



PANIC

**HYSTERIA'S HISTORY:**  
Environmental Alarmism in Context

By Amy Kaleita, Ph.D  
with Gregory R. Forbes

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# Introduction

Listening to the global-warming alarmists, one gets the idea that humanity faces a critical and certain danger from the rising global temperature, which will raise sea levels and swamp major cities, reduce arable land to desert, impoverish billions, and end civilization as we know it. One might further be convinced that the only means of heading off this catastrophe is to implement draconian restrictions on human activity of all kinds, from industrial production, to pleasant Sunday drives, to the most basic exercises of entrepreneurial freedom. The line between reversible phenomenon and inevitable doom is about to be crossed, say the alarmists, and only the venal and the blind deny the awful truth.

A person could almost be forgiven for believing all this. There is an entire industry devoted to the promulgation of climate-change hysteria. Well-known projects range from former Vice President Al Gore's Oscar-winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, to *Vanity Fair's* "Green Issue," to profit-making but functionally ineffectual endeavors like TerraPass, which purports to enable the purchase of a "carbon neutral" lifestyle. Fighting global warming—and, as important, promoting belief in a specific, narrow, apocalyptic version of its existence and effects—is the cause du jour. The apostles of global warming falsely claim that the science is "settled," but in reality only the conventional media wisdom is settled. That conventional wisdom, enforced by the rhetoric and peer pressure of wealthy celebrities, leads almost universally to terrible policy making at all levels. Examples of poor and self-contradictory choices that stem from climate-change hysteria abound:

- The much-ballyhooed Kyoto Accords, dead only thanks to a forward-thinking U.S. Senate that rejected them 95-0, would have essentially halted all industrial progress in the developed world.
- Across the nation, various states give tax breaks to the owners of hybrid vehicles, under the assumption that those vehicles reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. However, the manufacture of hybrid vehicles releases more greenhouse gases than the manufacture of conventional vehicles.
- In California, the former and current state attorneys general have been squandering taxpayer money on a quixotic lawsuit against

nearly the entire automobile industry in North America—seeking damages for ills that have yet to occur.

- The Low Carbon Fuel Standard recently promulgated by the governor of California will have the unfortunate effect of promoting the use of ethanol in the state’s fuel supply. Ethanol reduces fuel efficiency, which means drivers will need to burn more fuel to go the same distance. Further, because of ethanol’s corrosive effect on pipelines, the reformulated gasoline containing ethanol must be transported by road in tanker trucks, thereby releasing more greenhouse gases than the pipeline transport of comparable amounts of ordinary gasoline.
- The city of San Francisco recently banned the use of plastic bags in city businesses, partly on the assumption that because those bags are manufactured from oil-based products, they represent the end result of a global-warming—abetting manufacturing process. In reality, the manufacture of paper bags releases more greenhouse gases than the manufacture of plastic bags.
- A self-proclaimed “megalomaniac” writer in New York City has dubbed himself “No-Impact Man” and is leading his wife and child on a spurious quest to have a “carbon footprint” of zero. Among his extreme measures, undertaken after viewing *An Inconvenient Truth*, is the cessation of any use of toilet paper in his home.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the bad ideas and terrible decisions that result from environmental hysteria. The tragedy of this hysteria is twofold: it is often a detrimental perversion of the truth—and *it has all happened before*.

## CHAPTER I:

# We Will Kill All the Birds, and Probably All the Other Animals, Too

Most people will recognize the name of biologist-turned-author Rachel Carson, whose 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, is credited with launching modern environmentalism. But Carson was simply the most successful in a long line of environmental activists convinced that human beings were on the cusp of eliminating various animal species altogether.

In 1887, the Audubon Society claimed, “There will soon not be a bird of paradise on earth, and the ostrich has only been saved by private breeders. Man will not wait for the cooling of the world to consume everything in it, from teak trees to humming-birds, and a century or two hence will find himself perplexed by a planet in which there is nothing except what he makes.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1898, a headline in the *New York Times* proclaimed, “THE DESTRUCTION OF BIRDS; New York Zoological Society to Publish the Results of an Extensive Investigation. LARGE DECREASE REPORTED... Many Species Are Becoming Extinct. Decrease in Bird Life in 30 States.”

In 1907, a story in the *New York Tribune* mourned the “Passing of the Chihuahua Dog,” which it characterized as “a curious little creature, popularly supposed to be a cross between the prairie dog and the jack rabbit.”

All of this came to a head with the publication of Carson’s *Silent Spring*. The book was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, endorsed by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for several weeks. It sparked widespread outcry over the impact on the environment of synthetic pesticides and other chemicals. Carson specifically noted the effect of the insecticide DDT (Dichloro-Diphenyl-Trichloroethane) and warned of a “silent spring” in which “no birds sing.”

Some have theorized that the public was ripe for her arguments by the time *Silent Spring* was published. Carson made pesticides sound like a looming threat very similar to another threat of which people were already aware, and terrified. Ralph Lutts, reflecting on the success of *Silent Spring*, noted:

She was sounding an alarm about a kind of pollution that was invisible to the senses; could be transported great distances, perhaps globally; could accumulate over time in body tissues; could produce chronic as well as acute poisoning; and could result in cancer, birth defects and genetic mutations that may not become evident until years or decades after exposure. Government officials, she also argued, were not taking the steps necessary to control this pollution and protect the public. Chemical pesticides were not the only form of pollution fitting this description. Another form, far better known to the public at the time, was radioactive fallout”<sup>2</sup>

Lutts went on to point out that the radioactive isotope Strontium-90, a long-lasting component of nuclear fallout, was the first pollutant Carson mentioned in *Silent Spring*. Mentions of that and other radioactive substances are sprinkled throughout the book.

There was an element of truth to Carson’s warnings about the effect of DDT on bird populations. In the late 1960s, some researchers concluded that exposure to DDT (or rather, its breakdown byproducts) caused the thinning of eggshells in some bird species, especially raptors such as eagles and peregrine falcons. The thinner eggshells were more delicate and less able to protect the chicks; thus many did not survive.

Even so, these findings remain an item of some controversy. A number of studies have shown little, if any, relationship between DDT consumption and eggshell thickness in many bird species.<sup>3</sup> Some analysts contend that most of the evidence Carson gives for the deleterious effects of DDT on bird populations is anecdotal or from uncontrolled observational studies.

And Carson’s work undeniably contains elements of unbridled alarmism. For example, Carson notes that, “like the robin, another American bird, [the bald eagle] seems to be on the verge of extinction.” In fact, the robin population has never seriously been considered to be in any sort of jeopardy. At the same time Carson’s book was published, a noted ornithologist was reporting robins to be the most abundant bird in North America.<sup>4</sup>

*Silent Spring* launched a whole series of hysterical claims about DDT and other chemicals. Some said that birds were dropping dead right out of the sky<sup>5</sup> or falling “out of the trees in by the thousands.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, DDT is not known to be directly toxic to any species outside of some insects.

Some people still believe DDT is carcinogenic, or harmful to humans in some other way. Although most chemicals can be carcinogenic in extremely

large doses, no study has ever specifically found a link between DDT exposure and cancer incidence in humans, not even when volunteers were fed, on a daily basis, three times the quantity of DDT the average American ingested annually.<sup>7</sup>

The public pressure created by the popularity of Carson's book took its toll. The use of DDT was banned in the United States in 1972, despite a general lack of evidence of its effect. Following the ban, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) threatened to stop foreign aid to any country using the chemical. When the World Bank sent aid to fight malaria, it stipulated that DDT could not be used.

Those decisions halted lifesaving efforts to combat malaria in many parts of the world. With the use of DDT in Venezuela, cases of malaria had dropped from more than eight million in 1943 to 800 in 1958. In India, cases had dropped from more than 10 million in 1935 to under 300,000 in 1969. In Italy, cases had dropped from more than 400,000 in 1945 to only 37 in 1968.<sup>8</sup> Today, malaria infects an estimated 350–500 million people annually, killing approximately one million every year. Most of the victims are young children in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Eventually, common sense about DDT began to revive. In 2006, the World Health Organization called on developing countries, particularly in Africa, to begin indoor spraying of DDT to fight malaria.<sup>10</sup> A small number of malaria-plagued countries were already using DDT, backed by a 2001 United Nations treaty. Environmental Defense—ironically, a key member of the anti-DDT campaign in the 1960s—now endorses the indoor use of DDT for malaria control, as do the Sierra Club and the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

The truth is that birds are still with us. In fact, over the last several decades, great strides have been made in terms of species preservation in the United States. In June 2007, the bald eagle was removed from the U.S. list of threatened and endangered species, and environmental groups believe the bald-eagle population will continue to grow. While some credit the DDT ban with this success, it is generally held that the leading causes of decline in bird populations are habitat disruption and hunting—not chemical use. Yet a documented effect of the DDT ban is in the death of millions of people.

But the hysteria lives on. Al Gore claims, “More species of animals and plants are now vanishing than at any time in the past 65 million years.”<sup>11</sup> The American Museum of Natural History asserts, “Scientists rate biodiversity loss as a more serious environmental problem than the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, or pollution and

contamination... This mass extinction is the fastest in earth's 4.5-billion-year history and, unlike prior extinctions, is mainly the result of human activity and not of natural phenomena."<sup>12</sup>

The lack of any reliable metric for assessing biodiversity hampers attempts to understand its true state nationally and globally.<sup>13</sup> As a result, the most alarmist projections are made without any supporting evidence, and not surprisingly these receive the most media attention.

## CHAPTER II:

# We Will Turn Our Planet Into an Empty Starving Wasteland

“We are moving towards the twilight of civilization,”<sup>14</sup> and with “[a]nother century like the [twentieth,] civilization will be facing its final crisis,”<sup>15</sup> according to Fairfield Osborn in his 1948 book, *Our Plundered Planet*. Resource alarmists have been shouting statements like this for over a century. They see a severe drought and exclaim that the productive capability of the earth is dwindling and that deserts will take over the world. They write propaganda books like Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, meant to show society the “doom” soon to come, in the cloak of a sci-fi adventure novel.<sup>16</sup> They take advantage of farmers who fought to survive the Dust Bowl, like a Kansas farmer who concluded that the “whole Great Plains region is already lost to desert that can not be reclaimed through the plans and labors of men.”<sup>17</sup> The alarm was displayed prominently in a *New York Times* story titled, “World Seen Facing Food Shortage Due to Lack of Arable Lands.”<sup>18</sup>

Some hysteria was understandable during the 1940s and ’50s. America had suffered its worst productivity disaster, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and images of dust clouding the sun as far east as Washington, D.C., were still vivid in the public memory. The Dust Bowl was a wake-up call that spurred farmers to take greater care in their agricultural practices. Profit and surplus today are worthless if the land is underproductive or even unusable tomorrow.

Because the farmers heeded that call, the Dust Bowl, far from dooming the country to famine and desert, demonstrated the ability of man to learn, progress, and overcome. The once-feared desert lands of the North American Great Plains have long since returned to productivity. Indeed, they are some of the most productive agricultural lands in the world.

Yet some alarmists continue to ignore these advances. In *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich claimed that “the agricultural value of Iowa farmland, which is about as good a land as we have, is declining by 1 percent per year.”<sup>19</sup> If this prediction had been accurate, the productivity of Iowa fields would have decreased by 40 percent since Ehrlich’s book was released in

1968. Instead, annual per-acre wheat yield has increased from 33 bushels to 66, corn yield from 89 bushels to 166, and soybean yield from 29.5 bushels to 50.5.<sup>20</sup>

Alarmists consistently ignore or deny the ability of humans to learn, grow, and advance socially and technologically. Swiss biochemist Ehrenfried Pfeiffer clearly states this alarmist view: “Production, rationalization and technicalization have reached a ‘saturation.’ They can not be increased.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet time and time again we see agricultural production records being broken. Human ingenuity and scientific advances help us better manage our acres and plant higher-yielding varieties that are drought, pest, and disease resistant. Every continent has seen an increase in yield in the last 40 years—with, of course, localized differences. Crop yield worldwide has increased for every commodity type, including fruit by 31 percent, rice by 63 percent, vegetables by 37 percent, and wheat by 148 percent.<sup>22</sup>

Though soil is one of the most important resources for human existence, another resource has become essential to almost every society and economy around the world: oil. As with food, oil is the target of dire predictions of its impending and unavoidable scarcity.

If you do a Google search of “peak oil” you will find about 4.8 million entries, many dedicated to sounding the alarm of oil shortages. “Peak oil” supposedly represents the point in time when the peak of world crude-oil production will be reached, after which production will enter a terminal decline. Once we have run the pump dry, society will begin to collapse as the effects of oil shortages become a grim reality.

Predictions of oil shortages have run throughout the last half-century. In 1943, U.S. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox predicted a serious oil shortage by 1944 and oil exhaustion in the United States by 1963.<sup>23</sup> In 1947, the *New York Times* wrote, “Every so often the fear of an oil shortage developing in the United States gains prominent mention. At present, such a campaign is in full swing.” The article explains that the unprecedented demand for oil will cause a shortage of energy.<sup>24</sup>

The same warnings were still being proclaimed more than two decades later. In 1974, *National Geographic* published “Oil, the Dwindling Treasure.” In this article, M. King Hubert, a U.S. petroleum geologist and strong advocate of the “peak oil” concept, claimed peak oil would be reached by 1995.<sup>25</sup> Three years later, the CIA reported that peak oil would be reached by 1987, leading to higher prices and worldwide shortages of gasoline, heating oil, and jet fuel.<sup>26</sup>

More recently, a few big hitters in the oil industry have begun to claim that peak oil has been reached. T. Boone Pickens, the founder of Mesa Petroleum, the world's leading independent oil and gas producer, said, "The majors, they talk about plenty of oil and that they can produce more, but if you look at ExxonMobil, ChevronTexaco, BP [British Petroleum], all the production [is] going down every year. They don't replace and they don't add to production, but they say there's plenty of oil around."<sup>27</sup> Matthew Simmons, chief executive of the energy-investment company Simmons & Co. International and an advisor to President George W. Bush, predicts peak oil will be reached soon. Simmons claims that Saudi Arabia's pumping capacity is running out, despite Saudi assertions to the contrary.<sup>28</sup>

Pickens and Simmons also warn that the increased demand in the developing world, specifically China and India, will accelerate the use of current reserves, cause demand to surpass supply, and create a worldwide shortage. In 2004, the *Toronto Star* quoted the British energy secretary as predicting that the coming oil crisis will be "the sharpest and perhaps the most violent dislocation [of society] in recent history."<sup>29</sup>

Despite all these claims, there is no evidence that peak oil has been reached or that there will be a long-term shortage of supply. In response to perceived oil shortages during the 1920s, the American Petroleum Institute announced that there were 26 billion barrels of oil in regions not yet fully explored and that ample reserves existed.<sup>30</sup> Similar headlines can be found today, including many announcements of new discoveries. Since 2000, numerous new reserves have been found around the world—at least three new fields in China,<sup>31</sup> a 4.5-billion-barrel reserve in Russia,<sup>32</sup> a 10-billion-barrel reserve in Mexico,<sup>33</sup> a 600-million-barrel field in Ghana,<sup>34</sup> and a new deep-water reserve in the Gulf of Mexico off the Louisiana coast that could yield up to 15 billion barrels.<sup>35</sup> Besides these new finds, the *Financial Times* reports that Iraq's reserves may be double those previously known, amounting to an additional 100 billion barrels.<sup>36</sup>

In 1971, proven oil reserves were at 521 billion gallons; in 2006, they were at 1,290 billion gallons.<sup>37</sup> The Cambridge Energy Research Association (CERA) has predicted that petroleum supplies will actually grow faster than demand until 2010.<sup>38</sup> Oil production and reserve levels have not yet dropped and are not likely to drop; supply constraints, where they exist, are issues of investment, geopolitics, and infrastructure.

CERA believes that higher oil prices will spur development of new technologies that will allow oil to be extracted from old fields. At least one company, Sneider Exploration Company, has been experimenting with one of these technologies and has found new life in old fields with economically viable extraction.<sup>39</sup>

At least as far back as 1926, alternatives to oil were being conceived. In that year the *New York Times* published an article that showed optimism and a lack of concern about oil scarcity: “A Synthetic Age Is Foreseen by Chemistry: Scientists at Williamstown Conference Promise That Substitutes Will Be Found for Everything That Man Needs if Natural Supply Fails—Some of the Marvels Achieved—Not Worried About Oil.”<sup>40</sup> Another article quoted the chief petroleum engineer of the U.S. Bureau of Mines explaining that petroleum would last for many years to come and that coal and oil shale would meet all requirements when petroleum came to be in short supply.<sup>41</sup>

Fuel shortages have been experienced in many parts of the world throughout history, but the primary motivation for developing alternative fuel sources has often been not scarcity, but the marketplace. In some cases, non-fuel purposes were discovered for a particular fuel, and, as a result of the new demand, the price of the fuel increased, spurring the development of an alternative. In other cases, the limitations of the energy source meant that when a better source became available, it naturally supplanted the earlier one. Steam-powered machinery replaced animal power and wind for labor and transportation. Kerosene was found to be a better and more plentiful fuel than whale oil for artificial lighting. One of the most common energy sources for transportation today came from a desire to utilize industrial waste: gasoline was a by-product of the production of kerosene.

In fact, new and improved technology is a long-standing result of scientific advancement in the energy industry, as well as other natural-resource sectors. As economist Erich Zimmerman noted, “Knowledge is truly the mother of all resources.”<sup>42</sup>

## CHAPTER III:

# We Will Overcrowd the Earth

Through much of modern history, overpopulation has been raised as a serious concern. In our own time, probably the most tireless exponent of the overpopulation theme has been the self-proclaimed propagandist Paul Ehrlich.

Ehrlich, an entomologist and professor of biological sciences at Stanford University, published his alarmist manifesto, *The Population Bomb*, in 1968. The book contains dire predictions for human civilization and advocates a number of radical solutions. The same year, Ehrlich and two colleagues founded the advocacy group Zero Population Growth, now known as Population Connection. The organization's mission is to lobby the public and Congress to reduce population growth through birth control and other methods, and to fund population-control research.<sup>43</sup>

*The Population Bomb* claimed that the earth was quickly becoming overpopulated. Ehrlich predicted that by the mid-1970s the world would be struck by severe famine and hundreds of millions of people would starve to death. Ehrlich strongly believed that the earth had reached its maximum capacity to support the growing human population, and that there was nowhere to go but down. The first line of his prologue states: "The battle to feed all humanity is over." Ehrlich continued, "At this late date nothing can prevent a substantial increase in the world death rate." He believed that any action taken at that point to prevent the increase would only "provide a stay of execution." He blamed man's "swollen head" for the environmental and societal disaster that he anticipated.

Ehrlich used absurd numbers to overwhelm the reader. For example, he explained that if population growth went unchecked for another 900 years, there would be 600,000 billion humans on earth, which equates to a population density of 100 people per square yard covering the entire surface (land and sea) of the earth.<sup>44</sup> Ehrlich also predicted that the deterioration of the environment would cause greater misery and more deaths than the shortage of food.<sup>45</sup> He included in his book a number of future scenarios; in every case, war, disease, famine, and hatred for the United States are prominent.































