



## IN DEFENSE OF ANIMALS

Matt Thompson  
President, Memphis Zoo

July 25, 2022  
Dear Mr. Thompson:

I am writing to you, respectfully, on behalf of In Defense of Animals, an international animal protection organization with over 250,000 valued supporters and a 39-year history. We are requesting an online (zoom) meeting with you in regards to the well-being of resident pandas YaYa and LeLe. We kindly ask you to take our sincere request for a virtual meeting into consideration, as we would like to work with you to ensure the best interests of the pandas.

We have no doubt that your staff has the wellbeing of the pandas as their utmost priority. However, attempts to improve their diet and care in recent months can only go so far. The fact is, giant pandas are native to central China. Therefore, in comparison to their home in China, there is really little that Memphis Zoo (or any zoo) can do for the true health and well-being of pandas, especially the elderly ones. We firmly believe that after nearly two decades of service to Memphis Zoo, it is time for YaYa and LeLe to return to their natural homeland of China to retire peacefully. Zoo communications call the pandas “geriatric” and in this case, then YaYa and LeLe should retire to China where they can receive special care from the experienced panda keepers and medical team there.

The Dujiangyan Base of the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda, the world's only "nursing home" for elderly captive pandas, is the best living environment and retirement option for pandas, in which they get to enjoy their natural habitat, several varieties of high-quality bamboo, and specialized care by the most experienced panda experts. The Dujiangyan Base is home to 17 returned overseas panda stars and many retired elderly pandas. Former San Diego Zoo pandas, GaoGao and BaiYun, now 31 and 30 years old, respectively, are comfortably retired here. For aging YaYa and LeLe, it is crucial for them to have access to environmental enrichment, a special diet, and special care by the specialized experts. The Dujiangyan Base in China is, without a doubt, the best place for YaYa and LeLe.

**The following current, documented conditions of YaYa & LeLe are of significant concern and could be ameliorated by relocation to Dujiangyan Base in China:**

1. YaYa's low weight, and skin condition that may be caused by parasites, as shared by Beijing Zoo.
2. Stereotypical behavior. We have observed YaYa often banging her head on the floor or moving it in circles over and over. LeLe spends a lot of time sitting on a rock playing with his tongue.



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3. Access to a nutritious diet and a suitable amount of food customized for them every day. Many times YaYa and LeLe are left without food in the last two hours before closing, during which they roar and pace.

4. Long caging times, especially when the zoo closes early for planned activities. The increased caging time does not seem to come with an increased amount of treats hidden in the room to distract them, or with sufficient varieties of bamboo to ensure the pandas are well-fed during the long caging hours, both of which could possibly minimize their mental stress, and thereby their pacing and roaring due to frustration. We have observed their long caging with subsequent roaring and pacing many times.

5. Regularly, the pandas do not go outdoors every day and since there is only one yard in the panda house, YaYa and LeLe take turns using it. Furthermore, the panda cam and volunteer observations reveal that the pandas have not been given access to the outdoor area in over a month. They spend nearly the whole day sleeping. Due to the climate and summer temperatures in Memphis, the pandas are indoors, which is very unnatural. They belong in the natural climate of their homeland China.

### **Important observations about the Memphis Zoo panda habitat:**

1. Sufficient bamboo variety and quality are incredibly important to ensure the pandas have the necessary nutrients. However, the bamboo given to the pandas is often yellow and dry and seems unappealing even to those watching. As bamboo takes up 99% of giant pandas' diets, the lack of high quality bamboo is a considerable issue.

2. There is only a limited variety and amount of fruits and veggies provided to the pandas. Captive pandas usually eat a variety of fruits and veggies i.e. carrots, apples, bamboo shoots, panda bread/cakes and honey water. Giant pandas have an active eating schedule which happens throughout the day and night. Hence, the fruits and vegetables should also be available throughout the day instead of only during behavioral training. These are to ensure they have sufficient nutrients and to prolong their foraging time.

3. There are no feeder toys or treats hidden in the room to help create an enriched zoo environment; more often than not, the pandas are forced to beg for food for a long time; the feeding is usually given at a fixed location (mostly at the door) and based on a fixed pattern (two bundles in the morning and others are offered piece by piece after the pandas have long-begged for food).



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The zoo claims that the pandas' appearance is due to their age. However, there are numerous pandas in captivity that are a lot older, not skinny or with a malnourished appearance, and in much better condition than both YaYa and LeLe. The Memphis Zoo pandas are lacking a truly experienced panda team who are familiar with pandas' eating habits, nutrition needs, behaviors, and elderly panda care, as well as a team of professionals who are open to the public's concerns and suggestions.

We continue to monitor both pandas with growing concern especially as YaYa's condition continues to deteriorate and LeLe's food-begging and abnormal behaviors increase. We are worried that they may not survive if the panda loan is renewed again before the end of the contract on April 7th, 2023. We also constantly research and communicate frequently with the Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens (CAZG), Beijing Zoo, and Shanghai Zoo.

Numerous members of the public who have visited your zoo have contacted us to thank us for highlighting the conditions of the pandas, whom they have long been concerned about.

It is our hope that you will keep the best interests of the pandas in mind, the rising costs of caring for geriatric animals, and the negative publicity of keeping unwell animals.

Please seriously consider the negative implications of extending the panda loan contract; we urge you to consider the benefits of terminating it and sending YaYa and LeLe to the specialist panda retirement home in China at the end of the contract. We strongly believe that your members and visitors will thank you for ensuring YaYa and LeLe get specialized care at Dujiangyan Panda Center in Chengdu, China, the world's only nursing home for elderly pandas, and that they will thrive there for the remainder of their lives.

We very much anticipate your favorable response and look forward to discussing this matter further in a diplomatic meeting.

Kind regards,

Brittany Michelson  
Captive Animals Campaigner  
In Defense of Animals  
[brittany@idausa.org](mailto:brittany@idausa.org)  
Cell: (928) 420-0727



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