

Weighing Ego and Money against Real Science

by Richard W. Rahn

THERE'S BIG MONEY IN ENVIRONMENTAL DOOMSDAY PROPHECIES AND BIG EGOS AT STAKE, SCIENCE BE DAMNED

“Science” is a variable, not a constant. “Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systemic methodology based on evidence.” The expression “follow the science” is often used by those in government and media as to imply it is fixed — whereas, in fact, most everything is subject to change as we learn more.



Everyone thinks there are things they know for certain — that often turn out not to be true. Whether we are children or the most learned professional in our field, we carry about many false ideas. There is a reluctance to admit we were wrong, particularly if money or our egos are involved. Those engaged in economic or political forecasting are often proved to be wrong — yet many develop endless excuses of why they were really right, despite the evidence.

Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834) was an English cleric, scholar and influential economist. He is best known for a book published in 1798 titled “An Essay on the Principle of Population” where he argued that as food production increased population would rise faster, leading to increased famine and disease among the lower classes. His ideas were widely accepted, even to the present day.

In 1968, Stanford University Professor Paul Ehrlich published “The Population Bomb” where he predicted the world would soon run out of resources, resulting in global famine in the 1970s and 1980s, which convinced many notable people, who should have known better, that the end was near.

Subsequently, a somewhat less radical group of latter-day Malthusians, including scientists, economists and government officials, formed the Club of Rome and published a report in 1972 titled “The Limits to Growth.” Their conclusions can be best summarized as: In the absence of radical change, the world will run out of resources within a hundred years, causing an “uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial production.”

Malthus, Mr. Ehrlich and all of the others had the science all wrong. The world still waits for Mr. Ehrlich and the others to confess to causing unnecessary global public panic and distress — (too much money and egos in the “end of the world” scenarios).

In fact, food and other resources have become more plentiful and less expensive in real terms, even as population has grown. The problem in much of the developed world is that population is stagnant or even in decline, which makes most of the old-age pension systems unviable because fewer workers are available to support increasing numbers of retirees.

Just this past week, the Chinese once again changed their population policy from a limit of one child per family which went to two children per family, now to a permissible and even desirable three children per family. This was necessitated by the Chinese facing a “depopulation bomb.”

Just one example of why the experts got it all wrong. Up to the 1930s, the average corn field yielded about 25 bushels per acre. Now, the average in the U.S. is about 180 bushels per acre. A friend who farms about 3,000 acres in Illinois told me that he now is producing about 325 bushels per acre. Most other agricultural crops have had similar productivity gains, stemming from better seeds, fertilizer, water management and improved farm machinery — with no end in sight.

For the past four decades, the world has been told the end is near because of global warming. As the old predictions have proved to be wrong and the doomsayers are losing credibility, they are doubling down — as evidenced by the

Biden administration’s hysteria on the topic. There is big money in environmental doomsday prophecies and big egos at stake — the real science be damned.

In a new paper, Professor Judith Curry, a well-known and highly regarded environmental expert (in part for producing much more accurate forecasts of hurricane intensities and tracks), looked at the question of why the previous predictions have been so bad. She found that there was a tendency for the official international agencies to take the worst-case scenarios and give undue publicity to them, rather than to take the most likely scenarios — with highest probability of occurrence.

Suppose you were a very highly paid senior government official, who signed off on a grant that would end up partially funding a medical research institute in a somewhat hostile foreign land — whose work product ended up killing millions of people around the world. Would you immediately take responsibility and ask for forgiveness for your mistake, or would you go through various stages of denial about your actions and what likely happened?

Well-intentioned scientists can be forgiven for admitting they made mistakes, particularly when dealing with scientific unknowns. What is not as easily forgiven is allowing one’s ego and publicity-seeking impulse to say things that are untrue or not known — which results in huge economic damage to hundreds of millions and unnecessary deaths. Dr. Fauci, call your office.

No one has received a government contract or had their photo published on the front of a major publication by saying, “Don’t worry, the private sector will take care of the problem without government help.”

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