Giant panda can survive

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Giant panda. Credit: Yange Yong

The giant panda is not at an “evolutionary dead end” and could have a long term viable future, according to new research involving scientists from Cardiff University.

Previous studies have found that the giant panda’s isolation, unusual dietary requirements and slow reproductive rates have led to a lack of genetic diversity that will inevitably lead the species to extinction.

Now a study by Professor Michael Bruford and Dr Benoît Goossens

from the School of Biosciences, in collaboration with Professor Fuwen Wei and colleagues from the Institute of Zoology along with the China West Normal University in Sichuan, has found that the decline of the species can be linked directly to human activities rather than a genetic inability to adapt and evolve.

“Our research challenges the hypothesis that giant panda’s are at an ‘evolutionary dead end’” said Professor Bruford. “It is however clear that the species has suffered demographically at the hands of human activities such as deforestation and poaching”.

The study gives a new genetic perspective on the giant panda, as well as tracing its demographic history. The research also shows that in areas where habit conservation projects are in place, the giant panda is flourishing and population numbers are increasing.

“Our research suggests we have to revise our thinking about the evolutionary prospects for the giant panda” said Professor Bruford. “The species has a viable future and possesses the genetic capacity to adapt to new circumstances. Conservation efforts should therefore be directed towards habitat restoration and protection. In their natural environment, the giant panda is a species that can have a bright future.”

Source: Cardiff University