

To catch a panda

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Michigan State University's panda habitat research team has spent years collecting mountains of data aimed at understanding and saving giant pandas. Now a graduate student is working to catch crucial data that's black, white and furry.

Vanessa Hull, 25, a Ph.D. candidate, is in the snowy, remote mountains of the Sichuan Province of China – which also is the heart of panda habitat. She's hoping to capture, collar and track up to four wild pandas using advanced global positioning systems.

Hull, a student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife in the MSU College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, is among the first since the 1990s in this crucial area to obtain permits to trap the pandas and fit them with GPS collars. She and the team will map where these elusive creatures go, effectively letting the pandas tell the researchers the habitat they like best.

"Reintroducing captive pandas into the wild is a very difficult process because pandas in captivity aren't used to be in wild, they don't have the survival skills," Hull said. "The researchers in China want to collaborate with us closely."

Scientists can mesh what the pandas tell them with that mountain of data. It can help them identify the most hospitable panda neighborhoods, learn how to preserve those and create more.

"We are very excited about this new project. It will generate lots of long-awaited important information about panda biology, behavior and interactions with human activities," says Jianguo "Jack" Liu, Hull's major adviser, Rachel Carson Chair in Sustainability and University Distinguished Professor of fisheries and wildlife.

For the past dozen years, the MSU Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability, led by Liu, painstakingly has gathered and crunched data on the pandas' habitat, in collaboration with Professor

Zhiyun Ouyang at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Director Hemin Zhang at Wolong Nature Reserve.

With support from the National Science Foundation, NASA, National Natural Science Foundation of China and other sources, the scientists have made groundbreaking discoveries on the give-and-take between panda and human survival in the bamboo jungles, mountains and farmland of the Wolong Nature Reserve, home of the famous panda research and breeding center.

The giant pandas are the darlings of their native China and the world. But walk through panda habitat and they're invisible. Pandas are endangered. Estimates of panda numbers in the wild range from 1,600 to 3,000.

Pandas are particular. Nonnegotiable to the panda is a home that offers lots of choice bamboo, mature trees strong enough to hold a napping panda, ideal temperature and a comfy slope.

Pandas share their home, even in reserves, with people locked in their own struggle to survive. The logging and farming that provides humans heat for their homes and income to survive has wiped out acres of panda-friendly terrain.

Recent history is steeped in irony. China's efforts to save the pandas have made the nature reserves an irresistible tourist attraction. Panda fans on ecotourism trips flock like groupies. This commerce and development degrades panda habitat.

Source: Michigan State University

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