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Pandas Closer to the Public: Climate Minister Inspects Gwangju Uchi Zoo on Site

- Review of facilities, staffing, and overall readiness of the second national hub zoo, a candidate site for panda introduction, in preparation for the possibility of their arrival following successful Korea-China consultations

If the introduction of pandas* is finalized, the Minister of Climate, Energy and Environment (MCEE) will visit Gwangju Uchi Zoo to personally inspect its facilities, staffing, and overall readiness, so that the public can see China's endemic species and a globally endangered animal more up close.

* Giant panda (scientific name: *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*): a Chinese endemic species listed in CITES Appendix I (species threatened with extinction and, in principle, prohibited from international trade).

The MCEE announced that on the afternoon of January 22, Minister Kim Sunghwan will visit Uchi Zoo (located in Buk-gu, Gwangju) to review the zoo's preparedness and conditions for accommodating pandas in the future.

Ahead of this visit, at the Korea-China summit held in Beijing on January 5, President Lee Jae-myung proposed to the Chinese side that a pair of pandas be loaned to Gwangju Uchi Zoo, the country's second national hub zoo.

The MCEE explained that although a decision on whether to actually introduce pandas has not yet been made, the minister's on-site inspection was arranged to proactively review the zoo's readiness in preparation for the

possibility of a future introduction.

On that day, Minister Kim Sunghwan will receive briefings from Uchi Zoo on: 1) the status of facility and staffing operations, 2) experience in the care and medical treatment of wild animals, and 3) plans to establish panda conservation facilities, and will tour the site.

In addition, the minister will inspect the on-site animal hospital at Uchi Zoo, the bear enclosure currently housing four Asiatic black bears, and a vacant site of about 4,300 square meters that the zoo is considering as a candidate location for establishing a panda conservation facility.

Uchi Zoo meets all the facility and staffing requirements for a hub zoo* as stipulated in the Act on the Management of Zoos and Aquariums, and was therefore designated on June 30 last year (2025) as a hub zoo to strengthen the capacity of zoos in the Honam region and promote biodiversity conservation. It currently has four veterinarians and 13 animal keepers, and houses 667 animals of 89 species, including four Asiatic black bears.

* Roles include: 1) education and public outreach to strengthen zoo capacity by region, 2) support for animal disease prevention and safety management, 3) operation of species conservation and breeding programs, and 4) improvement of living environments for animals in their care.

Meanwhile, China sent the pandas Ai Bao and Le Bao to Korea in 2016. Subsequently, Fu Bao was born to Ai Bao and Le Bao in 2020, and Rui Bao and Hui Bao were born in 2023. As Fu Bao returned to China in 2024 upon turning four years old, there are currently a total of four pandas in Korea.

The MCEE will actively support the technical reviews required for bilateral diplomatic consultations, including an assessment of Uchi Zoo's capacity to accommodate pandas, and will continue practical-level consultations with China's wildlife management authority, the National Forestry and Grassland

Administration.

Minister Kim Sunghwan of the MCEE stated, “Since their first introduction to Korea in 2016, pandas have served as a symbol of friendship and cooperation between Korea and China, making a significant contribution to improving bilateral relations.” He added, “In preparation for the possible additional introduction of pandas, the Ministry of Climate, Energy and Environment will carefully and thoroughly make ready to welcome these precious lives.”