

# Pandas Leave US National Zoo After Decades

NFK EDITORS - NOVEMBER 9, 2023

Washington, DC —([Map](#))

Copied from NewsforKids.net on Jan. 22, 2023. <https://newsforkids.net/articles/2023/11/09/pandas-leave-us-national-zoo-after-decades/>

Yesterday, the National Zoo in Washington, DC said goodbye to its giant pandas, as they left for China. It's the first time the zoo hasn't had pandas in 23 years, and it may mark the end of a 50-year program. The pandas will be greatly missed by the zoo and its visitors.

Black and white giant pandas are special and unusual. They grow to be very large, even though they eat mainly bamboo. In the wild, pandas are only found in China. But for decades, China has used pandas as a way of making positive connections with other countries.



In 1972, US President Richard Nixon and his wife, Pat, visited China. It was a historic visit, since China was largely closed off from the outside world at the time. Mrs. Nixon mentioned that she loved pandas, and China's leader promised to send her some. The pandas wound up at the National Zoo.

The National Zoo's pandas were an instant hit, and became an important symbol of the zoo. Since 1972, except for one year, the zoo has always had pandas. The pandas are extremely popular, and are one of the big reasons that people visit the zoo.

But the National Zoo didn't own the pandas. It had a special agreement with China which allowed them to keep the pandas for a certain amount of time. The older pandas, Mei Xiang and Tian Tian, have been at the zoo since 2000. In 2020, [Mei Xiang gave birth to a cub](#), which was given the name Xiao Qi Ji ("Little Miracle").

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Until 2016, pandas were endangered. The situation is slightly better now for wild pandas in China, but pandas will still need help from humans for the population to grow.

Now, all three pandas are on their way to China. They were taken to the airport in special crates. The pandas are used to these crates, so the situation seems normal to them. The crates were loaded onto a special FedEx plane called "Panda Express", headed for Chengdu, China. The trip to China will take about 19 hours.

Two zoo workers and a veterinarian went with the pandas on the plane. To keep the pandas happy, they have lots of food, including more than 220 pounds (100 kilograms) of bamboo. The pandas will also have plenty of snacks, including special biscuits, pears, and butternut squash.

Laurie Thompson, one of the zoo workers, says, "We're mostly there to keep them happy,".

When the pandas arrive in China, they'll be taken to a protected area in the mountains of Sichuan Province. Around 150 other pandas are already living there.

It's not clear if China will ever loan more pandas to the National Zoo again, but the zoo is hoping that it will. In fact, the zoo is even working to improve its panda area, so that it will be ready if that happens.