

# Earth Read-Out

Keith Lampe

1969

a review of

*The Population Bomb*, by Paul R. Ehrlich, Ballantine, 223 pp., \$.95, paper.

Ehrlich tries to reach a broad public in this book—but he's not coy or campy.

He knows there's no longer time for that.

His first words are: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. 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...

"Nothing could be more misleading to our children than our present affluent society. They will inherit a totally different world, a world in which the standards, politics, and economics of the 1960s are dead."

Ehrlich—is part of a relatively large community at Stanford which through most of the 60's has been trying to draw attention to the various catastrophes made daily more likely by the exploded and re-exploding populations.

His own battles with bureaucrats and others go back at least as far as 1957 when he tried to talk the Department of Agriculture out of spraying twenty million acres in the Southeastern U.S. with amounts of dieldrin and heptachlor eight to thirty times more toxic to wildlife than standard dosages of DDT. He failed—and the spray program was a disaster.

Ehrlich subdivides his first chapter into the simplest outline of calamity: Too Many People—Too Little Food—A Dying Planet. Though population is the central factor in his analyses and suggested programs, he says that "in the long view the progressive deterioration of our environment may cause more death and misery than any conceivable food-population gap. And it is just this factor, environmental deterioration, that is almost universally ignored by those most concerned with closing the food gap."

He then discusses extinction of the passenger pigeon; loss of arable land through erosion, gulying, strip mining; salinization of our water supply; pesticides ("a record of ecological stupidity without parallel"); poisoned air; lead poisoning.

He is of course not optimistic: "I predict that the rate of soil deterioration will accelerate as the food crisis intensifies. Ecology will be ignored more and more as things get tough."

He thinks the next few years "will probably tell the story." He offers three scenarios—the most catastrophic of which climaxes in 1980 with "general thermonuclear war" resulting primarily from runaway food/population pressures. "The most intelligent creatures ultimately surviving this period are cockroaches."

His most cheerful scenario is so severe it will be repressed immediately by most persons reading it:

"In 1974 the U.S. government finally realizes that the food-population balance in much of Asia, Africa and South America is such that most areas cannot attain self-sufficiency. American expeditionary forces are withdrawn from Vietnam and Thailand and the U.S. announces it will no longer send food to India, Egypt, and some other countries which it considers beyond hope. A moderate food rationing program is instituted in the U.S..."

“Pope Pius XIII, yielding to pressure from enlightened Catholics, announces that all good Catholics have a responsibility to drastically restrict their reproductive activities. He gives his blessing to abortion and all methods of contraception...

“Famine and food riots sweep Asia. In China, India, and other areas of Asia, central governments weaken and then disappear...Famine and plague sweep the Arab world...Most of the countries of Africa and South America slide backward into famine and local warfare...

“In the United Nations, the United States, Canada, Russia, Japan, Australia, and the Common Market countries set up a machinery for “area rehabilitation which will... be initiated in 1985, when it is calculated that the major die-back will be over...The plan will eventually cover the entire world and is programmed with a goal of a total world population of two billion in 2025, and 1.5 million [sic] in 2100.

“This scenario has considerably more appeal than the others, even though it presumes the death by starvation of perhaps as many as half a billion people, one fifth of the world’s population. Unfortunately, it also involves a maturity of outlook and behavior in the U.S. that seems unlikely to develop in the near future...”

So heavy.

This book was published more than a year ago. It’s embarrassing how long it’s taken us (me) to pick up on it.

If we’d been paying attention more broadly, the planetary ecological emergency probably would have been our central concern for the past six or eight years. Of course, things weren’t made any easier for us when almost all of Rachel Carson’s colleagues copped out on her as soon as she came under heavy fire from commercial interests. They knew she was right, but they isolated her in the same way other intellectuals isolated the prime targets of McCarthyism a decade earlier.

Because we lacked the energy or insight to get beneath the media distortions of Rachel Carson, we took her concern to be cranky or alarmist. Male chauvinism probably was a factor too: If Rachel Carson had been Richard Carson, we might have picked up much earlier.

Paul Ehrlich has had enough hope or energy remaining to put together a strong book. A part of his hope is invested in the “much despised ‘hippie’ movement...a movement wrapped up in Zen Buddhism, physical love and a disdain for material wealth. It is small wonder that our society is horrified at hippies’ behavior—it goes against our most cherished religious and ethical ideas.

“I think it would be well if those of us who are totally ensnared in the non-hip part of our culture paid a great deal of attention to the movement, rather than condemn it out of hand. They may not have the answer, but they may have an answer. At the very least they are asking the proper questions.”

Ehrlich says that in order to get through the coming years “somehow we’ve got to change from a growth-oriented, exploitative system to one focused on stability and conservation. Our entire system of orienting to nature must undergo a revolution. And that revolution is going to be extremely difficult to pull off, since the attitudes of Western culture toward nature are deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Unlike people in many other cultures, we see man’s basic role as that of dominating nature, rather than as living in harmony with it.

“This entire problem has been elegantly discussed by Professor Lynn White, Jr... He points out, for instance, that before the Christian era trees, springs, hills, streams, and other objects of nature had guardian spirits. These spirits had to be approached and placated before one could safely invade their territory. As White says, ‘By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.’”

Ehrlich later quotes White again (from a piece available in *The Subversive Science*): “Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.”

Next Earth Read-Out will discuss Ehrlich’s suggestions for actions. [See FE #87, September 4–17, 1969.]

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