Pandas are actually pretty gregarious, study finds

Previously thought to be solitary animals, giant pandas actually spend a decent amount of time together, according to a new study from Michigan State University.

By Rowena Lindsay, Staff Writer | MARCH 30, 2015

Giant pandas, thought to be hermits of the animal kingdom, are actually quite social (http://www.sciencetimes.com/articles/5031/20150329/the-charming-tale-of-giant-pandas-why-these-wall-flowers-are-the-life-of-the-party.htm), according to a study published in the Journal of Mammalogy.

A team of researchers from Michigan State University put GPS collars on five giant pandas from the Wolong Nature Reserve (http://csmlists/topic/Wolong+Nature+Reserve) in China (http://csmlists/topic/China). The pandas Pan Pan, Mei Mei, Zhong Zhon, Long...
Long, and Chuan Chuan were captured, given the collars and released back into the wild where their movements were logged every four hours for two years, from 2010 to 2012.

Pandas were previously thought to be solitary animals, but the GPS trackers found that the three female pandas Pan Pan, Mei Mei, and Long Long spend long periods of time together throughout the year. The male panda Chuan Chuan traveled longer distances but frequently returned the group of female pandas, even outside of the spring mating season.

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"Pandas are such an elusive species and it's very hard to observe them in wild, so we haven't had a good picture of where they are from one day to the next," coauthors of the study, Vanessa Hull and Jindong Zhang said in a press release (http://www.sciencetimes.com/articles/5031/20150329/the-charming-tale-of-giant-pandas-why-these-wall-flowers-are-the-life-of-the-party.htm). "This was a great opportunity to get a peek into the pandas' secretive society that has been closed off to us in the past."

By tracking the pandas' movements, researchers also found that pandas return to the same locations to feed up to six months after having vacated an area, suggesting that the animals remember particularly good meals and return when the bamboo has grown back.

Very little was previously known about the behavior of pandas, as they are a highly endangered species due to habitat fragmentation, climate change, and human interaction.

Only 1,846 pandas are estimated to be living in the wild, although this total is up from 1,000 to 1,100 in 1977, according to the World Wildlife Foundation.
The Chinese government does not typically allow researchers to put GPS collars on pandas, since they are under state protection. But Dr. Hull hopes that they will allow future studies to go forward given the success of this most recent one.

"We hope the Chinese government sees the value of doing this kind of study and encourages more of it in the future," Hull told the New Scientist.
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