

Pandas Actually Hang Out Together

GPS tracking data sheds light on giant pandas secretive societies



(Keren Su/Corbis)

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smithsonian.com
March 30, 2015 3:34PM

Despite their adorable, friendly looking faces, giant pandas have long had a reputation as loners that don't seek (or even actively avoid) long term companionship. But pandas are also a notoriously mysterious bunch, and recent research suggests that maybe it is just we humans who have been left out of their ursine friend circles.

The Michigan State University [study](#), which tracked five pandas using GPS collars, is one of the first instances in which this technology has shed light on giant pandas' social behavior. "Pandas are such an elusive species and it's very hard to observe them in the wild, so we haven't had a good picture of where they are from one day to the next," researcher [Vanessa Hull explains in a press release](#). "This was a great opportunity to get a peek into the panda's secretive society that has been closed off to us in the past."

After the pandas (four females and one male) were captured and collared, the GPS transmitted each animal's position every four hours for up to two years, between 2010 and 2012. Of the team's discoveries, the result they found most surprising was that three of the pandas were found in the same area for several weeks (and that's not accounting for un-collared pandas that may have also been nearby). "We could see they were in the same locations, which we never would have expected for that length of time and at

that time of year, [outside the breeding season],” Hull says.

The research team also looked at the pandas' feeding habits—and found another pattern. From the *Christian Science Monitor*:

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.

Giant pandas are extremely vulnerable to stresses like habitat loss and human interaction; the more we understand about how they behave and where they eat, the better conservationists will be able to provide space for them to eat, breed—and hang out with friends.

About Samantha Larson

Samantha Larson is a freelance writer who particularly likes to cover science, the environment, and adventure. For more of her work, visit