

Correspondence

To tackle wildfires, don't focus on flames

Wildfires around the world are overwhelming fire services and becoming humanitarian disasters. Rather than short-term 'save and rescue' efforts focusing on just the flames, there should be more widespread recognition that fire is a natural process that is essential and unavoidable.

After devastating wildfires in 2017 (see A. M. Ramos *et al. iScience* **26**, 106141; 2023), Portugal changed its wildfire governance, financing, outreach and monitoring by developing a Landscape Fire Governance Framework (see go.nature.com/4geymua). This is based on revaluing rural areas, creating fire-resilient communities and landscapes, and fostering good, safe and traditional use of fire.

Sustainable transformation requires long-lasting efforts and political will. But change is also coming from new players in wildfire. The Dutch government acknowledged in October that, to prevent disaster, having fire in the landscape is part of the solution (see go.nature.com/kgtrjrc; in Dutch) – an approach that matches its world-famous water-management strategy. We call on national governments and international institutions to develop, implement and finance long-term wildfire policies based on similar principles.

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Chinese rice tastes ever more nice

A recent Research Highlight (*Nature* **635**, 527; 2024) suggests that the quality of rice crops in China and Japan is declining, owing to hotter nights brought about by climate change (X. Liu *et al. Geophys. Res. Lett.* **51**, e2024GL110557; 2024). There are, however, many quality indicators for rice (*Oryza sativa*), including appearance and texture. Taste tests by the China National Rice Research Institute in Hangzhou, where we work, suggest a steady improvement in these attributes over the past decade or so, with peak scores in 2022.

Measures such as genetic improvement and monitoring of planting environments have contributed to this advance, which has occurred alongside a marked increase in the efficiency of rice production as measured by total factor productivity. This is particularly noticeable for the subspecies *O. sativa indica*, which tends to be cultivated in economically developed regions of southern China, such as Guangdong province.

Rice productivity in these regions is positively correlated with urbanization rate, the population's average number of years of education and per capita gross domestic product, whereas effective irrigation area and disaster rate have a negative, but not significant, impact (X. Zhang, Master's thesis, Central South Univ. Forestry Technol. <https://doi.org/nw5d> (2023); in Chinese). This suggests that the improvement of rice taste quality is positively related to the regional economy and national grain-subsidy policy.

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Apply 'true malice' principle to research-misconduct sleuths

Academia champions openness, freedom and integrity. Yet, as the Nature Index interview with academic-misconduct detective Graham Kendall reveals, many whistle-blowers choose online anonymity for fear of repercussions from publishers, institutions or peers (see *Nature* <https://doi.org/g8nr69>; 2024).

With the number of large-scale retractions and various forms of research misconduct apparently on the rise (*Nature* **624**, 479–481; 2023), it is time to consider granting greater protections to whistle-blowers. A feasible approach could draw on the 'true malice' principle that exists in libel law in many jurisdictions. In journalism, this principle has created an enduring legacy for press freedom. The 1964 US Supreme Court decision for the case between *The New York Times* and police commissioner L. B. Sullivan, for instance, established that government officials cannot pursue defamation claims over reporting inaccuracies in the United States unless they can prove that whoever reported them knew them to be false.

Academic detectives should be offered a similar degree of immunity for unintentional errors when exposing misconduct. Clear principles and processes to protect whistle-blowers should be laid down by institutions and funders to enable self-regulation in the first instance. If cases should require the intervention of the courts, the true-malice principle should be extended in law to cover investigations of potential academic malfeasance.

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What to do when there is no psychiatrist

We read with great interest your Feature on laypeople helping to treat mental-health issues in Africa (*Nature* **635**, 540–542; 2024). The global shortage of mental-health support that it lays bare is even more acute in conflict zones and after natural disasters, when people face the trauma of displacement and loss of life and livelihood.

There is no full substitute for professional mental-health support. But where that is not practicable, the 2018 book *Where There is No Psychiatrist* by mental-health specialists Vikram Patel and Charlotte Hanlon might provide some assistance. Now in its second edition and freely downloadable as an e-book (see go.nature.com/42vdvz7), it was intended as a follow-up to the book *Where There Is No Doctor* (D. Werner *et al.*, 1977), one of the most widely consulted manuals on physical health in the world.

The book categorizes and describes the symptoms of mental illnesses and how, for example, behavioural therapy can be offered safely by laypeople. It was of great help to B.P.C. when he was stranded without professional support in Bangladesh during the unrest of mid-2024. It might similarly aid others without training in tackling minor mental-health conditions, such as anxiety, in themselves and others, and also guide those with more-complex needs towards appropriate treatment and care.

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