

# 'Population Bomb' Turns 50: Unlike a Fine Wine, It Aged Poorly



By Ruth Kava — March 29, 2018



Malthusian Time Bomb Explosion? [1]

I can't just say happy birthday to this book — after all it's pretty much anti-birth. But that's what the book really was — an early harbinger of the many scares put out by this group or that. According to Ehrlich, by the end of the 1970s, we should have seen mass starvation on a level never witnessed before:

*The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now. (1)*

However, we seem to still be here, and in spite of some famines and numerous deadly wars since 1968, the world population has continued to increase. That's not to say that everyone has enough to eat, or clean water to drink, but we certainly don't seem to be on the cusp of the disasters that Ehrlich thought were real possibilities.

Dr. Ehrlich misjudged the promise of technology to increase food production yields. And here I'm speaking of the early efforts of Dr. Norman Borlaug, a founder of ACSH, which led to the so-called "Green Revolution", providing new hybrids of corn and wheat that staved off starvation for millions. And now we have genetic engineering, technologies that can further improve yields of food crops and husbandry — but of course these weren't really on the horizon in 1968.

So concerned was he about the impending doom that Ehrlich even said he supported enforced

birth control to slow population growth. But that's been tried in China with their one-child policy. It resulted in millions of abortions (forced and not), and a disruption in the male: female ratio that leaves young men with little chance of finding a mate. Or, in some cases, "illegal" births in families that chose to flout the law. These children likely will have a difficult row to hoe in society.

Ehrlich admitted that he should have paid more attention to consumption levels by various societies — not all will have the same impact on consumption or on the environment. Also, not all crowding is due to a too high birth rate. The opening of *The Population Bomb*, for example, depicts the horrors of overcrowding in a street scene in Delhi. But the overcrowding in that case was more likely due to people moving from rural to urban areas in search of better job opportunities (2).

Thus, while the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *The Population Bomb* is certainly noteworthy, by no means is its message equally worthy. Indeed, it should be a warning to all about following the lead of those who try to tell us that we could solve our problems with just one change. It really isn't that simple.

1) *The Population Bomb*. Paul R. Ehrlich. 1968. RIVERCITY Press, Rivercity, MA 01337. pg xi

2) *The Wizard and the Prophet*. Charles C. Mann. 2018. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. pg 400-401.

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