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Returning pandas to China to alleviate cost concerns not possible due to agreement

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Malaysia under obligation to keep giant pandas for 10 years

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DESPITE the growing public pressure to send the giant pandas at Zoo Negara back to China, Malaysia cannot do so due to its obligations under the International Giant Panda Conservation Agreement with China.

Energy and Natural Resources Minister Datuk Dr Shamsul Anuar Nasarah said the agreement inked in 2014 was for China to loan a pair of giant pandas to Malaysia for 10 years.

"Initially, the government wanted to place the giant pandas in Putrajaya. However, at the Malaysian Zoological Society's (MZS) request, we agreed to place the pandas at Zoo Negara after considering its strategic collaboration with the government and non-governmental organisations, suitable location, high volume of visitors and expertise in managing wildlife for more than 50



Giant panda Yi Yi's return to China in April was postponed due to the pandemic. PIC BY EFFENDY RASHID

years," he said in a statement yesterday.

Shamsul said in 2013, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) and MZS signed an agreement, in which the government agreed to develop the Giant Panda Conservation Centre (PKGP) and pay an

annual conservation fee for the giant pandas.

MZS was entrusted with paying for the panda cubs' insurance fee, the cost to send back the cubs to China and the operational costs to manage them.

"Still, the government paid for the panda cubs' fee, the cost of

returning the first panda cub (Nuan Nuan) to China in 2017 and also paid the giant panda experts from China who were deployed to PKGP, as a gesture of concern.

"The second cub (Yi Yi) is now two years old and is supposed to have been returned to China in April. But the plan had to be postponed as the conservation centre in China was closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The ministry will send Yi Yi back as soon as China confirms the date."

Calls to return the giant pandas came after Zoo Negara's zoology, veterinary and Giant Panda Conservation Centre director Dr Mat Naim Ramli disclosed on Nov 17 that the zoo had only three months' worth of emergency funds left.

On Nov 30, it was reported that the Malaysian Animal Association had urged the government to return the pandas to China to help Zoo Negara cope with its financial woes.

Shamsul said he would meet the

Zoo Negara management today to discuss the mechanisms to improve its operations, including ensuring a progressive management and the welfare of the wildlife.

"The ministry allocated RM1.3 million from the Prihatin Wildlife Welfare Fund to Zoo Negara on April 10 to cover food supplies for the wildlife, husbandry management and medicines.

"The government has also given a 15 per cent discount on monthly electricity bills for six months to all zoos under the Prihatin stimulus package."

Shamsul thanked the public for their generous donations to Zoo Negara and urged its management to use the funds prudently.

"Between January and September this year, Zoo Negara collected RM10.6 million from various parties in the form of monetary contributions and animal food.

"The amount is more than enough to cover the food supplies of the wildlife based on Zoo Negara's previous financial records."

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