

**Protect local species before conserving pandas, group tells Najib**  
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**By Thanusya Shanmuganathan**

KUALA LUMPUR, July 21 — Putrajaya's "panda diplomacy" deal with China has angered an environmental group, which is now demanding that the government spend the same amount to protect Malaysia's own endangered species.

Land Empowerment Animals People (LEAP) executive director Cynthia Ong told Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in an open letter yesterday that his reason for striking the panda deal with China was "dubious", largely because funds channelled to help local species have been "pitiful".

"It is a waste of money and resources at a time when Malaysia's own native species are suffering from a range of threats," she said in the letter.

Ong revealed that over past two decades, she had helped raise some RM50 million for local environmental conservation efforts.

The same sum, she claimed, would go to maintaining the two giant panda bears from China for the next 10 years.

"In one fell swoop, you (Najib) spent a chunk of funds equal to what I've spent half my life to raise," she complained.

Ong said the funds she had raised had largely come from international sources as local funding, whether from public or private entities, has always come up short.

"Your actions with Projek Panda deeply confused, upset and angered me and many of my colleagues who are working tirelessly to protect the endangered species of Sabah and Malaysia," she said.

"We go through soul-destroying fund application processes to receive (or not) what little funds your government allocates to manage and protect this natural capital fundamental to the economic, ecological, social and cultural health of the state," she added.

Ong urged Najib to match "one for one" the funds meant for the panda project and place the money into a Sabah endangered species fund which will be administered by LEAP and non-governmental organisations in the east Malaysian state.

"I ask you to consider my request and show government leadership, at the same time modelling philanthropic leadership for the private sector," she said.

In previous media reports, Najib had said that the giant panda project would boost Malaysia's relationship with China and attract tourists.

The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry has also claimed that the project will promote public awareness on China's panda conservation efforts.

Malaysia is home to a number of charismatic endangered mammals including the sunbear, clouded leopard, Malay tapir, Bornean orangutan, pygmy elephant, Sumatran rhino and Malayan tiger.

Logging, poaching and conversion of habitat for rubber, timber and oil palm plantations are among the major threats to wildlife in Malaysia.

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