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# HOPE FOR THE RED PANDA

HOW PEOPLE ARE SAVING THESE  
VULNERABLE CREATURES

BY CRISPIN BOYER



**W**ith a flick of its fluffy tail, the elusive red panda curls into a ball. Poof! It's the wildlife equivalent of Harry Potter's invisibility cloak. Now it looks like just another bump on a log in its misty mountain-forest habitat.

So it's no wonder that when conservationist Brian Williams trekked through Himalayan foothills in search of red pandas, he saw fewer of these raccoon-size animals in a month than you'd find in one afternoon at the zoo. "Seeing them in the wild is rare. You remember it vividly," says Williams.

From the tufts of its fuzzy white ears to its red-ringed tail, each red panda is roughly 12 pounds of concentrated cuteness. When it's not dozing in a tree or curled into a cozy ball for warmth, the animal spends its time clutching bamboo branches and chewing tender shoots and leaves.

Unfortunately, these darlings of the bamboo forests are in great danger. And if they don't get help soon, the red panda's disappearing act might become permanent.

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## LOST ISLANDS

The red panda lives in chilly, foggy bamboo forests that cover the foothills more than two miles high, set against some of the tallest mountains in the world. Long ago, the animal developed adaptations for this environment. Its dense fur and cloaklike tail, for instance, keep it warm during snowy winters. Its body is built for climbing into the thinnest branches, which helps it escape leopards, dogs, and human hunters who poach red pandas for their soft fur. The red panda has a thumblike sixth digit for grasping stalks of bamboo, its main source of food.

The animal is at home here, and few places seem as remote and safe. But as more towns surround the red panda's mountain forests, more of this habitat is chopped down for farming and firewood. Researchers estimate that the animal's range has shrunk as much as 50 percent over the past two decades. "Panda habitats that at one time were connected to each other through the forests now end up confined to isolated mountaintops," says Miles Roberts, a wildlife biologist at the National Zoo, in Washington, D.C. "Think of them as little islands of red panda populations without any links to each other."

Because they eat so much bamboo every day—up to 30 percent of their body weight—red pandas need about two square miles of forest for each animal. As their territory butts up against the edges of these habitat "islands," pandas are running out of room—and food. "They can't get out and establish their own home ranges," says Roberts. "They're stuck."

## RUNNING ON EMPTY

High in a tree in eastern Nepal, a red panda plans its escape route. The panda is trying to get away from Williams. And it's taking its time. Switching its gaze from Williams, who's watching from the ground, to every avenue of escape, the red panda finally

settles on a plan: It quietly bolts down the tree and into the thick underbrush. It took the panda 90 minutes to reach this decision. "These are cautious animals," says Williams. "They want to be 100 percent sure of what they need to do before they do it."

The red panda's slow reaction time is due to its diet. Bamboo doesn't provide red pandas with very much energy. As a result, they can run only in short bursts before becoming tired.

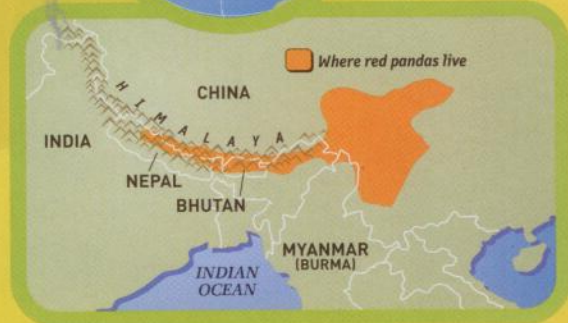
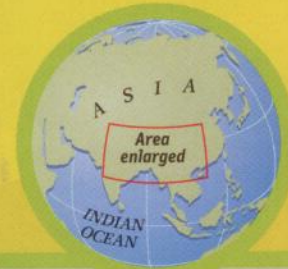
## HOPEFUL FUTURE

The red panda's sluggish nature can doom it when facing a predator. With little energy or muscle to fight back, the panda can only hope for an easy escape up a tree. But the red panda is finding fewer places to take cover from a greater number of predators, such as the dogs that watch over cattle herds.

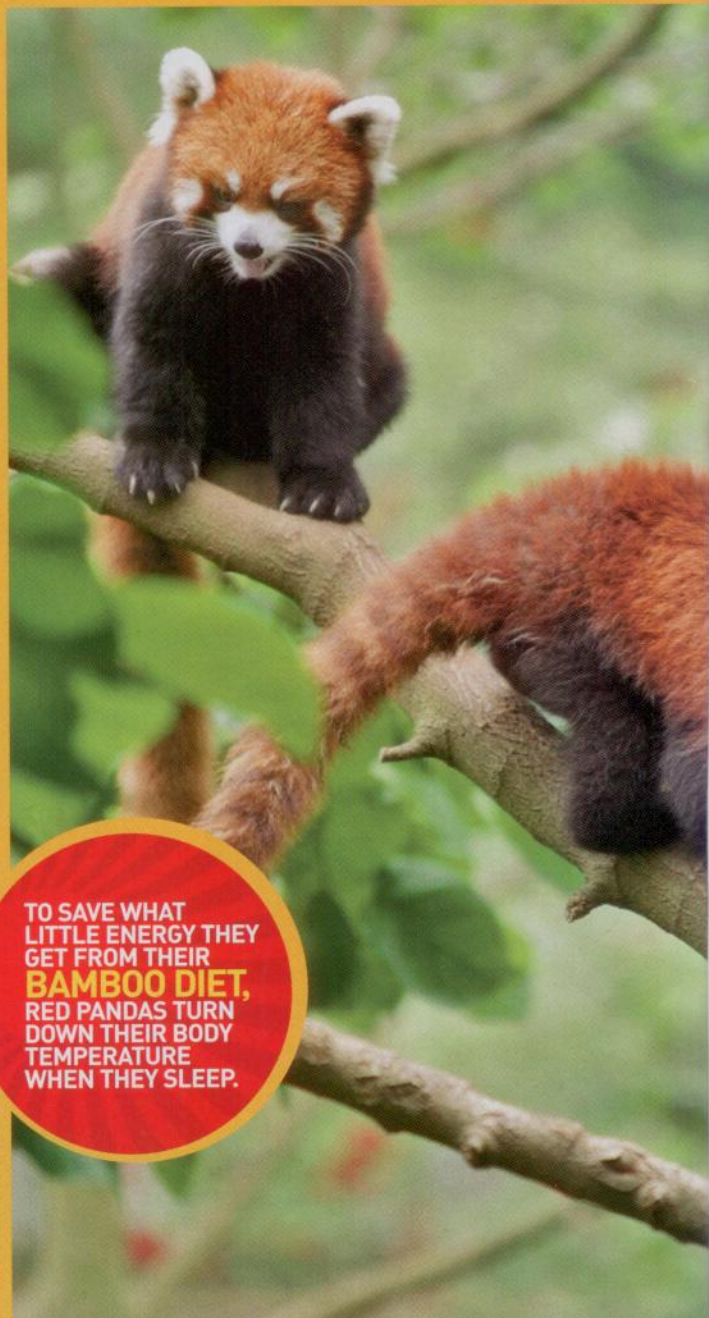
Conservationists are working to change the way people view the animal. Williams founded the Red Panda Network, which hires local "forest guardians" to keep an eye on the pandas, replant bamboo, and spread the word that tourists will spend lots of money to see red pandas in the wild.

Other plans are in motion, including a switch to more modern heating methods so that villages will stop cutting down forests for firewood. Ranchers are learning better ways to raise their cattle, which use less land for grazing. The Red Panda Network is working to create a huge stretch of bamboo forest in which several vulnerable species are making their last stands.

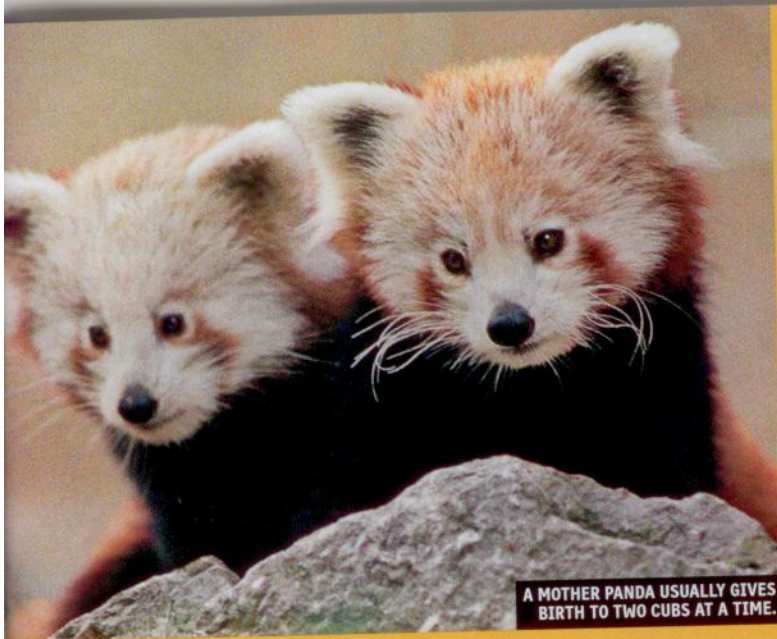
All of these efforts are a good start when it comes to saving the red panda. "The real hope," says Roberts, "is finding ways that people and the animals can live compatibly."



ABOUT 99 PERCENT OF A RED PANDA'S DIET IS BAMBOO.



TO SAVE WHAT LITTLE ENERGY THEY GET FROM THEIR BAMBOO DIET, RED PANDAS TURN DOWN THEIR BODY TEMPERATURE WHEN THEY SLEEP.



A MOTHER PANDA USUALLY GIVES BIRTH TO TWO CUBS AT A TIME.

# BAMBOO FOR TWO



GIANT PANDA

ALTHOUGH UNRELATED, RED PANDAS AND GIANT PANDAS DO SHARE MORE THAN A NAME.

## LIKE THE GIANT PANDA...

Red pandas forage in cool mountain forests, often within a few hundred feet of giant pandas. Many of the animals' similarities developed because of this shared habitat.

Red pandas have a taste for bamboo—particularly the tender shoots and leaves.

Red pandas have a thumb-like digit on their wrists that they use to clutch bamboo stalks.

Red pandas are in trouble. Their numbers are dwindling because of habitat destruction and hunting.

## UNLIKE THE GIANT PANDA...

Red pandas spend most of their time in trees, eating and sleeping. Giant pandas spend more time plodding around on the ground looking for their food.

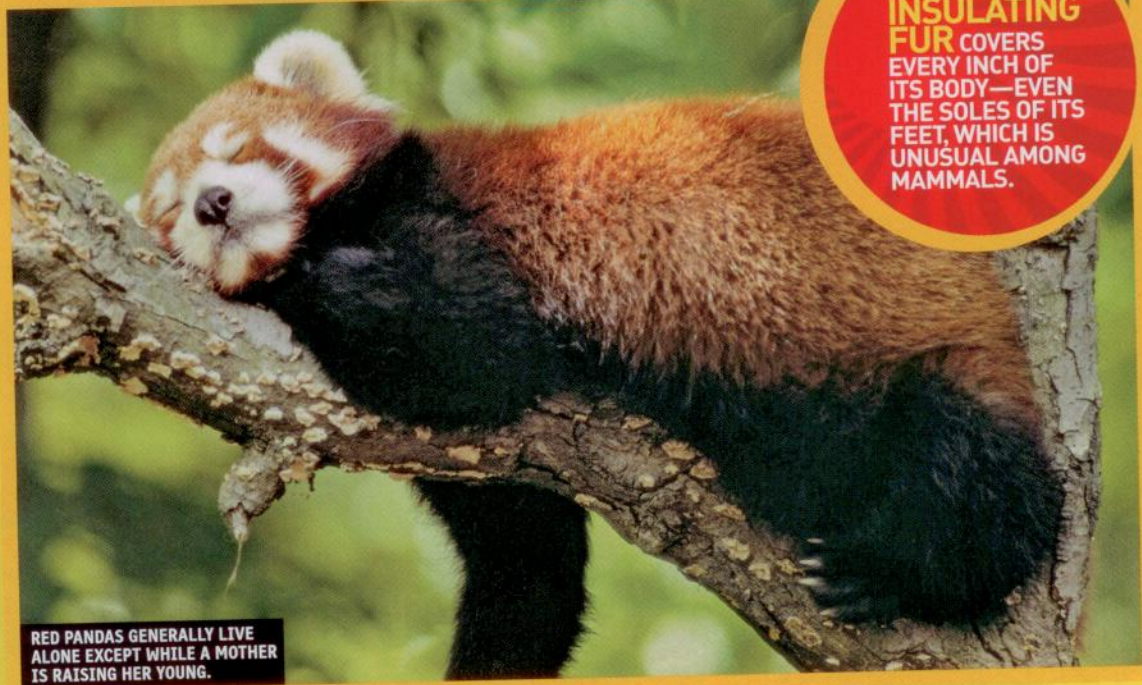
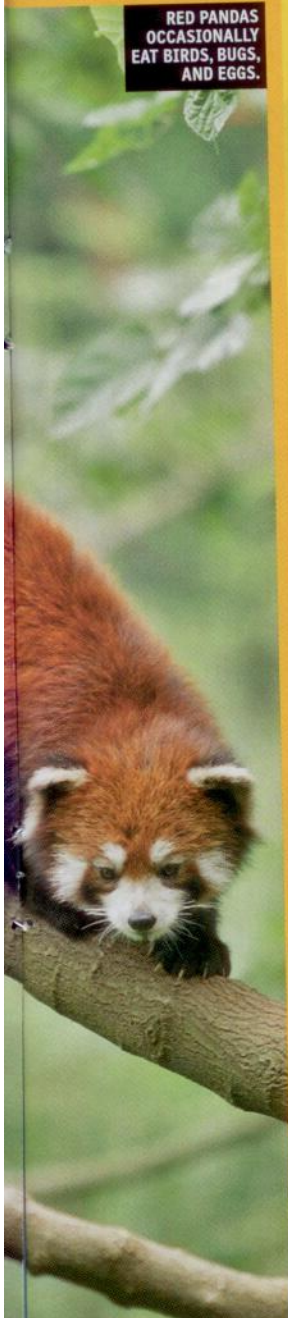
Red pandas don't eat the tough bamboo stems. They also supplement their diet with mushrooms, berries, and bugs.

This digit isn't as flexible as the giant panda's. As a result, the giant panda has a stronger grip.

The red panda's status isn't quite as critical as the giant panda's. But since both species live in some of the same misty mountains, saving habitat for red pandas saves it for giant pandas, too.

RED PANDAS OCCASIONALLY EAT BIRDS, BUGS, AND EGGS.

Researchers estimate that the red panda's range has shrunk as much as **50 percent** over the past two decades.



A RED PANDA'S INSULATING FUR COVERS EVERY INCH OF ITS BODY—EVEN THE SOLES OF ITS FEET, WHICH IS UNUSUAL AMONG MAMMALS.

RED PANDAS GENERALLY LIVE ALONE EXCEPT WHILE A MOTHER IS RAISING HER YOUNG.

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