



That Old Time Religion: A Review of Recent Environmental Books

By Steven F. Hayward

A slew of new and highly regarded environmental books in 2004 is testimony to the persistence of environmental apocalypticism, despite growing signs of environmental progress in the United States and the developing world. The persistence of doomsaying is an indicator of the staleness of popular environmental thought, which is increasingly removed from political reality and closed-minded toward innovative thinking about real environmental problems and their solutions.

Hollywood likes to remake classic movies from a generation ago, like *Planet of the Apes*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, and *The Ladykillers*. Why, it might be asked, has there never been—and never will there be—a remake of *Soylent Green*? For readers who have forgotten or not seen the movie, *Soylent Green* was the 1973 sci-fi/horror film starring Charlton Heston that featured an overpopulated, food-short world of the early-twenty-first century where organized cannibalism had become necessary.¹ But *Soylent Green* today is clearly too ridiculous even for Roland Emmerich, the moving force behind the remakes of *War of the Worlds* (*Independence Day*) and *Godzilla*, as well as this year's eco-disaster flick, *The Day after Tomorrow*.

Successful science fiction requires at least a sliver of plausibility based on circumstances we think might be possible in the distant future. *Soylent Green* was the perfect expression of the mood of its time, which was suffused with the fear of the “population bomb.” Indeed, *Soylent Green* might well be described as the cinematic vision of Paul Ehrlich, the famous author of a runaway 1968 bestseller, *The Population Bomb*. Ehrlich's critics have never tired of quoting back the prophecy that opens the book:

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“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.” Later in the book Ehrlich predicted “massive famines,” with perhaps as many as a billion people dying of starvation.

This Malthusian nightmare never came close to occurring. To the contrary, world per-capita food production has increased by about one-third over the last generation, with further substantial increases expected. More significant, however, is that the population bomb turned out to be a wet firecracker. Long-range world population growth projections fall year-by-year as fertility rates are plummeting in rich and poor nations alike, such that even the UN Population Agency now thinks it likely that world population will peak about mid-century and then may begin to decline rapidly by the end of the century. The most pressing social problem a century from now may well be the consequences of falling population—a prospect that was unthinkable just twenty years ago.

The population bomb and its resource-scarcity corollaries have a quaint ring now, like bell-bottoms, gas lines, Jimmy Carter's grin, and other totems of 1970s sensibility. It is this kind of eco-apocalypticism that Bjørn Lomborg called “The Litany”:

We are all familiar with the Litany: the environment is in poor shape here in Earth. Our resources are running out. The population is ever growing, leaving less and less to eat. The air and water are becoming ever more polluted. The planet's species are becoming extinct in vast numbers—we kill off more than 40,000 each year. The forests are disappearing, fish stocks are collapsing, and the coral reefs are dying. We are defiling our Earth, the fertile topsoil is disappearing; we are paving over nature, destroying the wilderness, decimating the biosphere, and will end up killing ourselves in the process. The world's ecosystem is breaking down. We are fast approaching the absolute limit of viability, and the limits of growth are becoming apparent.²

A chief complaint of Lomborg's many critics is that his "Litany" was a straw man. Allen Hammond of the World Resources Institute, for example, argued at an AEI forum in October 2001 that Lomborg's Litany "paints a caricature of the environmental agenda based on sometimes mistaken views widely held thirty years ago, *but to which no serious environmental institution subscribes today*"³ (emphasis added). Michael Grubb of Cambridge University, one of Britain's leading environmental figures, wrote in a *Science* magazine review of Lomborg that "to any professional, it is no news at all that the 1972 *Limits to Growth* study was mostly wrong or that Paul Ehrlich and Lester Brown have perennially exaggerated the problems of food supply."⁴

These dismissals of 1970s-era hysteria from some figures in the environmental establishment are an indication that eco-pessimism is slowly passing out of fashion or is at least maturing from free-floating apocalypticism toward more specific focus on discrete global issues such as species extinction and climate change. The trajectory of Paul Ehrlich himself offers some encouragement on this score. *The Population Bomb* sold millions of copies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was assigned reading in many college courses, and landed Ehrlich as a frequent guest on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Subsequently in the 1970s, Ehrlich published more bestsellers with first-line trade publishers such as Simon & Schuster.

Ehrlich is still very much with us, however, having in recent years won several prestigious environmental prizes, as well as a MacArthur "genius" grant. He continues to publish his unrepentant and unabashed Malthusian doomsaying and remains a venerated figure among

environmentalists. But he does not publish with Simon & Schuster any more nor does he appear on major network television programs.⁵ His most recent books have been released by Island Press, a quality but specialized environmental publisher whose books seldom reach the bestseller list. Although Ehrlich's recent books have all been celebrated in the environmental press, they have not broken out to a wider audience in the same fashion as *The Population Bomb*. It would seem that although ordinary citizens tell pollsters that they are very concerned about the planet's environment, they are not as taken in as they were thirty years ago by the prophets of doom and gloom, or are at least beginning to apply a hefty discount rate to their predictions.

New Wave, Same Bilge

Although these signs are encouraging, environmental doomsaying is proving to be persistent and resilient. Three recent books that have received lavish praise in the environmental world and some general media outlets illustrate this point: Paul and Anne Ehrlich's *One with Nineveh: Politics, Consumption, and the Human Future* (Island Press); James Gustave Speth's *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment* (Yale University Press); and Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and Dennis Meadows's *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* (Chelsea Green). All three books demonstrate that little has been absorbed from the wrong predictions of the past thirty years or the analytical framework that led to those predictions. To the contrary, the analytical frameworks these authors use are becoming more slipshod and simpleminded.

Start with the *Limits to Growth*. Randers and the Meadowses were the principals behind the original *Limits to Growth* study that the Club of Rome made famous in the early 1970s—the report that Michael Grubb judged to be "mostly wrong." The original *Limits to Growth* report was based chiefly on an elaborate computer model called "World3," which generated a dozen potential "scenarios" of the world's future. The new edition updates this computer model and also incorporates the newly popular method of calculating the human ecological "overshoot" of natural resources.⁶ Computer models are the talismans of our time but are no better than the dynamic assumptions programmed into them. A good example of the limitations of this approach is to recall futurist Herman Kahn's 1967 study, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years*.⁷

It was chock full of predictions for the year 2000 (which can now be checked for accuracy), many of them right on the mark (cell phones, the Internet, satellite TV, and psychotropic drugs like Prozac, for example) and others way off the mark. Kahn's most accurate predictions were those deriving from his keen imagination. His worst predictions were the ones based on computer models. One of Kahn's computer-generated projections, for example, was that the U.S. population would grow by nearly 120 million by the year 2000. (The actual figure was 75 million, less than two-thirds of what Kahn had predicted.)

In the updated edition of the *Limits to Growth*, the authors seem to climb down from the certainty of the original report, complaining that the media misunderstood or misinterpreted their findings. More than once in the new edition, the authors insist that "we are *not* predicting that a particular future will take place. . . . We do not believe that available data and theories will ever permit accurate predictions of what will happen to the world over the coming century."⁸ Two pages later this reticence is thrown out the window. After the reviewing in two short paragraphs the trajectory of the dot.com bubble of the 1990s, the authors conclude: "Sadly, we believe the world will experience overshoot and collapse in global resource use and emissions much the same as was the dot.com bubble—though on a much larger time scale."

It is precisely this kind of heuristic that has given popular environmentalism its bad reputation for unqualified doomsaying. The dot.com bubble was merely the latest in a series of speculative bubbles going back centuries, such as the tulip craze and the South Sea bubble. What is important to note about these speculative crashes is that, from a long-term perspective, they amounted to mere bumps in the road in terms of long-term human and economic progress. Is the dot.com bubble really the metaphor environmentalists want to use to arrest our attention? If so, they may as well pulp and recycle the new edition of *Limits to Growth* tomorrow.

Gus Speth, author of *Red Sky at Dawn*, is currently dean at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and was chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality under President Jimmy Carter, where he was the driving force behind *The Global 2000 Report to the President*. *Global 2000* had the misfortune of offering specific predictions for the year 2000, such as \$100-a-barrel oil, a 40-percent loss of forestland in developing nations, and a 20-percent increase in desertification. Some of these predictions were not just wrong; they were wrong by an order of magnitude. Looking beyond

2000, *Global 2000* forecast that world population would approach 30 billion people by 2100—a figure that even the most outlandish pessimist would not put forward today.

Speth gamely concedes that "some projections, like those on the prices of food and minerals, *Global 2000* got wrong, and the report had many shortcomings."⁹ It would be a useful exercise for Speth to ponder these "shortcomings" for what they might tell us about how to revise long-term forecasting. Instead, Speth insists that, for all its errors, *Global 2000* was essentially correct: "We have entered the endgame in our traditional, historical relationship with the natural world." But the authors have at least learned one thing from their previous specific errors: do not make firm predictions about the future. The new genre of doomsday books eschews specific forecasts, such that it will not be possible in the future to say they were wrong.

The new approach is to make very general statements about our dire future with only glancing references to secondary literature about climate change or species extinction, all wrapped in a "systems analysis" of the impending collapse of the planet. Like *Limits to Growth*, Speth's book offers very little detailed data or analysis of specific ecological problems; recent eco-apocalypse books proceed with the presumption that scenarios of catastrophe are beyond reasonable dispute or qualification and are not even open to discussion. (Speth recently withdrew from a debate about the future of the global environment when he was booked opposite Bjørn Lomborg. Speth is highly critical of Lomborg in *Red Sky at Dawn*, but is unwilling to face off with Lomborg in a public forum.)

Like the recurrence to computer models in *Limits to Growth*, Speth recurs to Paul Ehrlich's famous mathematical formula as a device to explain the certainty of our environmental doom: $I=PAT$, where I represents the adverse human impact on the Earth, with P standing for population, A for affluence, and T for technology. The endurance of this simplistic formula is an indicator of the isolation of so-called "mainstream" environmentalists, as it has been thoroughly controverted countless times over the last two decades.¹⁰ Speth and others who employ $I=PAT$ seem unaware of these critiques or perhaps feel it is unnecessary to reckon with them.

Rather than engage contrary points of view seriously, all three books employ the argument of authority and cite the 1992 "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity" report, signed by 1,600 scientists, including 102 Nobel laureates, so it must be true:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.¹¹

To be sure, the opinions of scientists in their particular fields are surely worth heeding, but when they offer synoptic judgments about the future of the world, are their judgments inherently better than, say, economists? (And if Nobel Prizes were *de facto* certifications of general authority, then why did we not listen to the social prognostications of double-Nobel winner William Shockley?) Indeed, scientists may be less well equipped than ordinary citizens when it comes to having common sense about social problems. The Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin wrote in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*: “Most scientists are, at a minimum, liberals, although it is by no means obvious why this should be so. Despite the fact that all of the molecular biologists of my acquaintance are shareholders in or advisers to biotechnology firms, the chief political controversy in the scientific community seems to be whether it is wise to vote for Ralph Nader this time.”¹² This does not inspire a lot of confidence in the judgment of scientists.

Paul and Anne Ehrlich’s *One with Nineveh* employs the newly popular technique of drawing an analogy between the collapse of an ancient civilization due to environmental factors and the prospective collapse of modern civilization. The Ehrlichs look to Biblical Nineveh; last year Jared Diamond used the same technique with the ancient Mayan civilization in the pages of *Harper’s* magazine.¹³ Declaring with certitude from the murky and incomplete history of Nineveh and Maya that environmental factors were *the* cause of their collapse and that their example is applicable to modern technological society is just the kind of superficial analysis that leads more and more disinterested observers to dismiss popular environmentalism as cranky obscurantism.

All three books contain the familiar theme that *we’re running out of time*. *Limits to Growth* cites without irony the secretary-general of the United Nations: “Members of the United Nations have perhaps ten years left in

which to subordinate their ancient quarrels and launch a global partnership to curb the arms race, to improve the human environment, to defuse the population explosion, and to supply the required momentum to development efforts.” The UN secretary-general who said that was U Thant in 1971. None of these things have been done to the satisfaction of the “concerned community,” and yet here we are still alive today. But *now*, we are assured, we really are running out of time. Gus Speth says that right now “may be our last chance to get it right before we reap an appalling deterioration of our natural assets.” And surely one prediction that will come true is that thirty years from now Speth or his successors will be telling us that it is “absolutely, positively” our last chance to save the Earth.

The ultimate divorce from reality comes with the suggested institutional and political remedies for our dire predicament. While many genuine environmental problems often stem from a lack of institutions or imperfect institutions (lack of fishing rights or water rights that lead to overfishing and overconsumption of water, for example), neither the Ehrlichs nor Speth nor the *Limits to Growth* team deign to work on the grubby details of these discrete and solvable problems. They much prefer to wring their hands about the defects of modern democratic capitalism and propose global “holistic” solutions to everything at once. All three books argue for some form of powerful “global governance” for the sake of the environment. Speth points to “U.S. regulatory agencies like the Federal Trade Commission and the Food and Drug Administration, which, operating under broad ‘public interest’ mandates from Congress, set rules and norms in their areas. A small group of appointed officials is, in effect, writing laws for the country, subject, to be sure, to congressional oversight and reversal. *One could imagine a world environment agency like these federal agencies*” (emphasis added).

The Ehrlichs favor junking the EPA in favor of a Federal Environmental Authority modeled after the political independence and power of the Federal Reserve—precisely because the Fed is “insulated from day-to-day politics.” In other words, the Ehrlichs make clear that they understand that their agenda of governmentally imposed “constraint” (their term) would not succeed in a genuine democracy.¹⁴ The *Limits to Growth* team is a little more realistic that “a world of strict, centralized government control” of the environment is not possible, but they still indulge in some wishful thinking about how the world should be changed:

It doesn't take much imagination to come up with a minimum set of social structures—feedback loops that carry new information about costs, consequences, and sanctions—that would allow evolution, creativity, and change and permit many more freedoms than would ever be possible in a world that continues to crowd against or exceed its limits. One of the most important of these new rules would fit in perfectly with economic theory: It would combine knowledge and regulation to 'internalize the externalities' of the market system, so that the price of a product would reflect the full costs (including all environmental and social side effects) of making the product. This is a measure every economics textbook has called for (in vain) for decades. It would automatically guide investments and purchases, so people could make choices in the monetary realm that they would not later regret in the realm of material and social worth.¹⁵

Never mind whether this idea is truly consistent with "economic theory"; clearly none of these authors has ever set foot inside a federal regulatory agency. It is ironic that these prophets of our lack of perception of environmental reality have so little perception of political reality.

Which leads to one of Gus Speth's complaints: "I often ask myself why more American conservatives do not more actively seek to conserve America. Part of the answer, I suspect, lies in the point made by Benjamin Barber. Environmental challenges threaten the ascendant promarket, antigovernment ideology. They require major governmental responses, including action at the international level. They require 'interference' with the market to ensure that social and environmental goals are served."¹⁶ This is exactly correct; stripped of Speth's pejorative connotations, conservatives understand that the solutions Speth and the other authors on display here propose would be worse than the problems they purport to solve. It is one thing to have intelligent disagreement with the conservative philosophy of limited government (see Cass Sunstein); Speth clearly does not have any respect for conservative points of view. By failing to recognize the principled ground of this disagreement, Speth is closing off any possibility of a productive deliberation about ways the environment might be protected consistent with the principles of limited government.¹⁷

A Travesty of a Mockery of a Sham

One reason this cannot be contemplated is that it would involve giving up the urgent sense of crisis that still fuels too much of the environmental movement. This is leading to the slow trivialization and marginalization of environmentalism as a general public concern. Serious environmentalists—the laboratory scientists, field biologists, and local conservationists doing the nitty-gritty and uncelebrated work to solve environmental problems one at a time—should not stand for this cheap grandstanding. It may be, as WRI's Allan Hammond says, that "no serious environmental institution subscribes today" to Ehrlich-Speth-*Limits to Growth* doomsaying, but if so why do most environmental leaders decline to rebuke this kind of sensationalism and the diminishing effect it has on taking environmental problems seriously?

It probably feels too good to give up. When Ted Turner says, "If I had to predict the way things are going, I'd say the chances are about 50/50 that humanity will be extinct or nearly extinct within 50 years," but then cuts back on environmental grant making because his stock portfolio swoons, does anyone in the environmental community have the courage to point out that Turner is making a mockery of environmental concern?

The old-timers of doomsaying keep plugging away to a smaller and smaller audience, with each iteration of the old time religion sounding more and more like Woody Allen's famous commencement speech from the 1970s: "More than at any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly." The doomsayers' theory seems to be that if they repeat these themes enough, it will get through our thick skulls. To paraphrase Karl Marx, this represents the poverty of environmental philosophy. You get the feeling that if someone in Hollywood did produce a remake of *Soylent Green*, these authors would rush to see it on opening night and pronounce it brilliant and believable.

Notes

1. The promotional summary of *Soylent Green* reads as follows: "The year is 2022. Overcrowding, pollution, and resource depletion have reduced society's leaders to finding food for the teeming masses. The answer is *Soylent Green*—an artificial nourishment whose actual ingredients are not known by the public."

2. Bjørn Lomborg, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.
3. Hammond went on to dismiss one of the leading environmental alarmists of our time, Lester Brown: "I would not regard [Brown] in fact as a significant figure in advancing environmental concerns."
4. Michael Grubb, "Relying on Manna from Heaven?" *Science* (November 9, 2001): 1,285.
5. His most recent television appearance was with me on the syndicated PBS show *Uncommon Knowledge* (www.uncommonknowledge.org).
6. The "ecological overshoot" model of Mathis Wackernagel has been analyzed previously in Steven F. Hayward, "Sustainable Development in the Balance," *Environmental Policy Outlook* (August 1, 2002), available at www.aei.org/publication14200.
7. Herman Kahn and Anthony J. Weiner, *The Year 2000: A Framework for Speculation on the Next Thirty-Three Years* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).
8. Donella Meadows, Jorgen Rander, and Denise Meadows, *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* (White River Junction: Chelsea Press, 2004), xix.
9. James Gustave Speth, *Red Sky at Morning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 7.
10. The best summary of this work is Indur M. Goklany, *Extending the Limits to Growth: Improving the State of Humanity and the Environment*, forthcoming from AEI Press. One simple

- example, however, suffices to expose the shallowness of the I-PAT formula. Where, one asks, is there the most progress in reducing pollution, the largest gains in forestland (10 million acres over the last decade), the most aggressive steps being taken to protect species and habitat, and the most spending on climate research? The United States, the wealthiest and most technologically advanced nation in the world. Speth writes: "If there is one country that bears the most responsibility for the lack of progress on international environmental issues, it is the United States," while the Ehrlichs write that "sadly, our nation is also at present the biggest engine of ecological destruction on Earth, the chief (but by no means only) force keeping humanity on collision course with the natural world."
11. Union of Concerned Scientists, "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity" (1992), available at <http://www.ucsusa.org/ucs/about/page.cfm?pageID=1009>.
 12. Richard Lewontin, "Dishonesty in Science," *New York Review of Books* (November 18, 2004): 39.
 13. Jared Diamond, "Environmental Collapse and the End of Civilization," *Harper's* (June 2003).
 14. "Nowhere," the Ehrlichs write, "could delegated delegation be more important and spare politicians more pain, than in areas of fundamental constraints," 308.
 15. Meadows, Rander, and Meadows, *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update*, 257-258.
 16. Speth, *Red Sky at Dawn*, 113.
 17. See, e.g., Terry L. Anderson and Don Leal, *Free Market Environmentalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).