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Coming down to Earth Day

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Today is Earth Day. Every year since 1970, environmental activist groups have used this day to warn of impending environmental catastrophe and advocate new government programs, from federal land acquisitions and pollution control regulations to information mandates and international treaties.

In the words of Earth Day founder Denis Hayes, the question on April 22 is "how to perpetuate life on this planet." This year is likely to be no different. The Sierra Club warns that America is losing farmland at an unprecedented rate and emissions from automobiles and factories threaten to overheat the planet. According to Greenpeace, chlorine chemistry threatens humanity with an epidemic of cancer and reproductive failure. The parade of horrors may be different from year to year, but the underlying message is always the same: The Earth is in trouble.

One of the most prominent alarmists, year-in and year-out, is the Worldwatch Institute, founded in 1974 by former agricultural analyst Lester Brown. Worldwatch is best known for its annual environmental report State of the World, once referred to as the only doomsday book that annually advertises for next year's edition. The first State of the World report, published in 1984, identified "the depletion of resources" as the root of many global problems. In particular, the report identified the depletion of oil reserves as "the most immediate threat to world economic stability." Yet since 1984 proven oil reserves have reached an all-time high and the threat of oil depletion is virtually non-existent, and the same can be said of most other natural resources.

A routine concern of Worldwatch and other modern Malthusians is that global population may outstrip the global food supply. Since the 1960s, Institute President Brown has written of the imminent threat of dwindling food supplies numerous times. For instance, in 1967 Brown claimed that "The trend in grain stocks indicates clearly that 1961 marked a worldwide turning point... food consumption moved ahead of production." Yet world per capita food production increased by 18 percent in the three decades following 1961. In 1974, Mr. Brown was back predicting the world starvation was imminent due to reductions in global food stocks. Unknown to Mr. Brown at the time, agricultural output in lesser developed countries

was on the verge of a rapid increase — nearly 50 percent from 1976 to 1989.

Undaunted, Mr. Brown and Worldwatch made similar predictions of food shortages and global famine into the 1990s. In 1992, Mr. Brown wrote that "there are far more hungry people than ever before," even though per capita calorie intake had been increasing worldwide since 1965. Nonetheless, in the 1994 State of the World report, Mr. Brown charged that "Seldom has the world faced an unfolding emergency whose dimensions are as clear as the growing imbalance between food and people." Similarly, in 1996 Worldwatch again charged that population growth and drops in global grain stocks foretold imminent shortages and increases in food stocks. Yet the simple fact is that food is more abundant and less expensive than at any other point in human history. While world population has doubled since World War II, food production has tripled.

Mr. Brown is not alone, of course. Noted doomsday Paul Ehrlich proclaimed in his 1968 book that "the battle to feed humanity is over." Like Mr. Brown, Mr. Ehrlich predicted global famine and drastic shortages of raw materials. Similarly, the Union of Concerned Scientists predicted the imminent exhaustion of fossil fuels in 1980. And like Mr. Brown, both Mr. Ehrlich and the UCS were wrong.

There are real environmental problems, including the loss of tropical forests, depletion of fisheries, and indoor air pollution, to name a few. These problems are serious, but none threaten the future of humanity. Repeated environmental doom-saying, however, diverts media and public attention away from the real, if somewhat mundane, environmental problems.

"World disaster imminent" will sell more papers — and more activist group memberships — than "Third-World poor lack safe drinking water supplies." Yet millions more people are at risk from waterborne disease than will starve because farmers are not growing enough food. Where famine is a serious concern, it is typically a function of distribution, not production.

Not only do many environmental activists focus on the relatively trivial concerns, there are few environmental problems that Worldwatch, Greenpeace, or the Sierra Club do not believe call for more government. Yet in most instances government is to blame for the problems in the first place. Government subsidies for agricultural, mismanagement of federal lands, and failure to recognize property rights in threatened resources are all too often the cause of environmental degradation.

When one looks around the world, one sees that market institutions — property rights, voluntary exchange, and the rule of law — create the conditions necessary to address environmental concerns. Indeed, as a direct result of these institutions, humans have learned to do more with less — to meet human needs while using fewer, and less scarce, natural resource inputs.

Consider that to feed the current world's population using 1950s agricultural technology would require putting an additional 10 million square miles under plow — acres that are now forest or wildlife habitat; or that a microchip made from a

few grains of sand is capable of retaining and reprocessing all the information contained in a local library; or that proven reserves of oil and gas increased sevenfold since 1950.

All things considered, the planet is doing pretty well. As the late Julian Simon reminded us in his numerous volumes debunking apocalyptic scenarios, the Earth, due to its inhabitants, is tremendously resourceful. Humans are ingenious and inventive. Given the chance, a free people will figure out how to solve their own problems. As Mr. Simon noted, "The main fuel to speed our progress is our stock of knowledge, and the brake is our lack of imagination. The ultimate resource is people."

So, this year on Earth Day, hold your head up high. Rather than worry about the planet's fate, celebrate it. Mark today as Resourceful Earth Day.

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