Background Notes for Teachers

Giant Panda Habitat Loss

The giant panda's mountainous bamboo forest habitat once covered vast areas of China, northern Vietnam and northern Burma. Now, fragments of forest can only be found in a few isolated mountain ranges in Gansu, Shaanxi and the Sichuan Provinces of south-central China. Habitat loss, and the subsequent loss of their primary food source - bamboo, is undoubtedly one of the major reasons for the dwindling numbers of giant pandas in wild.

A typical pair of breeding pandas need a minimum area of around 30 square kilometres of bamboo forest to support them, but logging has destroyed much of their original habitat. In the Sichuan Province alone the panda's habitat shrank by 50% between 1974 and 1989. In 1998 the Chinese government banned logging but up until that time large areas of natural bamboo forest were cleared for timber, fuel wood, infrastructure for a growing population and land for hydropower development.

Use of the land for agriculture also had a major effect on the giant panda's habitat and food source. Bamboo only grows at altitudes of between 500m and 3,100m. Unfortunately, much of the lower land utilized by the giant panda has been claimed for agriculture. This in effect has confined most of the panda's habitat to altitudes greater than 1,400m. As pandas do not hibernate, this has caused major problems for them, as they are unable to retreat to lower levels during the cold winter months.

Three-quarters of all wild pandas now live in nature reserves – but despite this, they're still endangered. Nearly half of all wild pandas were lost between the early 1970s and the late 1990s – mainly owing to habitat destruction and poaching. Habitat loss and fragmentation are still the main threats today.

Giant pandas are doing their bit to reinstate their habitat and keep it healthy. By spreading seeds in their droppings all around the forest – they help vegetation to spread and grow and this in turn helps the forest thrive.

The giant panda's habitat, seen here as red pockets of bamboo forest, is now restricted to a few isolated mountain ranges in south-central China.