

Interview with Paul Ehrlich

About the interviewee

Paul is President of the Center for Conservation Biology and Bing Professor of Population Studies at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA. His books include the 1968 bestseller *The Population Bomb*.

About the questions

The questions were posed by the Journal's editorial team.

Citation

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Keywords

Biodiversity; overpopulation; societal change; sustainability

Q: To what extent did your early research training in populations of non-human species, such as butterflies, inform the development of your view on the threats posed by human overpopulation?

A: It informed them very much, since the basic rules of ecology apply to human beings as well as all other animals. My training in population dynamics (how population sizes change) and population genetics (evolution) were especially valuable.

Q: How would you counter the arguments presented by latter-day techno-cornucopians (such as the Breakthrough Institute) that neo-Malthusians will continue to be 'proved wrong'?

A: There are several ways. First of all, humanity still has hundreds of millions of hungry people despite the brags of the techno-twits, it is rapidly reducing the populations of other organisms with which it shares space and resources (half of wildlife has gone in the last 40 years) and upon which it depends for critical ecosystem services, increasing human numbers are altering the climate in ways that may end civilization, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics tells us there are definite limits to growth.

Q: Do you think that the 'Netherlands Fallacy' (the incorrect assertion that ecological impacts of a nation are limited to impacts within the nation's borders only) has become more common in recent years?

A: Rather than there now being a better understanding of the issues, it has become more widespread,

at least in the US, as Americans fail to see the global environmental impacts of the American empire.

Q: Do you feel that ecocentrism and biocentrism as worldviews are waxing or waning?

A: Sadly, I feel that such worldviews are waning, at least in Trump-world.

Q: What do you believe to be the most promising means of curbing global population growth? And, in this regard, where do you think foreign aid should best be directed?

A: There needs to be a great drive towards giving women equal rights and opportunities with men everywhere and providing modern contraception and back-up abortion to all sexually active individuals. Foreign aid should be aimed at the latter in a context of improving healthcare overall for everyone. We must take good care of all people already here, while working to reduce the size of the human population to one that is sustainable in the foreseeable future. In rich countries we should promote the idea that having more than two children is unethical, and that two is now ethically marginal.

Q: What are your thoughts on migration from poorer to richer countries?

A: This is something that is inevitable and it will greatly increase as long as large international inequities are maintained.

Q: How do you see the debate about 'optimum population size' evolving over the coming decades? And

how can concerned citizens best influence that debate?

A: It will probably become moot as the collapse worsens. Time has come for concerned citizens to work to soften the collapse and, perhaps more importantly, plan for a possible 'reset' that will not lead to another round of growth mania and collapse. Above all, we must fight the ubiquitous insanity that economic growth is a cure – it is the disease.

Q: **What should *The Ecological Citizen* do to help promote population reduction and ecological footprint reduction?**

A: You should push the slogan of 'stop at two', fight all kinds of discrimination, especially by gender and race (we'll need cooperation to keep the collapse from being so severe that no reset is possible), push a discussion of consumption control among the rich, and promote redistribution rather than growth to improve civilization's chances.

Q: **What – if anything – gives you hope for the immediate future of life on Earth?**

A: I'll have no hope unless I see major politicians start talking about the need to shrink the size of the human enterprise. ■

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