

Correspondence

Rooibos settlement: a crucial omission

We celebrate the compensation agreement between the rooibos-tea industry and South Africa's Indigenous peoples (see *Nature* 575, 258; 2019). As researchers in the field, what concerns us are those left out of the story: small-scale farmers who have worked rooibos land for generations.

It is their oral histories that informed how rooibos seeds were originally unearthed by following the paths of ants (a finding that led to the birth of the industry at scale), and how rooibos was used alongside breast milk to nurture their children. Yet these farmers do not fit neatly into the compensation-agreement narrative because most do not self-identify as Indigenous San or Khoi. Traditional knowledge does not necessarily have a clear-cut ethnic provenance.

Although some small-scale rooibos farmers are descended from San and Khoi, many trace back to slaves and labourers brought in from other parts of Africa and from southeast Asia. The group was largely left out of the compensation negotiations and was eventually included only through a gesture by the National Khoisan Council. Whether the group will benefit in practice remains to be seen.

If not, these communities will be further marginalized: by their exclusion from an Indigenous heritage, by their dearth of land and resources, and because they lack the power of a government-recognized council.

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Sahel crisis: cut global emissions

The recommendations by Alisha Graves and her colleagues for averting catastrophe in Africa's Sahel overlook the need to address the drivers of its climate and ecological crises (*Nature* 575, 282–286; 2019).

Although the authors' recommendations could help to prevent catastrophe in the short to medium term, immediate action is also needed against the fundamental causes if we are to mitigate crises of rapidly escalating scale and severity in the longer term.

This might seem obvious, but it must be emphasized repeatedly if we are to ramp up our currently woefully inadequate action against the global climate and ecological emergency. Otherwise, there is an implicit acceptance of the status quo and the current trajectory. And the catastrophe in the Sahel, and others like it around the world, will not be averted, but at best delayed.

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Kurdistan: stop the cycle of strife

I agree with some of the scientists who wrote to *Nature* from nations experiencing civil unrest: instability can wreck educational and research infrastructure (*Nature* 576, 382–384; 2019). Several civil wars over the past half-century have certainly done so in Kurdistan – the geographical region divided between Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria. The continuing conflict against the Islamist terrorist group ISIS and Turkey is making matters worse. And civil war now looms in Rojava, the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria.

The Kurds have been considered second-class citizens in their homelands for centuries. Other than in Iraqi Kurdistan, they have no right to speak in their own language or to wear traditional attire in state institutions. Research students must undergo security screening and are excluded from some subjects, including electronics and aerospace engineering.

It pains me to think what another generation might have to live through in the region. I was a child in the 1980s, when Iraq's President Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons killed more than 3,000 Kurdish civilians in one day. He bombarded my city, Saqez in Iran, forcing my family and thousands of others to flee. After the war, the damaged infrastructure of Iraq's and Iran's Kurdish regions – often there was electricity for just a few hours each day – prevented most research laboratories from functioning.

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Futures: lost to the past

I am deeply disappointed to see the loss of the Futures section from the print version of *Nature*. I read only the hard copy of the magazine, and I looked forward every week to the science fiction on its last page. To be able to think deeply about contemporary problems and then abruptly shift to a more creative turn of mind was, to my knowledge, unique among scientific publications.

The Futures section offered me an opportunity to make connections. For example, the mind- and time-bending short story 'You will remember this' by Justen Russell brought to life an illustration of two universes governed by different laws (*Nature* 574, 144; 2019). For me, this imaginative story found a route to reality as I read Philip Ball's Comment article 'Science must move with the times', which speculated on the future scientific advances of humanity (*Nature* 575, 29–31; 2019).

My more playful side will miss such indulgences when I am reading *Nature* to further my personal and professional development.

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