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Letter to the Editor

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Prioritize our Megafauna, Not Panda

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) previously warned and anticipated news of the costly upkeep of the pandas in Zoo Negara. In fact it is to be expected considering that pandas are the most expensive animal in the world to keep.

As far back as 2009 and 2012 SAM had strongly objected to the deal, being highly critical of the move to bring in the pandas which the Chinese government is happy to rent out for a six figure fee. At that time the Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment and Zoo Negara had an attack of panda-mania which conjure up the entire brouhaha drowning out the concerns of NGOs and the public.

Since pandas are the superstars of endangered species, charming gentle and vulnerable, a single animal can mean millions of visitor dollars, so it will raise a dwindling zoo revenue. Studies of zoos having pandas show there is a 'honeymoon period' when visitors flock to see them. Over time, the panda presence will have less to do with conservation or education and more to do with bringing in the gate collections. When revenue starts to decrease the panda cub will bring in more visitors to offset the cost of keeping the animals.

However the expense of captive breeding pandas raises a serious question of whether this one species is really worth all that money that could be better spent on our megafauna – large animals - such as elephants, tigers and rhinos? Malaysia is facing an ugly situation whereby these animals are worth more dead than alive in the places they live and conservation is not pursuing new avenues of thought on how to better protect them. On this account they are all staring extinction in the face.

It is high time the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment become more prudent about where the money is spent. For all the cash spent on pandas we could protect a lot more species over a range of habitats including the upgrade of equipment, staffing and strategies in the fight against sophisticated smugglers who employ the latest technology to deceive officers. As it is the poor skills and questionable competencies of our Wildlife department towards our own endangered species need to be addressed.

The panda deal is nothing about conservation but all about numbers and money. China has long pursued panda diplomacy as a sign of warm diplomatic relations. But questions are to be raised about their financial motives behind a decision that is more like running a lucrative business in hiring the animals out.

Pandas are an endangered species, not a commodity to be traded for human amusement. Although the goal was to encourage habitat preservation and to increase their numbers for reintroduction into the wild, the panda diplomacy programme has shifted from protecting pandas in the wild to attracting paying customers in zoos and boost the tourism dollars. In addition pandas have become political and profitable bartering tools.

Panda conservation should be focused on habitat protection, including reducing human demands and impacts on the existing system of panda reserves and protected areas, and whatever in-situ captive breeding occurs should aim to put pandas back into the wild. If indeed conservation is the goal it does not make any sense to be shipping viable breeding

animals to zoos around the world. It is high time to educate the public about the giant panda as a wild animal in danger of becoming extinct and stop the exploitation of the public's infatuation with them, by trying to capitalize on that.

China should re-look into its policy of transporting their pandas all over the world offering panda gift loans. Their superstar panda should be allowed to thrive, live and breed freely in their natural environment. The desire to foster international relations jeopardizes the pandas' welfare.

Once again SAM urges the Government and the Natural Resource & Environment Ministry to put our money to better use on equipment, human resources, and effective action to tackle this burgeoning area of wildlife cybercrime, action against corruption and strengthen protection on the ground.

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