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Ming Chen, Yingzhu Sun, Chunping Yang, Guangming Zeng, Zhongwu Li and Jiachao Zhang

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The road to wild yak protection in China

China is home to about 22,000 wild yaks, which account for 90% of the global wild yak population (1). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) categorizes the wild yak, a cold-tolerant herbivore, as a vulnerable species (2), mainly attributable to excessive hunting for food and trade. China's wild yak is also threatened by land-use change, disease, environmental pollution, genetic contamination, climate change, and resource competition (1, 3, 4). In recent decades, infrastructure construction in China has grown increasingly disruptive to remaining wild yak populations.

Most wild yaks live in or near the Tibetan Plateau (1). These regions are located in or adjacent to areas zoned for the Western Development Strategy (5), an ambitious plan proposed in 1999 to increase the economic level and quality of life of China's rural citizens. The plan's implementation has accelerated the construction of railways and roads. Railways in the central western region of China, which account for 76.6% of China's current rail traffic (6), expanded from 70,000 km in 2014 (7) to 95,000 km in 2016 (6). Meanwhile, highway density increased from 7.7 km/100 km² in 1999 to 20.6 km/100 km² in 2008 (8). The increasing density of railways and roads has fragmented the habitats of wild yaks and forced them to migrate to resource-limited areas to escape from predation and conflict with humans.

China's wild yaks are an important genetic resource for breeding new yak species in an effort to sustainably develop animal husbandry in the Tibetan area and enrich the region's biodiversity (1, 9). Wild yaks are also an important component of biodiversity in nature (9). To protect China's wild yaks, the Chinese government has built several nature reserves (10, 11), but even there, the yaks are threatened by illegal hunting (10). To ensure the safety of China's wild yaks, China must further expand the nature reserves and effectively enforce existing hunting bans. The government should also implement scientific management and protection policies that minimize habitat fragmentation, resource plunder, and predation.

Ming Chen,^{1,2*} Yingzhu Sun,^{1,2}

Chunping Yang,^{1,2*} Guangming Zeng,^{1,2}

Zhongwu Li,^{1,2} Jiachao Zhang³

¹College of Environmental Science and Engineering, Hunan University, Changsha 410082, China. ²Key Laboratory of Environmental Biology and Pollution Control (Hunan University), Ministry of Education, Changsha 410082, China. ³College of Resources and Environment, Hunan Agricultural University, Changsha 410128, China.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: mchensn@hnu.edu.cn (M.C.); yangc@hnu.edu.cn (C.Y.)

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Trout in hot water: A call for global action

Trout are one of the most culturally, economically, and ecologically important taxonomic groups of freshwater fishes worldwide (1). Native to all continents in the Northern Hemisphere, trout belong to seven genera, which are distributed across 52 countries. These cold-water specialists provide recreation and food to millions of people and play important roles in ecosystem functioning and health (2). They are also extremely sensitive to human disturbances because they require cold, clean, complex, and connected habitats for survival and persistence (3)—all attributes that humans have substantially altered and degraded (4, 5). Despite their importance as societal icons and as indicators of biodiversity, many of the world's trout species and lineages are endangered and some require immediate conservation efforts to reverse their precarious decline.

Of the 124 recognized species of trout (6, 7), only 67 (54%) have been assessed by the International Union for Conservation

of Nature (IUCN) (7). Alarming, 73% of these species are currently threatened with global extinction, and four are now extinct (7). Although some of these species are likely subspecies, lineages, or distinct ecotypes, this level of threat is exceptionally high compared with other vertebrate groups assessed by the IUCN (8). Widespread imperilment of trout reflects numerous human activities identified in the IUCN assessments, including invasive species, overfishing, pollution, dams, deforestation, agriculture, grazing, and mining (7). Climate change is further stressing trout populations by warming water temperatures, shifting streamflow regimes, increasing extreme events (such as floods, drought, and wildfire), and facilitating species invasions (9, 10). Worse, climate change often acts in synergy with other stressors to further endanger trout (11, 12), a pattern that will be intensified in coming decades as global temperatures continue to rise, with important consequences for trout, aquatic ecosystem functioning, and human well-being.

Reversing these declines will require progressive conservation efforts to protect native trout diversity and ameliorate ongoing and future threats at local and global scales. To preserve these unique fishes, we must protect ecological and genetic diversity, viability, and adaptation in the face of rapid environmental change. Innovative conservation approaches include reconnecting rivers with floodplains, establishing native fish refuges, restoring habitat diversity, and reducing invasive species, including non-native trout stocking programs. Moreover, comprehensive, coordinated, and comparable approaches are needed immediately to assess conservation status and to delineate conservation units across the globe, particularly for data-poor species. Only by



Many trout species, such as these native bull trout, are endangered.