

# Correspondence

## Ongoing horror of 2019 oil disaster

The mystery crude-oil spill that struck Brazil from late August last year continues to severely affect thousands of kilometres of the country's northeastern coastline. Remediation and containment measures are being hampered because the source and timing of the spill are still unclear. The consequences of this environmental and societal disaster could last for decades.

Besides the spill's catastrophic impact on the region's marine biodiversity (more than 40 of Brazil's Marine Protected Areas have been hit), it affects the livelihoods and food security of millions of coastal residents. In the region of Pernambuco, for example, sales of fish and shellfish have plummeted by around 80% (M. E. de Araújo *et al. Cad. Saúde Públ.* <http://doi.org/dkq7>; 2020).

The decline in sales of fish and seafood in the region is exacerbated by public confusion over the authorities' conflicting advice on safe eating habits. The biological accumulation of toxins in food animals is likely to pose a long-term risk to human health.

**Richard J. Ladle\*** Institute of Biological and Health Sciences, Federal University of Alagoas, Maceió, Brazil.

\*On behalf of 4 correspondents; see [go.nature.com/2tz2u13](http://go.nature.com/2tz2u13)  
richardjamesladle@gmail.com

## Don't cheat Chinese environment laws

Some local authorities in China are resorting to 'quick fixes' to comply with strict regulations imposed by the 2014 revised Environmental Protection Law. Such tactics must be stopped: they mask pollution issues that could defeat long-term environmental goals.

For example, to pre-empt scrutiny and quickly improve air-quality rankings in Lanshan, Shandong province, 300 or so restaurants were shut and production at more than 400 wooden-fibreboard factories was stopped. Many of these businesses had pollution-control measures in place ([www.mee.gov.cn](http://www.mee.gov.cn)). In another case, farmers in Shangcai, Henan, were told to harvest 5 hectares of wheat by hand to avoid dust from mechanized harvesting affecting readings at a nearby air-monitoring site (J. Qu *Chutian Metropolis Daily* 10 June 2019). Air-quality monitoring data have also been manipulated in Xi'an, Shaanxi (D. Liu and S. Wang *Int. J. Environ. Sci. Technol.* **16**, 4963–4966; 2019).

Local leaders' success should be measured by their progress on long-term environmental improvements. Regional governments should therefore be allowed a reasonable period to address environmental issues. The focus should be on tackling underlying causes of environmental problems, with technical backing from central government, rather than on misguided quick fixes.

**Dasheng Liu** Ecological Society of Shandong, Jinan, China.  
ecologyliu@163.com

**Renqing Wang** Shandong University, Qingdao, China.

**Julian R. Thompson** University College London, UK.

## Ditch group metrics for student hopefuls

As an associate professor at an Australian university who was educated at unranked universities in India, I find it disturbing that some universities are now using international university rankings to help assess graduate students for admission. In my view, this risks promoting and institutionalizing discrimination, and hence undermines global efforts to increase diversity in academia.

When I applied in 1998 to do a PhD at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, the university requested my degree-course syllabuses from India. My opportunities were not scuttled by the ranking of those universities. So I was shocked when one of my students showed me the applications section for master's programmes at several premier institutions. These required applicants to give the ranking of the university where they studied as an undergraduate, for use as an assessment parameter.

Such 'objective' metrics could be viewed as a way to reduce the selection workload and avoid unconscious biases. But individuals should not be assessed through a group-based metric that reinforces stereotypes. And, given that university rankings are correlated with per capita gross domestic product (E. F. Tuesta *et al. J. Data Inf. Sci.* **4**, 56–78; 2019), organizations also risk making the serious mistake of equating an applicant's ability with regional and economic differences.

**Sureshkumar Balasubramanian** Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.  
mb.suresh@monash.edu

## No foundation for anti-nuclear bias

In his otherwise excellent review of Thane Gustafson's book *The Bridge*, Andrew Moravcsik includes nuclear power in his list of energy sources to which natural gas is "environmentally superior" (*Nature* **576**, 30–31; 2019). Burning natural gas in fact releases almost half as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as does coal. Nuclear power production itself releases none. Taking into account the CO<sub>2</sub> released from fossil fuels burnt during plant construction and uranium mining and processing, nuclear energy ranks about equally with solar power – so still much less polluting than natural gas.

If Moravcsik is referring to damage from environmental releases, nuclear power has proved itself to be much cleaner and safer than natural gas. If he is considering nuclear waste, existing practice effectively sequesters spent nuclear fuel from the environment by using dry-cask storage. Permanent disposal sites (two currently: the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in southern New Mexico, for military waste, and Onkalo, under construction in Finland) will effectively isolate nuclear waste for centuries.

Anti-nuclear bias has no place in a pre-eminent journal of science, especially when global heating is increasing dangerously as a result of our over-dependence on fossil fuels.

**Richard Rhodes**, Half Moon Bay, California, USA.  
richardrhodes1@comcast.net