

*Paul Ehrlich Was Wrong — But He Still Changed the World*  
Matt Ridley, *The Atlantic* 3.18.26

Paul Ehrlich, the butterfly biologist turned rock star eco-pessimist, has died at the age of 93. That in itself is remarkable because he warned that by 1980 the life expectancy of the average American would have fallen to 42 years as a result of cancer caused by pesticides. In 1968, he forecast that within the coming decade “at least 100-200 million people per year will be starving to death” and “by 1985 enough millions will have died to reduce the earth’s population to some acceptable level, like 1.5 billion people.” Ehrlich’s life debunked his own statistics. He survived a half-century longer than the average life expectancy he predicted. He also spent his last years as one of more than eight billion people, in an era in which global life expectancy has increased by more than seven hours day since he forecast that it would collapse.

Meanwhile, famine has all but gone extinct, with death rates from mass starvation down to a tiny fraction of what they were in the 1960s. Back then, about 30 million people out of a population of approximately three billion died in famines that killed more than 100,000 people each. In the 2010s, 1.1 million out of a population of more than 8 billion died in such episodes — a decline of more than 96 percent in the death rate.

It is not speaking ill of the dead to point out that Ehrlich was wrong. He wasn’t, as *The New York Times* said in its obituary this week, “premature,” but radically, completely, spectacularly wrong. He was wrong as soon as he put pen to paper and went on being wrong for decades afterward. Ehrlich shot to fame with a best-selling book in 1968, *The Population Bomb*, the prologue of which dismissed all hope for humankind: “The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now. At this late date nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate.”

Yet something did prevent that. Even as Ehrlich wrote those words, the world’s population growth rate was falling. New strains of wheat and rice developed by agronomists like Norman Borlaug were starting to transform the productivity of agriculture, and India was on the way to banishing famine and becoming a food exporter within a few years. The amount of food available has increased faster than the population on every continent over the past 60 years, even as the land area devoted to farming has fallen. As so often happens with environmental pessimism, Ehrlich’s warning was already out of date when it was made.

But Ehrlich stuck stubbornly to his views. In 2008 he was still predicting an unhappy increase in the death rate. In 2023 he posted plaintively: “If I’m always wrong so is science, since my work is always peer-reviewed, including the *POPULATION BOMB* and I’ve gotten virtually every scientific honor. Sure I’ve made some mistakes, but no basic ones.” Ehrlich set the dirigiste tone for the nascent environmental movement, which saw people as the problem, economic growth as a crime, and coercion as necessary.

Less forgivable than his failed forecasts were the misanthropy and cruelty of his political recommendations. His book began with an evening in Delhi when he found the press of people overwhelming. “People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and

urinating.” The answer to his culture shock, he argued, was coerced, compulsory population control. “The operation will demand many apparently brutal and heartless decisions. The pain may be intense.”

Ehrlich argued that food aid to India be conditioned on forcible sterilization of all men who had three or more children: “coercion in a good cause.” He was “astounded” that libertarians objected when the American government took up his suggestion. In 1975, Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi was threatened with the loss of World Bank loans unless she began sterilizing people. She obliged, and her son Sanjay carried out a program making permits, licenses, rations, and even housing applications conditional on sterilization. Over 8 million people were sterilized.

The irony is that one of the greatest causes of the falling birth rate in the world over the past half-century has been kindness, not cruelty, in the form of child mortality prevention. As poor nations became wealthier and quality medical care for infants spread, birth rates declined across the world without the aid of coercion. When mothers are confident that their children will survive, they plan smaller families.

For Americans, too, Ehrlich recommended coercion and control. In a 1970 interview, he said that television programs should be ordered by the federal government to always show large families in a “negative light.” Commercials should relentlessly shame such people. If that did not work, the government should give women “bonuses for not having babies” or “change the tax structure” to punish the fertile, and if necessary, start “legislating the size of the family” and “throw you in jail if you have too many” children.

Immensely influential, Ehrlich set the dirigiste tone for the nascent environmental movement, which saw people as the problem, economic growth as a crime, and coercion as necessary. Adapting to a changing world is frowned upon. Abstinence and retreat are better than innovation. The carrots of incentives are not enough; the sticks of regulation are necessary.

Ehrlich’s attention switched to the exhaustion of resources in the late 1970s, as he began to predict that humans would run out of energy, food, land, metals, and other scarce goods. In 1971, together with the environmental scientist John Holdren, Ehrlich had coined the formula “IPAT”:  $\text{Impact} = \text{population} \times \text{affluence} \times \text{technology}$ . The implication was that environmental harm comes not only from population growth but also from economic growth and innovation. It was a total inversion of years of research that show how innovation allows society to do more with less.

The economist Julian Simon called his bluff. In 1980 he offered Ehrlich a bet: that the price of five metals would fall in real terms by 1990 because human ingenuity. The loser was to pay the difference in the price of the basket. Ehrlich rushed to accept Simon’s “astonishing offer before other greedy people jump in.” He chose chromium, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten, with \$200 invested in each. But when 1990 came round it was Ehrlich who owed Simon \$576.07, all five metals having fallen in price. Ehrlich would have lost even without taking inflation into account. Grudgingly, he made his wife and frequent co-author, Anne Ehrlich, write the check, before delivering a speech in which he said of Simon, “The one thing we’ll never run out of is imbeciles.”