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## Sabotaged by Soy? No Panda Progeny

Dr. Kaayla Daniel, PhD, CNN - May 3, 2012

Is she or isn't she? That's one of the most frequently asked questions at zoos around the world. Pregnancies of pandas in captivity are rare, and live births, even rarer. Of the few pandas born alive, only 40 percent survive the first month, and only a third make it into adulthood.

The challenge is great. Even in the wild, pandas are solitary creatures that can be finicky about finding a mate with the perfect smell. With the giant panda nearly extinct, zoo officials have tried everything imaginable to encourage the pandas to mate, including behavioral therapy to improve social skills and marriage counselors to improve relationships. At the Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding and Research Base in China, encouragement even includes showing X-rated "how to" videos of humping pandas.

At the Edinburgh Zoo, zookeepers, including the aptly named Iain Valentine, recently built a private love nest and love tunnel in the hope that the giant pandas Tian Tian and Yang Guang, also known as Sweetie and Sunshine, might get together this spring. Female pandas are only fertile two or three days per year so when Tian Tian showed signs of ovulating last week, hopes ran high. To improve the prospects, zoo keepers turned off the webcam to give the couple some privacy though clearly Mr. Valentine or someone else has been watching. Things looked hopeful for a bit when the pandas got together without fighting and did a little playful wrestling. Alas, Tian Tian's hormones dropped before they mated. And her premature drop in hormones meant the zoo couldn't try with artificial insemination either.

Clearly, many issues come into play. Yet why is it that zookeepers seem to have considered just about everything except diet? In the wild, pandas eat mostly bamboo, choosing from a variety of different species. Most pandas eat more than 30 kg per day, but also eat eggs, grasses, meat and vegetables if available. What Tian Tian and Yang Guang eat at the Edinburgh Zoo is also mostly bamboo, but primarily one type. And to provide what's considered a "balanced diet," zookeepers supplement with special panda cakes made from soy, corn, rice, egg and oil.

Similarly, at Washington DC's National Zoo, panda diets are supplemented with apple slices and soy biscuits.

Yes, soy, despite the fact that it is completely unnatural for pandas. Soy isoflavones have caused infertility, miscarriages, birth defects, decreased libido anxiety, social isolation, aggression and other behavioral disorders in all animal species tested. Making matters worse, both the soy and corn might be GMO, increasing reproductive risks even further. Oils, most likely refined, deodorized and rancid vegetable oils, have also been linked to fertility problems. Other than egg, all of the ingredients in these special panda cakes are completely unnatural for pandas. As for the egg, it almost certainly is powdered egg with oxidized cholesterol. No wonder pandas are having problems reproducing in captivity!

What's more, anecdotal evidence indicates that soy can even alter one's scent—and not for the better. Given the fact that pandas are exceptionally sensitive to scent, the only conclusion is, poor pandas!

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