



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

I see China has been celebrating the release of a captive-bred giant panda into the wild for the first time. A male called Xiang Xiang has just been set free in Sichuan Province.

I don't want to belittle the efforts of everyone involved in the three-year training programme that prepared Xiang Xiang for his new life, but is it really going to make any difference? No. The world's most famous endangered species won't be saved by the highly-publicised release of a single captive-bred five-year-old. It's just a smokescreen.

It reminds me of David Cameron's stunt in Svalbard, where he chose to mince across the Arctic ice on the eve of local government elections rather than giving Blair a proper run for his money. But Cameron's real faux pas was to pretend that the Tory mantras of free enterprise and consumer choice are compatible with a truly green policy.

So while he was wishing away the need for changes to our carbon-crunching lifestyles, the Chinese were wishing away the real problems still facing giant pandas.

I can understand why China is confident. A recent Government survey estimated a population of 1,590 pandas in the wild – 40 per cent more than previous figures. But this doesn't reveal a genuine recovery in panda numbers.

It merely reflects the fact that the four-year survey covered a wider area of western China than ever before and used much more sophisticated surveillance techniques. The truth is that pandas still face exactly the same threats of poaching and habitat fragmentation that they did several decades ago.

It worries me that such highly-publicised 'easy solutions' lull us into a false sense of security. It's like recycling instead of tackling the real problem of over-packaging, or widening roads rather than improving public transport.

But it's the politicians who are kidding themselves. They seem to be alone in believing that conservation is painless. When Gordon Brown was challenged to identify the sacrifices we all need to make to save the Earth, the best he could muster was that we must remember to turn off our tvs. Thank goodness the rest of us aren't so naïve.

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