been tweaked since, but the essence remains the same.

