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February 4, 2007

## China Prepares for Panda Tourism

**BEIJING, China**, August 26, 2004 (ENS) - To showcase the endangered giant panda, China's national animal, the government of Baoxing County in southwestern Sichuan Province, plans to build a protection and tourism zone, the Chinese Xinhua news service said today.

The Baoxing Jiajin Mountain Giant Panda Ecological Tourism Zone will cover 1,200 square kilometers (463 square miles). The new zone will encompass the existing Fengtongzhai Nature Reserve where 140 pandas, about 10 percent of all wild pandas, live today, an official of the natural reserve said.

In addition, the 180 million yuan (US\$21.8 million) tourism zone, about 250 kilometers (155 miles) from the provincial capital city of Chengdu, will include a safari park with a station for panda observation and a state forest park.

The enlarged space protected for the pandas will help to avoid inbreeding, the official said.



**Panda mother and cub** (Photos courtesy [Giant Panda.com](http://Giant Panda.com))

There is scientific controversy about the contribution of inbreeding to the extinction risk for animal populations in the wild. Most scientists acknowledge that inbreeding will tend to reduce population growth rates, but it is not generally accepted that inbreeding itself translates into elevated extinction risks, an international team of Australian and American conservation biologists said in 2002.

The difference is in the length of time the species has to breed. Inbreeding will have little time to act in populations that are declining rapidly due to pressures such as habitat loss, the conservation biologists pointed out.

If the pressure of habitat loss on the giant pandas of Baoxing is relieved by the new Ecological Tourism Zone, preventing inbreeding to maintain genetic diversity increases in

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importance, but if the tourists bring new human pressures to bear on the pandas, the population may lose ground before it has time to damage itself with inbreeding.

There are about 1,590 pandas in the wild worldwide, and most are living in China's Sichuan, Gansu and Shanxi provinces, in addition to the 160 that live in captivity. The Chinese government has established 10 nature reserves in the mountainous regions on the southern edge of the Tibetan plateau where pandas are found - eight in Sichuan province, one in Gansu and another in Shaanxi.

In these remote mountains, the pandas' staple food, two species of bamboo, grows in dense stands beneath a canopy of conifers.



**Pandas are mentioned in ancient Chinese history. They were kept by emperors and were thought to be able to ward off natural disasters.**

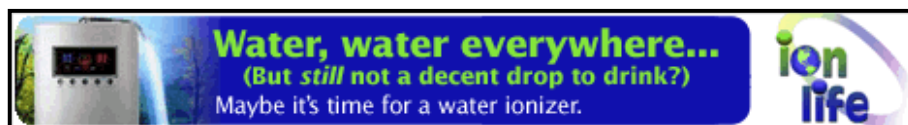
Many thousands of years ago, giant pandas ranged over much of China south of the Yellow River. But environmental changes and expanding human populations have brought them close to extinction, and the giant panda is now considered endangered.

Much public interest in viewing the pandas in their natural habitat now supports thriving tourist services, and in advance of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, this interest will be stimulated by the tour companies.

One Chinese tour company, the Sichuan China Int'l Travel Service, is already advertising tours that allow visitors "to track the giant pandas" in all the major nature reserves located in Sichuan, Gansu and Shaanxi provinces.

"We will arrange it till opening of 2008 Olympic Beijing, to attract all attentions from all over the world to this dangerous creature and it's threatened habitat," Sichuan China Int'l says on its website.

The newly developed Baoxing Jiajin Mountain Giant Panda Ecological Tourism Zone will help to satisfy that tourism demand, bringing thousands of visitors to the once remote mountain habitat of the giant panda.



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