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Summary of a Greenpeace East Asia investigation into deforestation in the UNESCO Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries

Introduction

Since 2013 Greenpeace East Asia (GPEA) has employed remote sensing interpretation, spatial analysis and field surveys to assess and analyse concerns about the natural forest habitat of giant pandas in Ya'an city prefecture, part of the Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

GPEA discovered that loopholes in weak forestry regulations are allowing illegal and destructive clear cut deforestation to go unchecked in parts of the Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries. To date deforested areas amount to a total of 3200 acres. These loopholes are allowing an area of nationally and internationally recognised significance to be exploited for profit, endangering local wildlife and global treasures, such as the iconic and rare Giant Panda, and severely undermining the Chinese government's effort to preserve its and the world's natural heritage.

A regulation named the 'Technical Regulations on Reconstruction of Low-function Forest' contains a loophole which allows for the replacement of natural forest with plantation. This is commonly abused by local business entities and authorities to engage in deforestation.

"In terms of forest conservation, the most pressing and most serious problem facing China now is deforestation of natural forest in the name of reconstruction of low-function Forest", says Zhou Lijiang, deputy chief engineer at the Sichuan Province Forestry Investigation and Planning Institute and key architect of the 'Technical Regulations on Reconstruction of Low-function Forest'.

The practice of clear cut deforestation in Ya'an is far from an isolated case. Previous Greenpeace investigations have uncovered similar activities in Yunnan (2013) and Zhejiang (2014) provinces.

In 2017, China will extend the Natural Forest Protection Programme nationwide. This will impose strict logging bans in natural forests across China. However, under the above loophole, forest classified as 'reconstruction of low function forest' will be exempt from the ban. If the loophole is not closed, up to a third of China's natural forest will remain at risk of deforestation even after the extension of the Natural Forest Protection Programme. Greenpeace notes the urgent need to close loopholes and effectively and stringently enforce related laws and regulations before the extension of the programme in 2017.

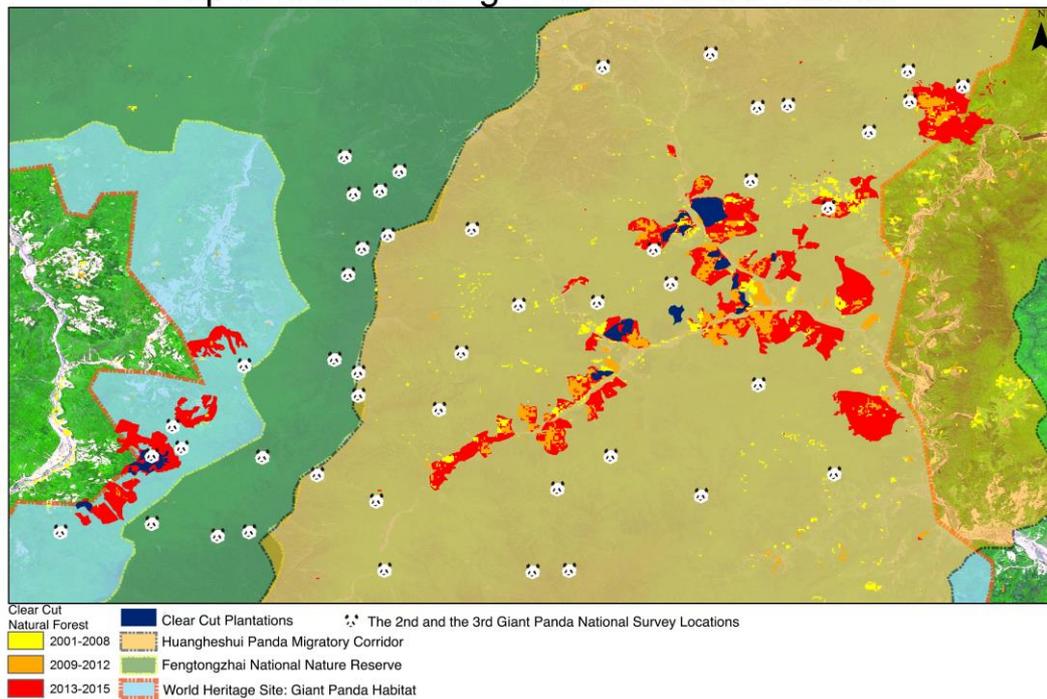
World Heritage Site: Giant Panda Habitat



Legend

-  City Prefecture Border
-  County Border
-  Huangheshui Panda Migratory Corridor
-  Fengtongzhai National Nature Reserve
-  World Heritage Site

Map of Clear Cutting in Giant Panda Habitat



I Main Findings

1. In the area surrounding Ya'an City prefecture's Fengtongzhai National Nature Reserve, in the World Natural Heritage Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries, considerable natural forest deforestation has taken place in the name of 'Reconstruction of Low-function Forest', which involves turning natural forests into profitable plantations. Forest clearance amounts to 3200 acres, equivalent to 1814 football (soccer) fields. In close proximity to these areas of natural forest clearance are a large number of panda activity points as well as nationally protected plants, such as the Chinese Yew (*Taxus chinensis*) and the Dove Tree (*Davidia involucrate*).

2. The 'clear cutting' deforesting practice used not only seriously damages the natural heritage of the giant panda reservation, leading to habitat fragmentation, it also impacts on a critical panda habitat migration corridor in the Qionglai Mountains in Ya'an. The damage this causes is indisputable, and represents a serious departure from China's commitment to world natural heritage protection.

3. During the reforestation of the Ya'an area, a number of parties have carried out expansions of the project to maximize profits, in violation of regulations. As a result, large areas of once natural forest are now manmade, artificial forests. In some areas unsuitable replanting of forests has also undermined the protection of national first level plants.



Case

Study 1: Lushan County Dachuan Town Tongchanghe Valley (Lushan Huangshui River Giant Panda Gene Flow Corridor, Qionglai Mountains' most important giant panda corridor): A large area of virgin forest has been cleared, a total of 2918 acres, of which 91.1% of the cleared area is natural forest (2659 acres).

Encompassed by the World Natural Heritage Site – Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries, this is an important area, containing National Nature Reserves and the Panda Gene Flow Corridor. From the results of the second and third national panda surveys, we can see that the valley contains no fewer than 20 panda activity points.¹ The stability of the corridor is critical for the connection and protection of the core population in the Fengtongzhai giant panda nature reserve, but forest clearance has created a number of holes in this panda habitat patch.



Case Study 2 - Baoxing Xinhua Village (recognized in the late 19th Century as the place of origin of the Giant Panda): In the name of “earthquake-damaged forest restoration,” 541 acres of natural pine forests have been replanted with Chinese fir plantations, with the majority of the clearing having occurred in 2014, following the Lushan earthquake on April 20, 2014. The clearing of the forest is already connected to the Fengtongzhai national nature reserve.

In a survey of wild flora and fauna, traces of suspected panda droppings were found within 50 metres of bamboo forest clearing, and 16 panda activity points were found within 20 metres. In addition, two nationally protected birds, the Golden Pheasant and the Crested Honey Buzzard, and the Dove Tree, which has first level national protection status, were found in the area. The distribution and traces of these animals and plants indicates the high conservation value of the natural forests of this area, and shows how low-function forest replanting which has been permitted due to loopholes in the regulations has crossed China’s own most sensitive and fragile ecological red lines.

¹ <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1213.pdf>

II The Impact of Natural Forest Clearance and Conversion

1. Destruction of World Natural Heritage - Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries

GPEA has discovered that natural forest clearance has taken place within the area of the World Natural Heritage Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries. Large areas of primary natural forest are a basic condition for the survival and reproduction of giant pandas in the wild. Deforestation further reduces and fragments the already limited natural habitat of the species, and is a direct threat to their feeding and migration zone. It increases the risk that their small and dispersed populations become increasingly cut off, limiting their chances to make contact with each other and reproduce.

2. Undermining the survival chances of rare plants

Within 500 metres of the clearance area, a number of national first level protected rare plants have been found, including a distribution of the rare Chinese Yew. These trees often grow in clusters, and the “clear cutting” method of natural forest clearance means that some of these rare trees are likely to have been felled, seriously violating Article 40 of the “People's Republic of China Forest Law” and Article 16 of the “Regulations on the Protection of Wild Plants.”

3. Increases likelihood of post-earthquake secondary geological disasters

Natural forests are the most important factor in soil and water conservation, and after extensive forest clearance, regeneration takes a long time. If during this forest regeneration period there happens to be a large earthquake, the cleared forest areas are liable to suffer secondary geological disasters such as landslides and debris flows.

III Root Causes of Large Scale Natural Forest Clearance and Conversion

1. ‘Reconstruction of Low-function Forest’ has become a loophole in the management of natural commercial forests.

The process of natural forest protection is highly entwined with commercial forest management. Since 1998, the Natural Forest Protection Programme has prohibited logging in Sichuan province’s natural forests. However, the commercial incentives for logging remain. From an economic perspective, forest farmer and local governments have a strong drive to benefit from natural forest resources. The loophole of reconstruction of low-function forest has allowed them to continue deforesting in search of these profits.

2. Huge economic profits have driven the concept of “replacement reconstruction” to deteriorate into ill-considered and inefficient forestry.

Few farmers have access to the capital, skills and technology needed to conduct reconstruction of natural forest. Clear cutting is the easiest way to harvest forests and has become common practice. In addition, following collective forestry reforms to allow for forestland circulation and transfer, big contractors have entered the scene and have gained the rights to conduct forest reconstruction over large areas of forest.

3. As much of the large area of the World Natural Heritage Site – Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries are not covered by nature reserves, a number of areas have not received effective or strict enough protection, supervision and management efforts.

A Sichuan Provincial People's Congress meeting on July 20, 2015 agreed and the 'Sichuan World Heritage Protection Ordinance (Revised Draft)' has adjusted relevant legal responsibilities appropriately. The 28 articles of Chapter V lists in detail prohibited behaviour in regards to world heritage sites. But in terms of specific actions for the protection of natural heritage – such as natural forest management activities – we have yet to see related regulations.

IV Greenpeace Recommendations

Greenpeace calls on the State Forestry Administration (SFA) and the Sichuan provincial government to strengthen panda habitat protection and implement effective ecological rehabilitation and strict supervision in order to prevent further damage being done to this World Heritage Site and important ecosystem. Greenpeace recommends:

- The SFA and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development should develop a programme to encourage ecological rehabilitation in areas of the World Heritage Site and manage current plantations so as to promote the return of the original habitat in order to ensure that endangered plant and animal species can continue to live in the area.
- The SFA should expand nationally and clarify the 'Technical Regulations on Reconstruction of Low-function Forest'.
- The Sichuan Provincial Government should revise the 'Regulations on the Protection of World Heritage in Sichuan Province' in order to strengthen the supervision and management of the world's natural heritage and improve the application of punitive measures.
- Before the Natural Forest Protection Programme is expanded nationwide in 2017, the SFA should outline specifically how 'commercial natural forest' can be utilised, establish sustainable management practices and encourage the development of other forestry industries, such as plant cultivation and the medicinal plants industry.