
There's Something about MSU and Pandas

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As a proud alumnus of Michigan State University following some of my fellow alums, I've recently noticed a correlation between MSU and pandas that I never knew existed. Although there aren't any pandas in the state of Michigan, several with a MSU connection are now important "panda people."

The first MSU panda person I learned about was Lisa Stevens, curator of pandas and primates at the National Zoo in Washington, DC. Lisa graduated from MSU in 1977, and has managed all aspects of the Zoo's giant panda program for over 20 years. She started working at the National Zoo after college, before planning to go to vet school, and never left. She became very familiar to panda fans worldwide after Tai Shan was born in 2005. (See Washington Post.) However, to Washingtonians, she has long been known as "The Panda Lady," since the days when Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing were NZ residents. (See Washington Post.)

When visiting Zoo Atlanta for Mei Lan's birthday in September, I learned that keeper Kenn Harwood is also a Michigan State graduate. Until recently, Kenn was the Large Mammal Relief Keeper, and unfortunately missed Mei Lan's birth while at home asleep after working a mammoth shift right before her arrival. Now, according to recent Zoo Atlanta updates, Kenn is the Lead Keeper of Carnivores. (See November 28 update.) We hear he's also pretty handy with the power tools. (See March 07 cub updates.)

Most recently, courtesy of my alumni updates, I learned about an important research project now underway in China, in which Vanessa Hull, MSU doctoral student, is now a key participant. Through the Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability, headed by Dr. Jianguo (Jack) Liu, Vanessa, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, is among the first to obtain permits to trap wild pandas and fit them with safe GPS collars, in order to learn more about their daily life and habitat. Vanessa now lives at the Wuyipeng research station in the Sichuan mountains, part of the Wolong National Nature Reserve. Through Vanessa's journal, we can track her progress in finding wild pandas to study; while she hasn't found any yet, we can't wait for that exciting day!

While my career path took me in almost an opposite direction from these MSU alums, I'm glad our paths have converged in the panda world, and that Michigan State University, through its panda project, is taking such an active role in contributing to our knowledge about these magnificent animals.