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Panda Shake-Up

Giant Panda Home Gets Extreme Makeover

By Ruth A. Musgrave

A major earthquake rocks China. The ground shudders and shakes around the giant pandas and their caregivers at the Wolong Giant Panda Breeding Center (WGPBC) in Sichuan. In two minutes of terror, entire mountainsides shear off, destroying villages, schools, and bamboo forests, and leaving the center in shambles. The pandas are taken to temporary quarters.

WGPBC is the world's largest giant panda breeding and research facility and home to half of the world's captive pandas. Only 1,600 are left in the wild. Rebuilding the center is crucial to the giant panda's survival as a species, so it doesn't take long for reconstruction plans to get under way. Researchers working on the rebuilding efforts feel that the earthquake highlighted the importance of a strong captive breeding program.



Moving Up

The new breeding center will be bigger and better than the one destroyed in the earthquake, with room for more than 100 pandas. In the nursery section, panda mothers and human caregivers will take care of newborns. When a cub is a year old and ready to leave its mother, it will move into another section: the panda kindergarten. That's where it will learn how to find food and explore new

environments in preparation for being released into the wild.

The new captive panda center will also create enormous panda enclosures by encircling forests on a nearby mountain with electric fencing. These enclosed bamboo-rich forests, each the size of 200 football fields or larger, will allow the pandas to experience a wild setting while scientists continue to monitor their health and safety.

Living as Neighbors

As scientists plan the new breeding center, they also are working to restore habitat where human activities have left groups of wild pandas isolated. Their goal is to restore wildlife corridors between habitats so that smaller panda populations do not become permanently isolated and unable to reproduce.

Working closely with the Chinese government, scientists hope to create a long-term solution that will protect pandas and preserve the way of life for neighboring communities. People are struggling to rebuild their lives after losing their homes and farms to the earthquake. New job opportunities that involve conservation efforts will hopefully benefit both humans and pandas--by making local people part of the solution. The hope is to help

the mountain villagers who share the land with the pandas to become guardians and caretakers, so that they can restore habitat and protect pandas as they rebuild their own lives.

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- Giant pandas are endangered.
- One giant panda will eat 20 to 40 pounds of bamboo in a day.
- More than 250 giant pandas live in captivity worldwide.

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