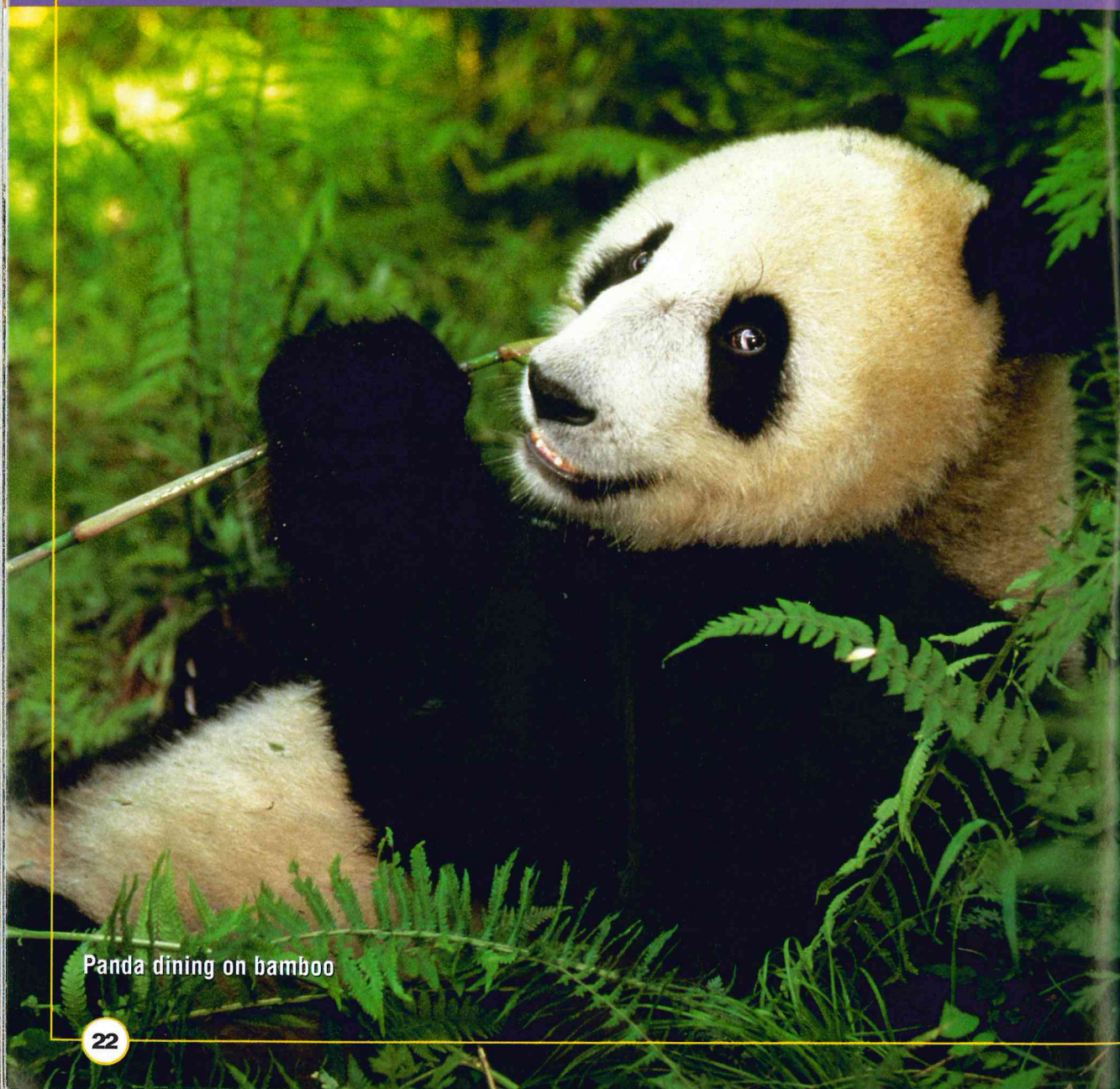


Shrinking Habitats

Animals on the Edge



Panda dining on bamboo

Panda's
"thumb"

Pandas are masterpieces of adaptation. Yet these beloved animals are inches away from extinction. How could this happen?

The answer is simple—bamboo. That tough, tree-like grass is just about the only thing wild pandas eat. They crunch through 30 to 60 pounds of it a day. Thumb-like bones on their front paws help pandas grasp stems. Huge, strong jaws crush the hard plant. Tough throat linings guard pandas from sharp splinters.

Thanks to those adaptations, pandas are perfectly suited to their bamboo-forest habitat. But now the bamboo is vanishing—fast. China's growing human population constantly needs more land. To get it, people clear forests.

That leaves pandas with a problem. Adapted to just one habitat, they can't survive without bamboo. Nor can they change quickly enough to fit into new habitats. As a result, pandas—so perfectly adapted to their bamboo habitat—have become endangered. Scientists estimate that only a thousand or so are alive in the wild today.



Bamboo