

Pandas safe after latest earthquake to hit Sichuan

When a 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit Jiuzhaigou County, a popular tourist area in southwest China's Sichuan Province, on Tuesday night, the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda was quick to confirm that the staff and pandas at its base, 400 kilometers from epicenter, were safe.

However, the earthquake was near a panda migration corridor and might have an impact on the wild population in the area, said Gu Xiaodong, deputy director of a local wildlife protection station.

Giant pandas live mainly in the mountains of Sichuan and neighboring Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. Due to habitat loss and low birthrates, only about 1,800 still live in the wild, while some 400 live in captivity.

Panda reserves cover about 60 percent of their natural habitat and are home to 70 percent of the wild population. Most of the habitat is in Sichuan, where earthquakes and habitat fragmentation have affected breeding patterns.

Secondary disasters, such as screees and barrier lakes, also change the habitat, cut off food sources and increase risks for the wild population.

In May, 2008, an 8.0-magnitude earthquake damaged Sichuan's Wolong Panda Reserve. Most of its pandas and staff were transferred to another facility in Ya'an, 140 kilometers from provincial capital Chengdu.

That facility fell victim when a 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit Lushan County on April 20, 2013. The center reported minimal damage and its 61 pandas were uninjured.

A new panda breeding and research center, sponsored by the Hong Kong government, has been built on less rugged terrain in the Wolong reserve, with the capacity to accommodate 80 captive pandas.

Last year, the provincial government put forward a plan for a 27,134 square kilometer national park that would unite the isolated habitats. It aims to restore migration corridors to link 67 panda reserves on six isolated mountain ranges. It will allow wild pandas to mate with those from other areas to enrich their gene pool.