

## Why environmental alarmists keep getting it wrong

# Refuting the Doomsayers

**M**ore than two decades ago, a PBS producer and former *Forbes* science writer came up with a concept for a book on the psychological appeal of doom. He observed that the classic works of environmentalism—from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* to the Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth*—had all confidently predicted their own versions of global catastrophe. Yet not one of these forecasts had come to fruition. “Two decades after these and other dire predictions had been made, I noticed that we were still here and that civilization had not collapsed,” he wrote.

Now Ronald Bailey, an award-winning science correspondent for *Reason* magazine, is back with a fresh perspective on why environmental pessimists continuously lead us astray. In *The End of Doom: Environmental Renewal in the 21st Century*, Bailey provides a detailed examination of the theories, studies, and assumptions that have spurred the current forecasts of calamity. “I aim in this new book to again remind the public, the media, and policymakers that the foretellers of ruin have consistently been wrong,” he writes, “whereas the advocates of human resourcefulness have nearly always been right.”

Why have the doomsayers consistently been such poor guides to the future? One of the most infamous examples of these unfulfilled predictions was Stanford University biologist Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 bestseller, *The Population Bomb*. Ehrlich warned that unbridled population growth would outpace food supply in a matter of years. “The battle to feed all of humanity is over,” he wrote. “In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.” Ehrlich compared humanity to a growing cancer.

As Bailey points out, globe-spanning

famines have yet to occur. Instead, average life expectancy has increased and a higher percentage of people are enjoying the benefits of modern technology than ever before. How could Ehrlich have been so off-the-mark? Like all prophets of doom, he wildly underestimated the power of human ingenuity. “Human beings are not like a herd of deer that simply starves to death when it overgrazes its meadow,” Bailey argues. “Instead we seek out new ways to produce more food and do it ever more efficiently.” Breakthroughs in plant breeding spawned the Green Revolution, which dramatically boosted global food production. More people meant more creative minds brought to the task of providing nourishment for the planet.

This same dynamic applies across a wide range of ecological issues. Breaking down the numbers, Bailey finds that—thanks to human ingenuity—many current trends are in fact positive. Cancer rates are falling in America. More and more land is being restored to nature. Increasing wealth is leading to decreasing pollution. And the cost of clean energy will soon fall below that of fossil fuels. As he demonstrates, the way to cement these trends is not to retreat into a maze of paralyzing regulation but to craft our own future.

And yet, this doesn’t seem to have reined in the pessimists. “While the overpopulation dirge has become somewhat muted as a result of their massive predictive failure, many of the more radical environmentalist ideologues still sing the same old Malthusian song,” he writes. The persistence of alarmism, according to Bailey, is both psy-

“Ronald Bailey sets out factually and simply the unassailable, if inconvenient, truth: that if you care for this planet, technological progress and economic enterprise are the best means of saving it.”  
—Matt Ridley, bestselling author of *The Rational Optimist*

## THE END OF DOOM



Environmental Renewal  
in the Twenty-first Century  
RONALD BAILEY

chological and political. “Human beings do have a psychological bias toward believing bad news and discounting good news,” he adds. “But besides that, the sciences surrounding environmental issues have been politicized from top to bottom.”

Nevertheless, Bailey offers an ultimately hopeful perspective. “Humanity does face big environmental challenges over the course of the coming century, but the bulk of the scientific and economic evidence shows that most of the trends are positive and can be turned in a positive direction by further enhancing human ingenuity.”

“The end of the world is not nigh,” he concludes. “Far from it.” ■

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