

How Many Pandas? Not Enough

Last Updated Sunday, 18 November 2007

In my last blog entry, I talked about how many pandas appear to have been born this year, and how many might exist in captivity. There's a similar confusion about how many pandas might exist in the wild. But a news article this week reminded me that no matter how many there might be, it's not enough. Pandas are up against the forces of nature both in captivity and in the wild, and we can't take anything for granted. I can't imagine life without pandas, but hopefully future generations won't have to either.

There has recently been some reasons for optimism about the numbers of pandas left in the world. Last year, a team of scientists who used DNA testing to determine the number of wild pandas in one of the Chinese reserves announced that according to their results, "previous surveys underestimated the population by more than 50 percent." (Study: Panda Numbers Exceed Expectations) Based upon the prior estimate of 1590, the number estimated in 2004, this would mean there are 3000 or more pandas in the wild. (Christian Science Monitor)

However, under the most recently released analysis of their conservation status, pandas are still considered "endangered." "Even though some people have claimed that panda populations are on the rise, we still consider them endangered because too much uncertainty exists to justify changing their status," explained Dave Garshelis, co-chairman of the IUCN bear specialist group. (BBC News)

Even if the higher numbers are most accurate, recent events remind us just how tenuous the status of pandas in the wild can be. Since 98% of a panda's diet is bamboo, any changes in the availability of bamboo are obviously going to have a significant effect. Recently, during the annual meeting of the China Giant Panda Breeding Technical Committee, Yang Xuyu, deputy head of the Wild Animal Preservation Station of the Sichuan provincial forestry bureau in west China issued a warning. Bamboo has begun to flower in Sichuan, where 1,206 pandas live in 40 nature reserves, accounting for 77 percent of the total panda habitat in China. (Xinhua)

The mass flowering of bamboo plants poses a major threat to wild pandas' survival. In China in 1984 and 1987, arrow bamboo, the pandas' favorite variety, flowered, seeded and died, causing hundreds of pandas to die of disease and starvation. Yang said that "No wild panda has been found dead of starvation. But as the area of bamboo flowering spreads, we should keep close watch on the severity of the pandas' food shortages." (Xinhua)

In the past, when pandas encountered flowering bamboo, they were able to migrate to other regions where the bamboo was not flowering. But now, their ability to migrate is limited by development. (Xinhua) Yang said that if 15 percent of the total bamboo area or 100 percent of a single variety is found to be flowering, all bears in that area will be inoculated and/or relocated to ensure their safety. (China Daily)

Hopefully, if relocation is needed, it will be carried out more smoothly than the last major die-off in the 1980s. As George Schaller's book, *The Last Panda*, chronicles, "The rescue operation, begun with such good intentions, had become a lament...Although the bamboo die-off had not much affected the pandas, human activities in the reserve continued to

have a serious impact....The panda's habitat is shrinking, and many pandas die in poachers' snares."

The last die-off was also used as justification for taking more pandas into captivity. But that is fraught with danger as well. At the same meeting where news of the looming die-off was shared, it was also revealed that 10 pandas at the Wolong Nature Reserve this year became infected with a rare contagious disease from which two of them later died. (China Daily) Chinese officials plan to build more enclosures at both Wolong and Chengdu to ensure that sick bears can be isolated to prevent the fast spread of diseases.

In another article I read about overnight stays at the San Diego Zoo, 12-year-old Matthew observed, "Saving animals in a zoo is good," he adds, "Not destroying habitat is better." (Christian Science Monitor) Hopefully, enough habitat is left for pandas in the affected regions that they can migrate to other areas and stay in the wild even with the die-off. Whether the number is 3000 or 1590, we can't afford to lose a single one of them.