Obituary for Paul Ehrlich

Sandy Irvine

Sandy is a political activist based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.

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On 13 March, the sad news came of the death of biologist Paul Ehrlich. He had been one of the greatest true friends of the Earth in the last few decades. He also showed that there was another 'America', very different from the likes of, say, Trump or Musk.

One of my treasured mementos is a friendly communication I received from Ehrlich. I had been involved in efforts to challenge the utter nonsense being spouted by the then Green Party deputy leader (2013). The latter had claimed that "the Earth could comfortably accommodate twice the current population" and, if need be, we could just get rid of "non-productive trees" to produce more food. It was a symptom how far 'de-greening' was harming the Green Party back then.

Ehrlich has bequeathed a rich treasure trove of great writing on the planetary predicament. In it, he exposed the fantasies and falsities of assorted cornucopian dreamers, 'hopium' pushers, snake oil sellers of assorted 'technofixes' and other deluded folk. He was prepared to cross swords with popular but misguided pundits such as Hans Rosling, a prime 'good news' vendor (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013a).

He also addressed the tunnel vision of certain academic disciplines and the consequent failure to see the big picture (*e.g.* Ehrlich, 2008). He saw how wrong it was to reduce everything to economics and see things just in terms of economic redistribution. He rightly stressed the deeper cultural crisis (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2010) though, perhaps, he did not fully articulate the ecocentric ethic we need.

Ehrlich, often with a small group of colleagues, addressed a whole range of issues. Thus, long before Covid, he wrote on how global changes could make humanity vulnerable to pandemics (Daily and Ehrlich, 1996). He tirelessly stressed that the destruction of biodiversity and the collapse of important ecosystems was being dangerously ignored (*e.g.* Ehrlich and Mooney, 1983). He certainly pulled no punches about the general threat to human civilization (*e.g.* Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013b). Recent research has vindicated Ehrlich (*e.g.* Foster and Rahmstorf, 2026; Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 2025; Carrington, 2026).

Ehrlich was widely denounced, largely because of his book *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1968). It is true that this work was somewhat

cavalier in its predictions of famines on the immediate horizon, and failed to make sufficient allowance for the impact of high-yielded hybrid plants in the short term. Yet, as Norman Borlaug, 'father' of the Green Revolution, himself admitted, this was but a temporary fix, one with unsustainable needs in terms of resource inputs and equally unsustainable side-effects. Borlaug too recognized the threat from human overpopulation (see Borlaug, 1970).

In the longer term, Ehrlich has again been vindicated (Ehrlich, 2015). He further anticipated the complacent argument that fertility rates are falling so there is no need to worry (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2006). Overall, Ehrlich rightly argued that human numbers count: population is indeed the multiplier of all else.

Yet his critics routinely ignore the fact that Ehrlich continuously stressed the multiplicative interaction of human numbers with the two other key drivers of human impacts, namely *per capita* consumption and the choice of this or that technology (the famous formula, $I = P \times A \times T$). For that reason, Ehrlich called the USA, not just, say India or China, one of the most overpopulated countries in the world (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1991).

Another line of attack on Ehrlich was that he ignored the role of inequality. This was another red herring – on the same moronic level of attacking him for being a 'Neo-Malthusian' (*cf.* Irvine, n.d.). If his critics bothered to read books such as *How to be a Survivor* (Ehrlich and Harriman, 1971), they would find a big section on what it calls the "steerage" (pp. 80–101). The book makes perfectly clear that, on 'Spaceship Earth', the cabins range from the luxurious to the desperately poor. Ehrlich stood for an "unprecedented redistribution of wealth" and clearly recognized how "the rich [...] run the global system", calling their Davos summits "'world destroyer' meetings". This is not the language of someone who ignored inequality and power.

His critics also cite the bet he and his associates lost with cornucopian economist Julian Simon regarding the future cost of certain metals. Ehrlich seems to have made the mistake of assuming that prices just follow geology (*i.e.* the increasing scarcity of intrinsically finite resources). He made insufficient allowance for, say, the effects of economic downturns, government interventions, stock market movements, changing consumer preferences and short-term effects of better mining technology and other such improvements. But the longer term trend is as Ehrlich argued (*e.g.* Heinberg, 2022).

Moreover, it is not just resource availability and particular prices at any moment in time but, rather, the side effects of production and consumption, whose unsustainable costs are routinely not included in the prices consumers are charged. Many of Ehrlich's critics seem unaware that there were actually two bets but Simon ducked out of the second. Ehrlich had rightly shifted the proposed wager to those wider impacts and, as references above evidence, he was spot on about a deteriorating state of the planet. The real story is told in Turner (2009), and also discussed in *Betrayal of Science and Reason* (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1996), which is the Ehrlich book I'd recommend if I had to pick just one.

Some of Ehrlich's best writings were co-authored with his wife Anne. I had the privilege of hearing her speak in Newcastle (1984?) on the threat from a

'nuclear winter' after a nuclear war. She was particularly cogent and forceful. Sadly, she too was spot on.

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