

**A**uckland member Glen O'Keefe adds the following updated information on the plight of the giant pandas.

### Reproduction

Giant pandas are dependent upon and thus remain with the adult female for the first 18 months of life. Because of this and due to a gestation period of 3-5 months, at best the female can only produce offspring each two years. At the present time they are not managing this. A female which gives birth to a cub (which subsequently lives to independence) each three years is a rarity.

Where two cubs are born, one will be abandoned as the female must carry the other for the first 16 weeks following the birth. The remaining cub is by all accounts given constant care but despite this there is high mortality in the wild.

I have been unable to establish the age at which giant pandas mate but there are records of one captive female being on heat at the age of four years. Of the pandas being lent to New Zealand, the male will be around five and a quarter and the female almost four years old by the time they return to China. China has around 80 captive pandas, yet the total number of offspring born in captivity per year is 3, and these via artificial insemination.

### Status

Since the last survey 12 years ago when it was found there were around 1000 pandas left in the wild, habitat loss has increased, there has been bamboo die-off (1983) and poachers seem to be as numerous as ever despite the fact that they may receive life imprisonment or the death penalty. In the past 12 years, one in four pandas died through poaching. Giant panda hides sell for about \$15,000 in Japan or Hongkong. As an example of the extremely precarious situation the panda is now in, one need look no further than Wolong Reserve at Sichuan province.

With 770 sq miles, Wolong is the largest of 12 panda reserves. It is staffed with biologists led by China's panda expert, Professor Hu Jinchu and America's panda expert George Schaller. At Wolong is the \$US 1.6 million research and conservation centre which is specifically for giant pandas. In short, Wolong reserve appears well managed. Despite this, the number of pandas there has decreased to 72, 50 percent of those at Wolong 12 years ago.

It should be remembered too, that giant pandas have been ruthlessly exploited during the 50 years that the western world has known them. Expeditions for hides in the 1930s generally resulted in the deaths of cubs, lactating females and old pandas. Of those captured live, many died before they could be shipped from China, and the majority of those which did live long enough to reach foreign zoos died within 1-12 months. Because pandas did not run from gun-fire, early hunters described them as "stupid".

I believe pandas are probably incapable of any activity which demands sustained high level expenditure of energy. Bamboo shoots are 90 percent water and 80 percent of the food is not digested. Also, the evolution of giant pandas has proceeded alongside that of bamboo, thus the body is modified for ambling through bamboo thickets and for sitting upright to peel and eat shoots. Pandas spend 50-75 percent of their time doing just this. They may climb trees and can stand upright but they have never achieved the bi-pedalism most bear species are capable of nor have they achieved speed on all fours.

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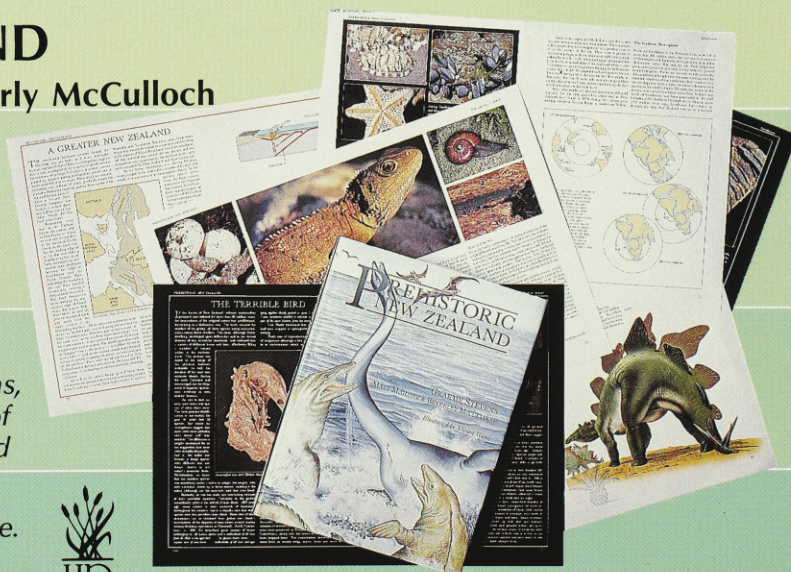
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