

## NPR Radio Transcript

### National Zoo Desperately Seeks Bamboo

*Heard on All Things Considered*

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In case you really hate some bamboo that's growing in your yard, if it seems impossible to get rid of it, indestructible, well, The National Zoo in Washington, D.C. might like to take that epidemic of bamboo off your hands. The zoo can't seem to get its bamboo to grow back. And as NPR's Brian Reed reports, it's looking to people like you to help feed the animals.

BRIAN REED: As head nutritionist at the National Zoo, not a day goes by that Mike Maslanka doesn't deal with bamboo. He has three giant pandas to feed, so almost everyday, he and his team cut down bamboo from their groves out in Virginia. It's enough to fill a small flat-bed truck.

Mr. MIKE MASLANKA (Head Nutritionist, National Zoo, Washington, D.C.): On any given day, those pandas are going through 300, 350 pounds, 400 pounds of product, at least of what's going into their exhibit. Hey, you're talking a fair number of stems on a daily basis.

(Soundbite of cutting bamboo)

REED: Who would have thought grocery shopping for pandas was such grueling work? The stalks are long and awkward to carry. There are pointy stumps all over the ground, and they jab the soles of your feet. And if it's a blustery day, the wind can catch the bamboo like a sail and pull you with it.

Mr. MASLANKA: We are finishing this stand off today. We've been cutting on this for seven or eight months, cutting once every couple of weeks. We have managed to make it through all the green stuff.

REED: Maslanka's team has a mantra written on their truck: "The bamboo never stops" but this year, it did. Maslanka says, he needed more bamboo because the youngest panda, three-year-old, Tai Shan, is now eating as much as an adult. But, they harvested so much that they're on the verge of running out.

Mr. MASLANKA: We would have expected there to be more, larger stems that grew back and instead we have a bunch that comes up to our chins and it's real bushy, but isn't real tall. That works for some animals in the park, but the pandas tend to prefer a little bit larger mature product.

REED: So, the zoo sent out a plea. They asked landowners in the Washington area with at least an acre of bamboo to let them harvest it.

Ms. MARY SULLIVAN: If the zoo needs it, I am happy for them to have it.

Ms. KARA DANNER: I hate the bamboos. It never stops. Never stops.

REED: Within 24 hours, Maslanka got more than 70 responses. That was Mary Sullivan and Kara Danner, two of the first callers. Danner says, no matter how hard she tries, she just can't get rid of her bamboo.

Ms. DANNER: One summer, we spent a full 40-hour workweek just cutting bamboo in my yard and trying to haul it away and just trying to - it didn't help, actually.

REED: So, why isn't the zoo's bamboo growing back? Kurt Bluemel has been a horticulturist for nearly 50 years and he grows bamboo commercially in Maryland. He says that even though bamboo is notorious for spreading quickly, it can still be overharvested. His advice? Give the grass a few seasons to rejuvenate.

Mr. KURT BLUEMEL (Horticulturist): It's a misunderstood plant. Bamboo can be very invasive but if you really depend on the growth of the bamboo, then you might have to rethink this whole process of cultivating it.

REED: Nutritionist Mike Maslanka says he does plan to eventually research what happened so that he can prevent future shortages, but before he does that, he's got to find enough bamboo to get three ravenous pandas through the winter. Brian Reed, NPR News, Washington.

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