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The Real Population BombPosted on [August 21, 2008](#) | Comments Off

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It's been 40 years since Stanford University population biologist Paul Ehrlich warned of imminent global catastrophe in his book "The Population Bomb." As it turns out, the book was aptly, though ironically, named.

Ehrlich predicted that, "In the 1970's, the world will undergo famines hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death.

"At this late date, nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate ..."

Forty years later, no such mass starvation has come to pass. While there have been tragic famines resulting in millions of deaths since 1968, none occurred because global food production failed to keep pace with population growth the core of Ehrlich's hypothesis. Per capita global food production has, instead, increased by 26.5 percent between 1968 and 2005, according to the World Resources Institute. The number of people who starve to death daily declined from 41,000 in 1977 to 24,000 today, according to The Hunger Project, an organization combating global hunger.

The roots of recent hunger generally lie in a combination of transient localized crop failures, political instability, and ill-conceived government policies. The U.N. attributes the current world food "crisis," for example, to recent reduced harvests and crop failures in Europe and Australia, respectively; rapidly growing demand for subsidized grain-based biofuels; and lower surplus crop inventories due to reduced subsidies.

Ehrlich also fretted in "The Population Bomb" that we were depleting the world oxygen supply by paving terrestrial areas, burning fossil fuels and clearing tropical forests. Green party campaigner Peter Tatchell recently reasserted this claim in the U.K. newspaper, The Guardian. "Compared to prehistoric times, the level of oxygen in the earth's atmosphere has declined by over a third and in polluted cities the decline may be more than 50 percent," Tatchell wrote.

But as physicist Luboš Motl points out in his blog, the oxygen scare is nonsense. Atmospheric oxygen has been at 20.94 percent or 20.95 percent for thousands of years, amounting to about 150,000 tons of oxygen per capita. Motl estimates that, at most, any atmospheric oxygen drop due to the combustion of fossil fuels might — at most — be 0.02 percent, a loss that could easily be offset by natural oxygen-producing processes.

Ehrlich also warned in “The Population Bomb” that manmade emissions of carbon dioxide would cause catastrophic global warming. He suggested that a few degrees of heating could melt the polar ice caps and raise sea level by 250 feet, even out fear-mongering Al ‘20-foot tidal wave’ Gore on his best worst day.

“Gondola to the Empire State Building, anyone?” Ehrlich asked.

But average sea level rise between 1961 and 2003 was only about 0.007 inches per year, according to the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and no one can offer more than mere speculation as to the cause of that barely noticeable increase.

Ehrlich’s proposal to avert global catastrophe was to limit or stop population growth. The most efficient way of doing this, he suggested, was for the government to add chemicals to the water or to food to temporarily sterilize people.

“Those of you who are appalled at such a suggestion can rest easy,” he wrote, “the option isn’t even open to us, thanks to the criminal inadequacy of biomedical research in this area.”

So, instead, he proposed a Department of Population and Environment to implement population control laws.

Ehrlich’s goal was to maintain world population at “one or even two billion,” which he suggested “could be sustained in reasonable comfort for 1,000 years if resources were husbanded carefully.” He did acknowledge that we might “still have a chance” if the population stabilizes at four or five billion, but “of course, mankind’s options will be fewer and people’s lives almost certainly less pleasant than if the lower figure is attained.”

But world population in 1968 exceeded 3.5 billion already way over Ehrlich’s goal. Today, world population exceeds 6.6 billion almost double what it was in 1968 and past the point of even having a “chance” of survival, according to Ehrlich.

Have we run out of food? Has population become unsustainable? According to U.N. statistics, the number of people in the developing world who were considered to be undernourished in 1968 was estimated at about 900 million. That estimate is on track to be reduced by more than 50 percent by 2015, according to the U.N. So while world population has just about doubled, global hunger will just about have been cut in half. Tremendous worldwide economic growth and technological advances ignored or not foreseen by Ehrlich have made this achievement possible.

Given how Ehrlich’s predictions turned out, you might think that he vanished into the dustbin of Chicken Little history or at least revised his ideas, right?

Wrong. The Stanford professor is a member of the prestigious National Academy of Sciences and has been honored by the United Nations, MacArthur Foundation, Sierra Club, World Wildlife Fund, Ecological Society of America and the American Institute of Biological Sciences to name a few. Worse, he’s still at it.

In 1968, Ehrlich helped form the group Zero Population Growth (ZPG), which was euphemistically renamed “Population Connection” in 2002. In the 40th anniversary issue of the official publication of Population Connection, Ehrlich warns that “ZPG’s 1968 message that [global population] must stop growing is now more urgent than ever.”

“Each additional person in the population puts disproportionate stress on our life support systems ... And Americans have the heaviest resource and environmental ‘footprints’ of all,” he claims.

Contrary to Ehrlich-think, however, more people have been a boom, not a bomb. They’ve led to an economic boom rather than a bust. In any event, who should decide who is to be born free-willed individuals or Ehrlich’s population police?

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