

LCQ8: Displaying national treasures

Following is a question by the Hon Leung Kwok-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Tsang Tak-sing, in the Legislative Council today (February 29):

Question:

Hong Kong has received gifts which are national treasures such as giant pandas and Chinese sturgeons from the Central Government several times, yet they are only displayed in the Ocean Park (the Park). Except for the elderly and those whose birthdays fall on the day of their visit, members of the public who wish to watch these national treasures have to buy a \$280 ticket for admission to the Park in order to get a glimpse of their glamour. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(a) of the reasons for deciding in the first place to entrust the Park with the custody and keeping of the giant pandas given to Hong Kong; which government department made such decisions; and whether the Government has considered that such arrangement might hinder the grassroots from watching the giant pandas;

(b) given the Government's huge fiscal surplus at present, whether it will consider following the practice of the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region in that the Government will keep those giant pandas, which are gifts from the State, and charge an admission fee of \$10 only, so as to enable the general public to watch the giant pandas at a lower price; and

(c) given the imminent 15th anniversary of the reunification of Hong Kong, whether the Government will consider, when the same kind of animals are given to the people of Hong Kong again by the Central Government, keeping them at free-admission venues such as the Hong Kong Zoological and Botanical Gardens, etc.?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the three parts of the question is as follows:

(a) Giant pandas are rare and endangered animals which must live in an environment similar to their natural habitat and be taken care of by husbandry and veterinary professionals. In 1999, the Central Government gave giant pandas An An and Jia Jia to Hong Kong as gifts. In order to provide a comfortable living environment for the giant pandas, the Home Affairs Bureau and the then Agriculture and Fisheries Department, after thorough consideration and consultation with experts at the State Forestry Administration and the China Conservation and Research Centre for the Giant Panda in Wolong, considered it would be most appropriate for the Ocean Park (the Park) to accommodate and take care of the giant pandas for the major reasons below:

(i) the Park had the experience of looking after giant pandas that stayed briefly in Hong Kong in 1979 and 1984. The Park also had experts on keeping animals. Furthermore, the Park was able to build special facilities within a short period of time to provide an appropriate habitat for the giant pandas;

(ii) millions of people visit the Park each year. Local residents and overseas visitors may visit the giant pandas that are accommodated in the Park easily; and

(iii) given that the Park is a non-profit-making organisation, if there is an increase in attendance as a result of the display of the giant pandas there, the additional surplus so generated will be used to support giant panda conservation efforts as well as the long-term development of the Park.

Since their arrival in Hong Kong in 1999, An An and Jia Jia have been taken good care of by the Park. Therefore when the Central Government gave another pair of giant pandas Le Le and Ying Ying to the HKSAR in 2007, the Government, drawing on previous arrangements, entrusted the Park to take care of the giant pandas. To this end, the Park built a new Giant Panda Habitat with advanced facilities to provide the four giant pandas with an ideal living environment.

Although members of the public have to pay a fee for admission to the Park, the Park also provides a series of concessionary arrangements to facilitate visits by, among others, the elderly, the disabled and people from low income groups. Specifically, free admission is offered to Hong Kong residents under the age of three or aged 65 or above, holders of a "Registration Card for People with Disabilities" and residents visiting the Park on their birthdays. Individuals on the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme and their family members, as well as the member

organisations of the Social Welfare Department can also buy admission tickets at the discounted rate of \$20 each. In addition, the Park provides sponsorship to students with financial difficulties so that they can participate in activities organised by the Ocean Park Academy Hong Kong free of charge and visit the animals kept by the Park.

(b) As stated in part (a) above, giant pandas are endangered animals under protection which must be kept in a suitable environment. At present, no Government-run sites have the necessary facilities, environment and professional caregivers to accommodate giant pandas. The Park, on the other hand, has been providing the special facilities and arrangements required for accommodating giant pandas, such as a designated environment with appropriate temperature, suitable food and professional husbandry staff. In addition, the Park has maintained close communication with the experts at the China Conservation and Research Centre for the Giant Panda in Wolong to ensure that proper care is given to the four giant pandas at all times. As such, we consider that entrusting the task of accommodating giant pandas to the Park is the most ideal and suitable arrangement. We have no plan to put the giant pandas under the direct care of the Government at present.

(c) Different animal species require different living conditions. If the Central Government gives other animals to the HKSAR as gifts in the future, we will carefully consider all relevant factors, such as the required living environment of the species, the availability of husbandry staff and arrangements for public patronage, before making a decision as to the most suitable accommodation for the animals.

Ends/Wednesday, February 29, 2012

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