

50 years on: Population Bomb Still Armed

A shattering collapse of civilization is a “**near certainty**” in the next few decades due to humanity’s continuing destruction of the natural world that sustains all life on Earth, according to biologist **Paul Ehrlich**.

In May, it will be **50 years** since the eminent biologist published his most famous and controversial book, *'The Population Bomb'*. But Ehrlich remains as outspoken as ever.

The world’s optimum population is less than two billion people – 5.6 billion fewer than on the planet today, he argues, and there is an increasing toxification of the entire planet by synthetic chemicals that may be more dangerous to people and wildlife than climate change.

Ehrlich also says an unprecedented redistribution of wealth is needed to end the over-consumption of resources, but *“the rich who now run the global system – that hold the annual ‘world destroyer’ meetings in Davos – are unlikely to let it happen”*.

The Population Bomb, written with his wife Anne Ehrlich in 1968, predicted *“hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death”* in the 1970s – a fate that was avoided by the green revolution in intensive agriculture.

Many details and timings of events were wrong, Paul Ehrlich acknowledges today, but he says the book was correct overall.

“Population growth, along with over-consumption per capita, is driving civilization over the edge: billions of people are now hungry or micronutrient malnourished, and climate disruption is killing people.”

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Ehrlich has been at Stanford University since 1959 and is also president of the **Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere**, which works *“to reduce the threat of a shattering collapse of civilization”*.

“It is a near certainty in the next few decades, and the risk is increasing continually as long as perpetual growth of the human enterprise remains the goal of economic and political systems,” he says. “As I’ve said many times, ‘perpetual growth is the creed of the cancer cell’.”

It is the combination of high population and high consumption by the rich that is destroying the natural world, he says. Research published by Ehrlich and colleagues in 2017 concluded that this is driving a sixth mass extinction of biodiversity, upon which civilisation depends for clean air, water and food.

The solutions are tough, he says. “To start, make modern contraception and back-up abortion available to all and give women full equal rights, pay and opportunities with men.

“I hope that would lead to a low enough total fertility rate that the needed shrinkage of population would follow. [But] it will take a very long time to humanely reduce total population to a size that is sustainable.”

He estimates an optimum global population size at roughly 1.5 to two billion, “But the longer humanity pursues business as usual, the smaller the sustainable society is likely to prove to be. We’re continuously harvesting the low-hanging fruit, for example by driving fisheries stocks to extinction.”

Ehrlich is also concerned about chemical pollution, which has already reached the most remote corners of the globe. “The evidence we have is that toxics reduce the intelligence of children, and members of the first heavily influenced generation are now adults.”

He treats this risk with characteristic dark humor: **“The first empirical evidence we are dumbing down Homo sapiens were the Republican debates in the US 2016 presidential elections – and the resultant kakistocracy. On the other hand, toxification may solve the population problem, since sperm counts are plunging.”**

Reflecting five decades after the publication of *The Population Bomb* (which he wanted to be titled *Population, Resources, and Environment*), he says: “No scientist would hold exactly the same



views after a half century of further experience, but Anne and I are still proud of our book.” It helped start a worldwide debate on the impact of rising population that continues today, he says.

The book’s strength, Ehrlich says, is that it was short, direct and basically correct. “Its weaknesses were not enough on overconsumption and equity issues. It needed more on women’s rights, and explicit countering of racism – which I’ve spent much of my career and activism trying to counter.

“Too many rich people in the world is a major threat to the human future, and cultural and genetic diversity are great human resources.”

Accusations that the book lent support to racist attitudes to population control still hurt today, Ehrlich says. “Having been a co-inventor of the sit-in to desegregate restaurants in Lawrence, Kansas in the 1950s and having published books and articles on the biological ridiculousness of racism, those accusations continue to annoy me.”

But, he says: “You can’t let the possibility that ignorant people will interpret your ideas as racist keep you from discussing critical issues honestly.”

Damian Carrington
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Judge says: "NO SPRAY!"

A judge has ordered the California Department of Food and Agriculture to stop using chemical pesticides in its statewide program until the agency complies with state environmental laws.

The injunction is a sweeping victory for 11 public-health, conservation, citizen and food-safety groups and the city of Berkeley. The coalition sued the state after unsuccessfully attempting for years to persuade the agency to shift to a sustainable approach to pest control that protects human health and the environment.

Despite thousands of comment letters urging the department to take a safer approach, officials in 2014 approved a program that gave them broad license to spray 79 pesticides, some known to cause cancer and birth defects,

anywhere in the state, including schools, organic farms, public parks and residential yards.

Spraying was allowed indefinitely and required no analysis of the health and environmental impacts of the chemicals at the specific application sites and no public notice or scrutiny of treatment decisions. Many of the pesticides are also highly toxic to bees, butterflies, fish and birds.

This injunction follows a Jan. 8 ruling by Judge Timothy M. Frawley voiding approval of the agency’s statewide program for numerous violations of state environmental laws, including relying on **“unsupported assumptions and speculation”** to conclude that pesticides would not contaminate water bodies. The ruling also cited the state’s **“woefully deficient”** analysis of the cumulative danger of increasing the more than 150 million pounds of pesticides already being used in California each year.

The court process culminating revealed not only far-reaching flaws in the state’s analysis of the environmental harm caused by the department’s pesticide use but also the agency’s decades-long history of evading disclosure of the human health and environmental impacts of its activities by granting itself repeated “emergency” exemptions from environmental laws.

The court also held that the agency had to give public notice of its activities, which officials had insisted was not required.

“The court rejected the agency’s blank check to spray people’s yards, exposing children and pets to a range of pesticides that can cause serious long-term problems, including cancer, asthma and IQ loss,” said Debbie Friedman, founder of MOMS Advocating Sustainability. **“If only the \$4.5 million in taxpayer dollars used to develop this outdated program had been spent to develop a modern, sustainable approach that does not rely on toxic chemicals, just imagine what progress we could have made toward a healthier environment for everyone.”**

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