

*He didn't repudiate his warnings when they failed to pan out, yet didn't lose his popularity or prestige.*



## UPWARD MOBILITY

### Paul Ehrlich Was Always Wrong, Never in Doubt

Not many biologists sell millions of books, make frequent appearances on late-night talk shows and achieve guru status. Paul Ehrlich, the population-control advocate who died last week at 93, checked all three boxes.

Ehrlich's 1968 book, "The Population Bomb," first brought him notoriety. It asserted that widespread famines and mass starvation would doom huge swaths of mankind because the world's population was growing too rapidly. "The battle to feed humanity is over," Ehrlich wrote. "In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."

Ehrlich had visited India and concluded that poor people were overbreeding. He believed that the developing world simply had "too many people" and calculated that the earth's population needed to be cut in half. "The operation will demand many apparently brutal and heartless decisions," and the "pain may be intense," he cautioned, sounding like a cartoon villain. But it would be "coercion in a good cause." Ehrlich urged wealthy nations to cut off food assistance to the Third World. He endorsed an Indian official's proposal for "sterilizing all Indian males with three or more children." It was for their own good, he insisted.

The world's population grew, but famine on the scale that Ehrlich predicted never materialized. Within a decade, India not only produced enough food to feed itself, thanks to technological advances in agriculture that Ehrlich hadn't anticipated, but was a net exporter of wheat. "Since 1900 the world has increased its population by 400 per cent; its cropland area by 30 per cent; its average yields by 400 per cent and its total crop harvest by 600 per cent," Matt Ridley wrote in his 2010 book, "The Rational Optimist." "So per capita food production has risen by 50 per cent."

Making spectacularly wrong predictions of imminent catastrophe became something of a habit for Ehrlich over the decades. His dire forecasts about global cooling and warming were wide of the mark, a twofer. He speculated that the U.S. and Europe would be forced to ration food and encouraged couples to limit themselves to one or two children. In 1971, he said that by "the year 2000 the United Kingdom will be simply a small group of impoverished islands, inhabited by some 70 million hungry people." Three years

later, he predicted that "America's economic joyride is coming to an end: there will be no more cheap, abundant energy, no more cheap abundant food."

Today, the U.K. has the sixthlargest economy in the world, and its population has yet to reach 70 million. After adjusting for inflation, staple foods and energy in the U.S. cost less than they did 50 years ago and claim a smaller percentage of the average person's disposable in--come. Ehrlich said in 1970 that famine would kill 65 million Americans between 1980 and 1989. The reality is that our population has more than doubled since 1950, our air and water have gotten cleaner, and obesity is a much bigger problem than hunger.

Ehrlich's knack for being not only wrong but 180 degrees in error cost him neither popularity—he appeared on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson" more than a dozen times—nor prestige in academia. But it did cost him a famous bet. In 1980 the economist Julian Simon, annoyed by the "phony bad news" being fed to the public, wagered that Ehrlich couldn't name a natural resource that would become more expensive after adjusting for inflation over the next decade. Ehrlich accepted the bet and chose copper, chromium, tin, nickel and tungsten. He lost. Each one of the

minerals declined in price. Ehrlich sent Simon a check for \$576.07 and wisely declined the offer to reup the bet, which he would have lost in 2000 as well.

Ehrlich was often labeled a neo-Malthusian, a reference to the 18th-century British political economist Thomas Malthus, best known for "An Essay on the Principle of Population." Malthus argued that "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce sustenance for man." Still, comparing Ehrlich to Malthus is something of an insult to the latter. Malthus published several revisions of his original essay, responding to new observations as well as criticism from contemporary economic giants like David Ricardo.

During his lifetime, Malthus's prediction that more people would necessarily lead to a decline in the standard of living proved incorrect. He witnessed a simultaneous rise in population and living standards, which continues today. "From the first to the seventh edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, its author moved from an ecological to a sociological perspective," wrote Malthus biographer William Petersen, "and—most remarkably— from an unrelenting pessimism to a cautious optimism." Facts and evidence mattered to Thomas Malthus. To Paul Ehrlich, and the radical environmentalists who revered him, they were at best an afterthought.

*By Jason L. Riley*

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