

Before citing this book in another review, I thought it worthwhile after a half century to reread it. This review takes into consideration what has become of Ehrlich's predictions fifty six years later.

Ehrlich's cover claims "Overpopulation is now the dominant problem in our personal, national, and international planning. No one can do rational personal planning, nor can public policy be resolved in any area, unless one first takes into account the population bomb. Schools, politicians, and mass media only touch the edge of the major problem."

The first sentences in the prolog have an air of utter certainty: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s 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, although many lives could be saved through dramatic programs to "stretch" the carrying capacity of earth by increasing food production and providing for more equitable distribution of whatever food is available.

The book, published in 1968, says that the doubling time for population is about 35 years. The world population stood at about 3 1/2 billion. By 2026 it should have reached 11 billion by his arithmetic. Instead, it is only 8.3 billion. The fertility rate has dropped dramatically, especially in this new century

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Ehrlich wrote that the population doubling time in the underdeveloped countries ranged from 20 to 35 years: Kenya 23, Nigeria 27, Turkey 26, Brazil 25, Costa Rica 19, and El Salvador 21. All of these have fallen dramatically. Had they not it would have been a problem. But even at the time Ehrlich could have determined that the rise was mostly a one-time phenomenon, brought on by better health through increased sanitation and western medicines. Once people observed that fewer children died, fertility would drop within a generation or so.

Ehrlich's first claim, too many people, proved to be exaggerated, but not wrong in its direction.

His second claim was "At least half the people in the world are now undernourished (have too little food) or malnourished (have serious imbalances in their diet).

"In 1966, only 10 countries grew more than they consumed: United States, Canada, Australia, Argentina, France, New Zealand, Burma, Thailand, Romania and South Africa. The United States,

Canada and Australia contributed most of the balance. All other countries including China, India and Russia imported more than exported.”

The prospect of famine was simply not true and Ehrlich should have known it. Prominent economist [Julian Simon](#) placed a series of five bets with Ehrlich about future availability of food, water and other resources. Simon, with a clearer view of the future, was to win all five bets. The world is not short of food or raw materials. For the most part. Gold and silver deposits have been exploited for centuries. New finds are fewer and scarcer.

What happened was a considerable revolution, largely in international trade. The great food exporting countries became more and more productive. They had a lot of land and increasing used crops with higher yields. They tapped aquifers. They put somewhat more acreage under cultivation.

The Americas are underpopulated, having only about a seventh of the world’s population. They have adequate land area. They have recently become more productive. The problems were and are political, as in Cuba, Venezuela and Argentina, where government policy depressed productivity.

Underdeveloped countries benefited from green technologies. Some like Brazil, the Philippines and Ukraine became major food exporters. It was mostly the small, rich countries that could afford imports, and chronically misgoverned countries such as the Soviet Union, Cuba and various parts of Africa that did not become self-sustaining. Ehrlich wrote that the green revolution could at best buy only a decade or two. He was wrong.

Ehrlich named obesity as a first-world problem. It now affects the undeveloped world as well.

Chapters two through four, the heart of the book, do not go directly to his point about overpopulation, but focus on other environmental and social issues

Chapter 2 consists of three disaster scenarios: nuclear destruction, deadly diseases, civil unrest and the like. They are presented as fiction, with no claims as to their likelihood, stirring up fear and discontent.

Chapter 3, entitled “A dying planet,” points out the problems of salinization, dehydration, and desertification, then continues with a long piece to the effect that pesticides are killing us, and that they become ineffective due to growing resistance. This is Rachel Carson’s theme in *Silent Spring*, another best-seller of the late 1960s.

Ehrlich contends that monocultures are a problem. Soil erosion is a problem. Synthetic pesticides are a problem. Big agriculture is locking farmers into patented seeds, chemical fertilizers and pest control. These chronic problems remain, unsolved but not dramatically worse, after fifty-five years.

He is flat wrong to claim that “We are also depleting the world supply of oxygen by burning (oxidizing) vast quantities of fossil fuels and by clearing iron rich tropical soils in which the iron is then oxidized.” Just the opposite. Plants release oxygen as they metabolize the carbon dioxide produced by burning fossil fuels. It is quite elementary. We will not run out of oxygen.

At the time of his writing, California and the United States had gotten the lead out of gasoline. Los Angeles and London were still smoggy but improving fast. Ehrlich dwells on the mercury in industrial processes on pesticides. He does not mention it in vaccines, the one place where it remained a big danger.

He could not fail to mention the threat of species extinctions. The ones on the brink then, such as California condors and black rhinos, remain on the brink a half-century later. There is no [sixth great extinction](#).

Chapter 3, "What is Being Done" laments the ineffectiveness of birth control, lambasting the Catholic Church. What he failed to consider is the phenomenal success of synthetic hormone birth control which had come into widespread use in the prior decade.

He wrote that "The story is depressingly the same everywhere. – People want large families. They want families of a size that will keep the population growing. If each couple had an average of just over two children (to replace themselves, with slight allowances for child mortality), population growth would eventually stop after about two generations, and the population would stabilize."

That is exactly what happened, as birth control became widely used. He lamented that forcing birth control by means such as vasectomies, tubal ligation and such was impossible. Wrong. China, in 1979, perhaps in response to Ehrlich, did implement the one child policy, which remained in effect until 2015. Bill Gates surreptitiously sterilized Kenyan women via polio vaccines.

In Chapter four Ehrlich credited Korea, Taiwan, and Japan with cutting their birthrates. Now, of course, all of them are facing an economic and demographic disaster as the birthrates of plummeted far below replacement level.

Ehrlich credits Rockefeller with the initiating a program to limit population growth in America. Rockefeller was involved in Planned Parenthood. He also credits AID – that's on the for International Development ,with planning with family planning assistance budget increasing from 9 million to 100 million in 1971. He does not mention that USAID was a major advocate of Gay Pride and other elements of the anti-natal homosexual agenda.

The table of contents for Chapter five gives his recommendations. First, Ehrlich refers to his own new organization – Zero Population Growth or ZPG, whose mission is to educate the public and politicians to the necessity of stopping population growth. The organization was founded in 1968 by himself, Richard Bowers, and Charles Remington. Next, he advocates being an advocate: Write letters, organize action groups, proselytize friends and associates.

Ehrlich titles his final, short Chapter 6, "What if I'm wrong?" He does no more than refer to Pascal's wager about belief in God. If God exists, I had better believe. If he does not, I have lost nothing. The consequences of being wrong have been vast. In giving up the family, we are losing our culture, the bedrock of our religious belief, and the generations of unborn taxpayers who would have paid our pensions.

The Population Bomb sold 3 million copies. Other books have also been vastly influential as well as vastly wrong. Sex and the Single Girl, which certainly supported Ehrlich's cause, sold two million copies and turned a generation of women away from thoughts of family. The best-selling academic works had similar effects. The two Kinsey reports, in the late 1940s, also argued that sex was for recreation more than procreation. [An American Dilemma](#), an academic paper written by two naïve, idealistic Swedes in the late 40s, sold over 100,000 and greatly influenced civil rights legislation.

Ehrlich made a good career for himself, defining a supposed problem and promoting himself as the guy with its solution. It is up to our generation to unravel the mess.