

# Betting the Planet

## REVIEW

By ERLE  
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### The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble Over Earth's Future

By Paul Sabin  
(Yale University Press)

**Y**OU MUST PLACE YOUR BET. The stakes are high. On one side, catastrophe; we humans are rapidly overwhelming the earth's limited resources. On the other, utopia; human ingenuity will enable us to thrive beyond any natural limits.

If you view the world in this way, you're probably familiar with Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon's 1980 bet on the future price of five metals. If not, you should be. As Paul Sabin, an associate professor of history and American studies at Yale University, demonstrates in *The Bet* (Yale), their wager has been at the center of

*The Bet* is a joy to read; Sabin weaves a vivid historical narrative rich with classic characters—Johnson, Nixon, the Club of Rome, Barry Commoner, Carter, Reagan. In a parable of political polarization, Sabin reveals how environmental concerns that largely united left and right in the early 1970s (Nixon founded the EPA) became political touchstones used to demonize and divide opponents. As conservatives increasingly derided environmental regulation as anathema to their core values of economic growth, liberals linked environmental concerns to their own political agenda, which is why the Simon-Ehrlich bet has been the source of endless argument. As a value-laden political debate—and debate it clearly is—there can be no end to it.

Concerns about environmental limits are ancient—an active subject for archaeologists and environmental historians. Yet Ehrlich and colleagues, including John Holdren, now director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy under President Obama, were among the first to depict such limits on a global scale. Claiming justification directly from science, especially population biology—his area of expertise—Ehrlich went to war against population growth. And war it was. Ehrlich did not hesitate to attack those who did not share his views, for example calling the governor of Arizona a “clown” and “moron” for his environmental views in the early 1970s. (Age hasn't tempered Ehrlich. Just this June, he called those smiling at a U.N. ceremony to mark a population of seven billion people on earth “idiots.”)

Politics were always central to Ehrlich's advocacy. Here he is in 1968: “Any aid to an underdeveloped country which does not include population control aid is entirely wasted.” By the 70s, Ehrlich had become a national figure, appearing regularly on *The Tonight Show*

and achieving remarkable political successes. The rise of environmental regulation, including the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, owes much to his efforts.

Simon joined the fight as an underdog. His early views on population differed little from Ehrlich's, but in 1970, in a self-described epiphany, Simon embraced population growth as an essential good for society. He began to glorify human ingenuity and declared no limits to the benefits of population growth. In 1983, in direct opposition to the “Global 2000” report commissioned by Jimmy Carter and published in 1980, Simon

argued that “the world in 2000 will be less crowded (though more populated), less polluted, more stable ecologically, and less vulnerable to resource supply disruption than the world we live in now.”

Simon took the fight to Ehrlich, with the bet and a popular book, *The Ultimate Resource* (1981). Simon's views found a champion in Ronald Reagan. By the year of the bet, the left/right divide on the environment had become an entrenched feature of our politics, polarizing views on nuclear versus solar energy, immigration, family planning, and regulation. Dialogue on many of these issues remains a challenge—with the focus more on determining sides than on balancing costs and benefits.

**I**N 1990, Simon received a letter from Ehrlich with a check for \$576.07 covering the gap in metals price. There was no note. The triumph of Simon, who died in 1998, became a rallying point for conservatives. “The Malthusian era can be said to have ended officially,” crowed one conservative of Simon's victory. Ehrlich was denounced by some as a “charlatan.” Yet he would have won the bet in most decades—1980s metal prices were atypical. Ehrlich later claimed to have been “schnookered” into the bet, and he and colleagues attempted to negotiate terms with Simon for a new wager. This was not successful—perhaps a metaphor for the growing depths of the divide.

Human populations are racing toward a projected midcentury peak of nine to 10 billion. Nearly every indicator of human well-being has moved steadily upward since the 1970s. Yet what is the meaning of Simon's victory? Will humanity benefit from warming our planet to levels never before experienced by our species? Is there some good reason to acidify the earth's oceans with carbon emissions? Are lives improved by species extinctions? On the other hand, are environmental limits the best rationale for family planning? Must all economic and technological development inevitably damage the environment?

Sabin's final words illuminate: “Neither biology nor economics can substitute for the deeper ethical question: What kind of world do we desire?” *The Bet* is both a cautionary tale and a call to order. Sound decisions result not from diatribe but from dialogue. Without taking sides, Sabin's narrative exposes how scholarly debates can become societal stalemates.

By framing the future as a stark choice between hard environmental limits and unlimited human possibility, Ehrlich and Simon did us a disservice. Values, trade-offs, and compromises are at the heart of societal solutions. Polemics may excite and instruct, but collegial debate, negotiation, and respect for a diversity of perspectives are prerequisites for solving the perpetual problems of humans and their environment. ■

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*Julian Simon is shown with the five metals that, by dropping in price, won him a bet with Paul Ehrlich.*

decades of debate about the environment. *The Bet* tells the story of how Ehrlich and Simon helped divide public opinion, stalemating action on key issues like climate change.

Proposed by Simon, an economist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the wager aimed to determine, once and for all, whether the demands of a growing population would lead to scarcity. The prices of five metals would serve as a proxy for natural resources. With characteristic confidence, Ehrlich, at Stanford, accepted the deal, described by *The Chronicle* in 1981 as “the scholarly wager of the decade.”