

Correspondence

Young scientists welcome at IPBES

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) gathers and evaluates information on biodiversity and ecosystem services to help its member governments and other stakeholders formulate policies based on sound scientific evidence (see www.ipbes.net). Such global assessments call for wide-ranging input, which is why the IPBES wishes to encourage early-career scientists to join its fellows programme.

The programme offers these scientists an opportunity to learn and contribute to international science policy, working across different disciplines. Currently, 33 fellows are participating in four regional assessments (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Americas, Europe and Central Asia) and in one thematic assessment (land degradation and restoration).

The strong communication skills of early-career scientists and their experience in public engagement will complement and consolidate the work of senior scientists and experts in describing scientific findings and options to policymakers to ensure the most satisfactory outcome.

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Is snow leopard tally underestimated?

The International Union for Conservation of Nature has altered the status of the snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) from “endangered” to “vulnerable” (<http://doi.org/cd8d>). The decision was based on the animal’s estimated population, which in my view is unrealistic. This change in status could

adversely affect conservation programmes, especially in developing countries with limited funds.

A report by the wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC recorded a minimum of 710 snow leopards poached in 2003–16, of which 259 were poached last year (see go.nature.com/2yox0fq). In my opinion, the actual number lost is likely to be much greater, because retaliatory killings by livestock owners in India, Nepal, China, Pakistan and Uzbekistan often go unreported (C. Mishra *et al.* in *Snow Leopards* 59–68; Elsevier, 2016). Also, the animals’ scattered distribution and remote mountain habitat limit access by officials and make legislation harder to enforce.

Conservation funding favours endangered rather than vulnerable species, so establishing the exact population of snow leopards in each of the countries in its range is crucial for conservation efforts. This calls for camera traps and genetic studies to underpin modelling estimates that might otherwise be misleading (A. Aryal *et al.* *J. Mammal.* **95**, 871–881; 2014).

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Construction: limit China’s sand mining

Sand mining in China has been massively stepped up over several decades to make the concrete and cement needed for the country’s boom in urbanization infrastructure. The scale of this activity in the Yangtze River basin, for example, has destroyed crucial spawning, feeding and rearing grounds for its aquatic organisms, contributing to the demise of unique species such as the now-extinct Yangtze river dolphin (*Lipotes vexillifer*) and the endangered Yangtze finless porpoise (*Neophocaena asiaeorientalis* ssp. *asiaeorientalis*).

Although the Chinese government set out a strict management plan for sand mining in the Yangtze River basin in 2012, our field investigations over two years from August 2015 indicate that operations are increasing, often illegally. Colossal vessels are mining sand outside the permitted areas and times in the Yangtze’s main stem and its tributaries, and in the huge connecting lakes Poyang and Dongting.

The impact of sand mining on the river’s ecology is exacerbated by many megadam developments upriver that obstruct sand replenishment downstream (B. Hu *et al.* *Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci.* **13**, 2253–2264; 2009). We appeal to the Chinese government to clamp down on this wholesale destruction of aquatic organisms’ habitat and to promote ecologically friendly building substitutes.

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*On behalf of 7 correspondents (see go.nature.com/2zniuuaa for a full list).

Construction: use waste for building

As construction work in India soars and the pressure on stone and other natural resources mounts, the Bureau of Indian Standards has called for good-quality building materials to be made from waste products. A proof of concept for this waste valorization has been developed by the Indo-UK Centre for Environment Research and Innovation (IU-CERI; see www.gre.ac.uk/iu-ceri).

IU-CERI has identified agricultural and industrial wastes from India that can be converted into value-added products such as construction materials by using carbon dioxide and commercial low-carbon technology (P. J. Gunning *et al.* *Proc. Inst. Civil Eng. Construct. Mater.* **164**,

231–239; 2011). These products meet European specifications for lightweight aggregates.

Implementing this technology will help to utilize India’s abundant wastes from agriculture (more than 800 million tonnes), mining and industry (more than 400 million tonnes). These sectors will benefit from economic gains and smaller carbon footprints. Other likely benefits include diversion of waste from burning or landfill, sustainable production of construction materials, and more-consistent supply chains in regions with sparse natural resources.

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On what’s neither clear nor obvious

This is a friendly suggestion to colleagues across all scientific disciplines to think twice about ever again using the words ‘obviously’ and ‘clearly’ in scientific and technical writing. These words are largely unhelpful, particularly to students, who may be counterproductively discouraged if what is described is not in fact obvious or clear to them.

Even the most astute readers can disagree about what is clear and obvious. The author may have been immersed in the subject for decades longer than the reader, for example, so his or her long-standing assumptions could involve subtleties that the reader feels ought to be revisited.

When seeking to convey the minimal effort needed to understand an argument that follows, or to provide a gauge for what should be evident to a reader who has progressed to that stage, there is more effective language available.

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