Time to rethink Captive Breeding Programmes

Who is ‘Pan Pan’?

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- Pan Pan, believed to be the **world’s oldest male giant panda,** died aged 31 at the China Conservation and Research Center for Giant Panda in Sichuan Province.
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- He fathered over 30 cubs. Considering there are fewer than 500 in captivity where panda breeding is a minor miracle, Pan Pan’s contribution cannot be overstated.
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What’s the IUCN status of Panda?

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- This September, the IUCN noted a decadal rise of 17% in the wild population and revised the status of the giant panda **from threatened to vulnerable.**
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- The rise in the wild population — from 1,596 in 2004 to 1,864 in 2014 — is perhaps testimony as much to conservation efforts as to the refinement of estimation tools.
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What is the contribution of captive breeding programme?

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- The contribution of the super expensive captive breeding programme to the now 1,864-wild population is **just 5 pandas.**
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- Since 2006, seven captive-bred giant pandas have been released into the Chinese wild. Two did not survive the initial weeks.
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Time to rethink?

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- Zoos world over pay millions of dollars to China for a captive-bred exhibit or two on lease. Housing a giant panda is roughly five times as expensive as having an elephant.
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- The massive cost of captive breeding underlines the need for a rethink. Caring for a giant panda in captivity costs up to a million dollars a year. **That's a lot of money that could be spent on securing natural habitats**.
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What is the purpose of captive breeding?

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- Its purpose is to **build up a stock and reintroduce individuals into the wild.** It's not easy. For one, most species struggle to breed in captivity.
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- There is no foolproof training protocol to make the young ones fit to survive in the wild.
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- **The bigger the species, the smaller the chances of successful reintroduction** due to their progressively complex skill requirements.
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- Captive breeding, therefore, is best employed as an insurance against a potential crisis that may hit a species that is already vulnerable in the wild.
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Are captive breeding programmes pointless?

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- In India, it became necessary when residual painkiller diclofenac (in cattle carcass) killed 99.9% of white-rumped vultures by the early 2000s.
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- But only a ban — though much delayed and not well enforced — on the veterinary use of diclofenac could see a tentative population rebound in

certain pockets.
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- The bottomline is captive breeding and reintroduction programmes are **pointless without securing the natural habitat**.
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- Take gharials, for example. Their eggs are hatched in breeding centres and thousands of young ones have been released in the Chambal. But the population remains below 1,200.
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- Sand mining, water shortage and overfishing has reduced the breed-and-release programme into a glorified replenishment tool. Even this equilibrium won't last long if the habitat continues to bleed.
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- The panda breeding programme needs a reality check. Compared to the 17% gain in the wild population, the captive population more than doubled in the last decade.
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- The most remarkable finding of the latest giant panda census is that **the area it inhabits increased by nearly 12% in the last decade.** That's where they need help.
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Why the obsession in saving only certain species?

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- In India, the tiger continues to hog nearly all conservation funds, while species far more endangered cry for attention.
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- The argument that **conserving apex species involves an umbrella approach** helping all else that come under it, **does not hold good unless all ecosystems get ticked.**
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- Nobody helped Great Indian Bustards in the name of saving the apex species of the semi-arid grassland where wolves themselves became near extinct.
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Conlcusion:

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- In these testing times, conservation **cannot afford to play favourites.** An umbrella species, the giant panda’s natural habitat is also home to about 2,300 mammal, bird, and amphibian species.
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- Each of them is a reason for securing all of them in the name of saving the giant panda or not.
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