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DOOMSAYER PAUL EHRLICH STRIKES OUT AGAIN

BY MICHAEL FUMENTO

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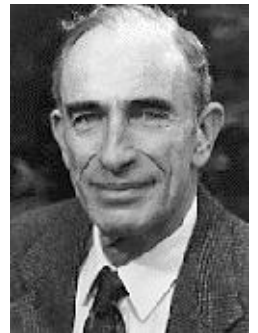
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Picture a mutual fund manager whose bad investments have caused his fund to lose value for each of the last 30 years, but who nonetheless has built the reputation of fundmeister Peter Lynch. If you can do so, you can envision Paul Ehrlich.

Ehrlich, a butterfly specialist, began his spectacular doomsaying career back in 1968 with his best-selling book *The Population Bomb*. Among his predictions then and since:

- "The battle to feed humanity is over. In the 1970s the world will undergo famines . . . [AND] hundreds of millions of people [including Americans] are going to starve to death." (1968)
- "Smog disasters" in 1973 might kill 200,000 people in New York and Los Angeles. (1969)
- "I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000." (1969)
- "Before 1985, mankind will enter a genuine age of scarcity . . . in which the accessible supplies of many key minerals will be facing depletion." (1976)



Paul Ehrlich

Yet today: 1) Food production is well ahead of population growth and obesity now kills 300,000 Americans a year, 2) the air in New York and L.A. is cleaner than it has been in decades, 3) with two years until 2000, England's odds are looking mighty good, and 4) there are no key minerals facing depletion. Almost all of them, along with raw materials in general, are far cheaper now relative either to the Consumer Price Index or wages.

But have Ehrlich's preposterous predictions hurt his reputation? Far from it – they've made him both celebrated and rich.

In one year – 1990 – he published a sequel to *Bomb* called *The Population Explosion*, received the MacArthur Foundation's famous "genius award" with a \$345,000 check, and split a Swedish Royal Academy of Science prize worth \$120,000.

Last year Erlich slammed his critics (myself included) in a book the very name of which screamschutzpah, *The Betrayal of Science and Reason*.

The reason Ehrlich keeps blowing it boils down to a single word: technology. It is Ehrlich's bete noire. So he just ignores its many benefits.

Now Ehrlich is the lead author of an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* this month, arguing that anybody who still says technology will provide more of such benefits is a liar or a fool.

Among his assertions: We really are running out of oil. That we seem to have such great reserves, he claims, comes from a decision by Arab countries in '87 to simply say they had a lot more oil than they previously had been saying. (Ehrlich claims it was a 250% increase; actually, it was 40%.)

But even if you subtract the new Arab estimate, since *The Population Bomb* came out in '68, world oil reserves are up 448 billion barrels.

Thirty years ago, we had an estimated 30-year supply of known oil reserves. Now it's up to 45 years, and pre-tax gasoline prices adjusted to the CPI are the lowest ever.

Why? Because technology has made it easier to find new oil fields at lower costs, to extract more from those fields, and even to pump oil from fields once thought dry.

Ehrlich tells Atlantic readers, "Since natural resources are finite, increased consumption must inevitably lead to depletion and scarcity."

Wrong. Look at copper. As it became scarcer, industry used new technology to switch to equal or even superior materials. Copper phone wiring went the way of the dodo, replaced by glass fiber optics that are dirt-cheap and made out of a raw material even Ehrlich doesn't fear for – sand. They are also vastly superior in the number and quality of transmissions they can carry.

But on and on Ehrlich goes. "Human-induced land degradation," he says, "affects about 40% of the planet's vegetated land surface," and is "accelerating nearly everywhere, reducing crop yields."

Reducing? Our silos runneth over, as yields continue to increase all over the world. For example, corn is now the world's most important crop. Here and worldwide, we now harvest about 50% more corn per acre than 30 years ago. And, says Hudson Institute analyst Dennis Avery, crop yields can be raised from the current world average of around 1.2 tons per acre to six to nine tons. And advances in genetics promise to dwarf even these increases.

Again, technology has thwarted Ehrlich's predictions, and you needn't be Nostradamus to know it always will. Ehrlich will still garner those accolades because, while in reality he's always wrong, politically he's always correct.

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