Correspondence

Save Iran's cheetah from extinction

The Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus* ssp. *venaticus*) is classed as critically endangered on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, with just 43 individuals left in Iran. Conservation efforts were dealt a major blow last month when the United Nations Development Program announced its withdrawal from the Conservation of the Asiatic Cheetah Project (see go.nature.com/2zrgyjx).

Management of the project will now fall mainly to Iran's Department of the Environment, the head of which has declared the cheetah "doomed to extinction" on the basis of its declining numbers since 2001. We urge Iran's government not to give up on cheetah conservation.

It should instead look to the example of the giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) in China. The Chinese government and its partners undertook to develop breeding programmes in the 1950s and to protect bamboo-forest habitats in the 1980s. The strategy was so successful that pandas were last year downlisted from endangered to vulnerable (see go.nature.com/2hizc6w).

Bringing the Asiatic cheetah back from the brink of extinction will require close cooperation between governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and grass-roots stakeholders. The government's wholehearted support is crucial.

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FRANS LANTING/FLPA

An Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus* ssp. *venaticus*): just 43 are left in Iran.

Celebrate results of excellence initiative

I respectfully disagree with your interpretation of the results from the latest round of competition in the Excellence Initiative for Germany's universities (see *Nature* **551,** 15; 2017). In my view, the outcome hints at the success, rather than the failure, of the programme to promote research excellence.

The Excellence Initiative is more than ten years old — long enough for universities aiming for research excellence to invest in their intellectual capacity and infrastructure, and to stimulate research programmes that can compete with those in the elite universities. The fact that the 88 research groups in the final round of the Clusters of Excellence competition cover a large geographical area and involve newcomers is a reason for celebration, not disappointment. It is healthy for the scientific enterprise to invest in new research areas as well as in different universities and groups, as long as the proposed research is innovative and the capacity to carry it out is evident.

This philosophy is embedded in the review criteria of the highly successful US National Science Foundation. Scientific excellence thrives on diversity and does not necessarily spring from earlier accomplishments, so it must be continually reasserted. Kudos is due to all of Germany's new and established research groups that made it to the final cut, and to the universities and federal states that supported them.

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Gauging the risk from nuclear waste

You suggest that the United States should modify its strategy for nuclear-waste disposal according to the "risk it poses" (*Nature* **550,** 429–430; 2017). That risk would first need to be determined.

The risk calculation is a function of the type of radiation, and its intensity and radiotoxicity. It also strongly depends on the mobility of specific radionuclides in different geological environments. The potential release and transport of radionuclides that are highly mobile in the geosphere, such as long-lived iodine-129 and selenium-79, have to be part of the risk evaluation. This risk varies from site to site.

Concerning the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico, it is not the state that has "tied the DOE's hands" by banning the disposal of tank wastes, but the Land Withdrawal Act of 1992. The act bans high-level waste and spent nuclear fuel from WIPP to ensure that the repository does not become a magnet for all manner of nuclear wastes.

You state that "by and large, WIPP has functioned as designed". However, the construction and operation of WIPP for a few decades does not confirm its long-term performance over 10,000 years, particularly for proposals that would increase or change the type of waste. The disposal of long-lived fission products could require the extension of WIPP's compliance period to hundreds of thousands of years, as at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.

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Scrap very useless qualifiers

Eric Blackman bemoans the misuse of 'obviously' and 'clearly' in scientific publications (*Nature* **550,** 457; 2017). He might also have mentioned another hackneyed adverb that conveys so little to the reader: 'very'.

As an editor and reviewer, it is one of my life's tasks to delete this overworked word from any scientific manuscript I handle. I once found it eight times in a paragraph; I felled seven and reluctantly showed a single act of mercy.

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CORRECTION

The cover line on the 30 November issue of *Nature* (*Nature* **551,** issue 7682; 2017) wrongly made reference to 'limb regeneration'. The cover line should have read 'How different types of muscle fibre help to direct regeneration'.