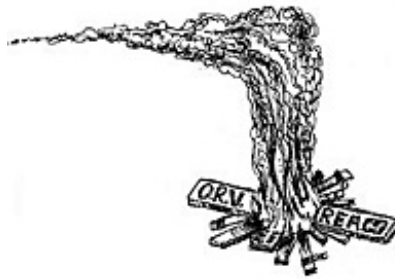




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Around the Campfire with Uncle Dave Foreman



The Great Ehrlich-Simon Bet Myth

Whenever a little pile of bullshit is dumped by the mainstream media, other media, public “intellectuals,” lazy academics, and a swarm of lesser beings flock to the pile and add more of their own until it begins to match The Tower of Babel in height and stink. Such a pile of bullshit is the one about The Bet between Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon, which, says the bullshit, Ehrlich “lost” and thus worry about overpopulation and ongoing madcap population growth is much overdone.

Though I’ve debunked the bullshit before, such as in a chapter of *Man Swarm*, I need to do it again. Wherever I go or whatever I read, when the fuss is overpopulation, I find myself up against The Tower of Bullshit. It was brought up at my talks in Santa Barbara and Los Angeles last week and was just coughed up like a hairball in an essay in *The New York Times*. So, let us look again at The Bet. Please reprint this essay, please send it to your email list, and please use it to wash away the growing hill of bullshit as Herakles used the Alpheus and Peneus Rivers to clean out the foul stables of King Augeas of Elis.

The Great Bet myth

Now let's look at The Bet, which Cornucopians love to dump on those of us who worry about the Man Swarm. Those who say population growth is nothing to worry about bring up a bet between Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon, which they say Ehrlich "lost." This bet has become mythic and is often brought out to gainsay Ehrlich and all sad-sack "Malthusians" who warn about overpopulation and overshooting carrying capacity. In truth, however, the bet had nothing to do with carrying capacity. It was about whether the price of five metals would go up or down over a set time of ten years. For the life of me, I don't understand why Ehrlich made the bet. I guess it was a belief that with rising population, all raw goods would become dearer and thus become worth more. Simon, believing in the endless cleverness of Man, thought everything would become cheaper. Again, it had nothing to do with whether or not Earth could house greater and greater swarms of ground apes.

Paul and Anne Ehrlich thoroughly debunk the bet myth in their 1996 book, *Betrayal of Science and Reason*. This is a top-notch book, by the way, and should be read by all conservationists and environmentalists. Indeed, for worthiness today, I'd say that it might be the Ehrlich's best book. The subtitle, *How Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens Our Future*, tells what it is about. Paul and Anne go through the antiscientific myths, lies, and blather from the Nature haters one by one and slay each.[\[1\]](#)

Anyway, prices for three of the metals went down somewhat and two went up, so, since the bet was \$200 for each, Simon owed \$400 and Ehrlich owed \$600. Ehrlich and his fellows lost \$200 in all. And that is all there is to the bet. The outcome of the bet, by the way, was mostly because of happenstance. The prices of the five metals yo-yoed throughout the time of the bet and it was only heads or tails which were up and which were down when The Bet came to its end.

A few years later (in 1995), Julian Simon wrote in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Every measure of material and environmental welfare in the United States and in the world has improved rather than deteriorated. All long-run trends point in exactly the opposite direction from the projections of the doomsayers."[\[2\]](#) Simon was so sure of himself that he offered to bet on his belief. Paul Ehrlich and climatologist Stephen Schneider took on Simon and made fifteen predictions of things getting worse, from per capita cropland decline to AIDS deaths.[\[3\]](#) Simon wouldn't take the bet. The Ehrlich-Schneider predictions were:

1. 2002-2004 would be warmer than 1992-1994
2. More CO₂ in 2004 than in 1994
3. More nitrous oxide in 2004 than in 1994
4. More ozone in lower atmosphere in 2004 than in 1994
5. More SO₂ pollution from Asia in 2004 than in 1994
6. Less acreage of fertile cropland per person in 2004 than in 1994
7. Less agricultural soil per person in 2004 than in 1994
8. Less rice and wheat grown per person in 2002-4 than in 1992-4
9. Less firewood per person in "developing" nations in 2004 than in 1994
10. Much less acreage of virgin moist tropical forest in 2004 than in 1994
11. Ocean fish "harvest" less per person in 2004 than in 1994
12. Fewer plant and animal species extant in 2004 than in 1994
13. More people will die of AIDS in 2004 than in 1994
14. Sperm counts will continue to decrease between 1994 and 2004
15. Gap between rich and poor will continue to grow

The Ehrlichs explain each more in *Betrayal*.[\[4\]](#)

Whenever someone brings up the metal-price bet, the later bet should be thrown in their face. Now, I don't much care about many of these fifteen (I'm all for declining sperm counts), but they are geared to Simon's "measure of material and environmental welfare."

And so, there is much more to The Bet than either cornucopians or public intellectuals talk about. It's likely that those spitting out The Bet Myth don't know the whole of it and are only parroting the fuzzy tale as they heard it from someone else who heard it from someone else and so on. In no way, can one say that The Bet belies the woe and hurt of overpopulation and population growth. It is an outlandish myth. Don't believe it. And flush it away as Herakles did the Augean Stables.

Dave Foreman



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- [1] Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich, *Betrayal of Science and Reason: How Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens Our Future* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 1996).
 - [2] Julian Simon, "Earth's Doomsayers are Wrong," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 1995.
 - [3] Paul R. Ehrlich and Stephen H. Schneider, "Bets and 'Ecofantasies,'" *Environmental Awareness*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1995, 47-50.
 - [4] Ehrlich and Ehrlich, *Betrayal of Science and Reason*, 100-104.



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Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez



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