

BOOK REVIEW

The dominant animal

By Paul Ehrlich and Anne Ehrlich

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Review by Matt Ridley

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“On what principle is it, asked Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1830, “that when we see nothing but improvement behind us, we are to expect nothing but deterioration before us?” He was reacting to a routine jeremiad of romantic pessimism from the reactionary poet laureate, Robert Southey, and he observed something that has been even more true in the two centuries since than it was in his own day: the more things get better, the more sages tell us they are about to get worse. Every sage always seems to live at history’s turning point.

Paul and Anne Ehrlich, authors of *The Dominant Animal*, are modern Southseys. “The world in general seems to be gradually awakening to a realization,” they regret to say, “that our long evolutionary story is, through our actions but not our intentions, coming to a turning point.’ For the Ehrlichs, population pressure and “global heating’ (the word “warming’ is not scary enough for them), not to mention resource exhaustion and toxic poisoning, will ensure that we are the last generation to have a decent standard of living. We are doomed to a terrible future.

The only trouble is, one of the Ehrlichs said this before in the 1960s, only then he was more specific. “In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now,” wrote Paul: “At this late date nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate.” This is from the opening paragraph of *The Population Bomb*, first published in 1968, which was the making of Paul Ehrlich’s reputation, turning him from an obscure snake and butterfly ecologist into a guru of the environmental movement complete with MacArthur “genius” award. In that book Ehrlich very explicitly and specifically argued that mass death was inevitable and imminent, that human numbers would fall to 2 billion, that the poor would get poorer, that those who saw that

population growth was already beginning to slow were as foolish as those who greet a slightly less freezing day in December as a sign of approaching spring, and (in later editions) that the Green Revolution then transforming Asian agriculture would “at the very best buy us only a decade or two.’

So it was with curiosity that, four decades later, I opened the current volume to see how the Ehrlichs would address the fact that far from mass starvation, the 1980s saw the virtual ending of famine as a cause of death (except where politics created it), the 1990s saw more people removed from poverty than in any previous decade and a halving of the percentage living in poverty even on the World Bank’s conservative figures, that world population growth rates did start falling in the 1960s and by the 1980s even the absolute number of people added each year was dropping, and that the Green Revolution trebled world cereal yields, turning India into a grain exporter even as its population trebled.

Alas, not a word about the previous predictions. Take the Green Revolution. In the new book, there is a glancing admission through gritted teeth that it “did increase the food security of millions of poor people’ – but at the expense of disease-susceptible monocultures (no case cited), the disappearance of traditional varieties that make it harder to adapt to changed conditions (yet this morning I listened to a genetic engineer on the radio describe his success with making drought-resistant crops) and “nutrient exhaustion’ (even though the whole point of the Green Revolution was to allow the use of fertilisers to refresh tired soils). “In the past decade or two,’ the Ehrlichs write, “expansion of global food production has failed to match the growing global demand.’ Simply false: per capita food production has grown steadily throughout recent decades.

(Incidentally, even on a much smaller scale, *The*

Population Bomb has proved wonderfully non-prophetic. At one point in that earlier book, Paul Ehrlich wrote about his early research on the water snakes of Lake Erie, concluding sadly: “You see, Lake Erie has died...the snakes are almost gone.” Yet today, the US federal government is considering whether to remove the Lake Erie water snake from the endangered list, not because it is extinct, but because its numbers in Ohio have rocketed from less than 2,000 in 1999 to more than 12,000 today.)

Surely, I thought, as I read on, the Ehrlichs were going to acknowledge that their previous pessimism had been misplaced and their advice to the world to cease economic growth and embrace drastic authoritarianism in the 1960s should be at least revisited. Not a word. The diagnosis – imminent collapse – is the same; and so is the treatment: retreat. The Ehrlichs have plainly learned one lesson. They give fewer hostages to fortune in the new book, which simply wails and carps and moans rather than predicts anything too closely dated. ‘An ‘unhappy increase in death rates’ is forecast (with what almost seems like relish) as a consequence of the calculation that humanity is now living at 120–140 percent of the biosphere’s regenerative capacity. But no date this time.

The Dominant Animal, after a few chapters of earnest but aimless and rather out-of-date discussion of evolution and psychology, is simply another specimen of the “glass-half-empty” school of environmental writing. Every pessimistic statistic is embraced, however dodgy; every piece of good news ignored or dismissed. And seen from the lofty omniscience of Mount Ehrlich, everybody, even including the reader, is an idiot: “The penalties for continued ignorance, malfeasance, and folly among opinion makers and the leaders of society – indeed all of us – have escalated enormously.’

It is a pity that the Ehrlichs have so little curiosity about why their previous predictions are wrong for it would enable them to make a fascinating observation. In *The Population Bomb*, they extrapolated population growth to make the point that things could not continue as they are. Indeed they could not, they did not and they never have, since the very dawn of *Homo sapiens*. That is the whole point of human ecology: it is dynamic, ever changing and ever evolving. The amount of oil left, the food growing capacity of the world’s farmland, even the regenerative capacity of the biosphere – these are not fixed numbers; they are dynamic variables produced by a constant negotiation between human ingenuity and natural constraints. Just as economists are learning to ditch the dire concept of “equilibrium” in favour of constant innovation and change, so academic ecologists are learning to ditch the dire concept of “climax” vegetation in favour of constant succession and instability. A rain-forest is a highly dynamic system.

Embracing dynamism means opening your mind to the possibility of posterity making a better world rather than preventing a worse one. We now know, as we did not in the 1960s, that more than six billion people can live upon the planet in improving health, food security and life expectancy and that this is compatible with cleaner air, increasing forest cover and booming populations of whales and elephants. The technologies of 1960 could not have supported six billion – Paul Ehrlich was right there. But the technologies changed. Is six billion the turning point? At a time when glass is replacing copper cable, electrons are replacing paper, most employment involves more software than hardware, otters are returning to English rivers, only the most static of imaginations could think so. ‘We cannot absolutely prove,’ said Macaulay, ‘that those are in error who tell us that society has reached a turning point, that we have seen our best days. But so said all who came before us, and with just as much apparent reason.’