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Giant panda is no longer “endangered,” experts say



PROLIFIC PANDAS. Seven panda cubs, all born in 2012, are seen at the Chengdu Panda Base in Chengdu, in southwestern China's Sichuan province, in this October 30, 2012 file photo. The International Union for Conservation of Nature has said in a report that the panda is now classified as a “vulnerable” instead of an “endangered” species, reflecting its growing numbers in the wild in southern China. (AP Photo/File)

By **Gerry Shih**
The Associated Press

BEIJING — A leading international group has taken the giant panda off its endangered list thanks to decades of conservation efforts, but China's government discounted the move, saying it did not view the status of the country's beloved symbol as any less

serious.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has said in a report that the panda is now classified as a “vulnerable” instead of an “endangered” species, reflecting its growing numbers in the wild in southern China. It said the wild panda population jumped to 1,864 in 2014 from 1,596 in 2004, the result of work by Chinese agencies to enforce poaching bans

and expand forest reserves.

The report warned, however, that although better forest protection has helped increase panda numbers, climate change is predicted to eliminate more than 35 percent of its natural bamboo habitat in the next 80 years, potentially leading to another decline.

In a statement to The Associated Press, China's State Forestry Administration

said it disputed the classification change because the natural habitats of pandas have been splintered by natural and human causes. The animals live in small, isolated groups of as few as 10 pandas that struggle to reproduce and face the risk of disappearing altogether, the agency said.

Still, animal groups hailed the recovery

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