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LETTERS

Saving China's onager

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China's onager (*Equus hemionus*) and its habitats are endangered by coal resource development.

PHOTO: KONRAD WOTHE/MINDEN PICTURES

The onager (*Equus hemionus*), a state-protected species in China, is listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (1) and categorized as near threatened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (2). The main threats to the species include habitat loss caused by human activity, excessive hunting for food and trade, resource competition, climate change, disease, genetic stochasticity, and inbreeding (3–6). In recent decades,

coal resource development in China has grown, adding to the threats faced by the remaining onager populations.

The northeastern part of the Junggar Basin, where most onagers live (1), is also home to abundant coal reserves and China's largest integrated coalfield. To meet the needs of the coal industry, the local government reduced the Kalamaili Mountain Ungulate Nature Reserve, the most important refuge of onagers in China, to 71% of its original size (7). The accommodations made for the coal industry have reduced the size of onager habitats, blocked access to drinking water, and disturbed them with the noise generated by the development. Meanwhile, railway construction required for the development of the coal industry has obstructed migration routes (6, 8, 9).

China's onagers are an important genetic resource for breeding new onager species, an effort that could protect species diversity, genetic diversity, and ecological diversity (10). Although the Chinese government has built a nature reserve to protect onagers, public awareness of wildlife protection remains low. To ensure the safety of China's onagers, China must further expand the current nature reserves and implement scientific management and protection policies. The government should also better publicize wildlife protection.

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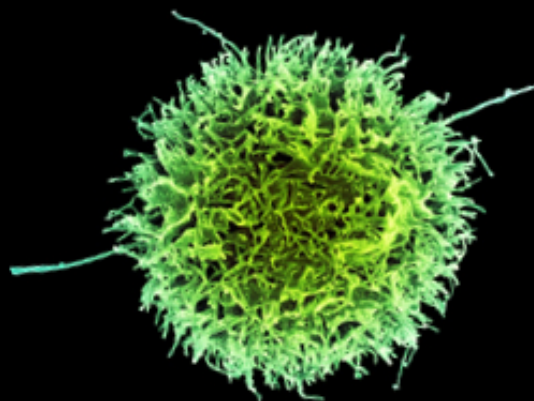
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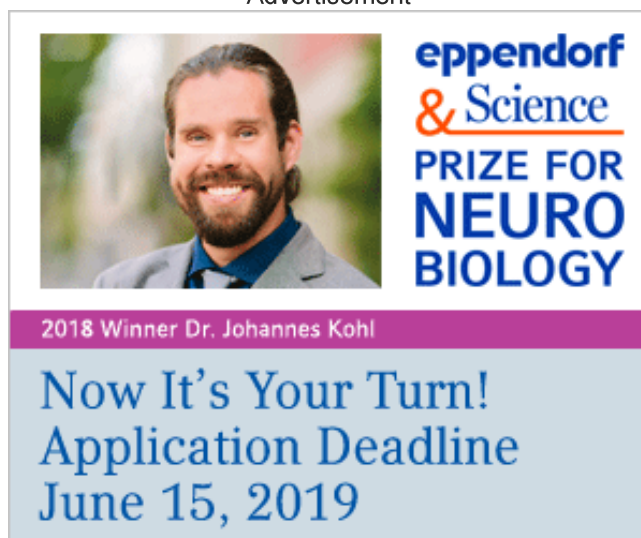
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