

A population pessimist turns 90

Paul Ehrlich reflects on life, love, and the science and politics of the human predicament

By **Peter Gleick**

For decades, the pioneering biologist and environmental scientist Paul Ehrlich, now 90, has published prolifically on topics ranging from species dynamics to population and consumption to nuclear war. In addition, he has provided straightforward explanations of science that have reached millions of people, including more than 20 appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, who found Ehrlich to be brilliant and funny, with a sharp wit and acerbic tongue. Those attributes are all on display in Ehrlich's compelling autobiography, *Life: A Journey Through Science and Politics*.

Ehrlich's life has spanned the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, decades of stunning scientific advances, the flowering of civil rights, and a quadrupling of Earth's population. His memoir includes remarkable stories of his research, travels, friends, colleagues, and scientific controversies that still roil today. It is also a love story, highlighting Ehrlich's passion and esteem for both science itself and for his wife of nearly 70 years, Anne Ehrlich, an intellectual and artistic powerhouse in her own right and Ehrlich's long-time coauthor.

Ehrlich's earliest work focused on insect dynamics through field surveys that took him from the Arctic to tropical rainforests. He discovered new species of butterflies, studied tropical fishes and birds, and redefined the very concept of species, helping to create the field of population biology by integrating zoology, botany, and entomology with population dynamics, genetics, behavior, and evolution.

But the arc of Ehrlich's life has also included watching his beloved butterflies disappear as human populations have exploded, natural lands have been paved over, and climate change, pesticide use, and habitat destruction have expanded. This produced in him "a deep sadness—and a drive to reverse the ongoing destruction of the living world before it's too late" and fueled his efforts to raise the alarm about the risk of "a collapse of civilization as the existential threats—those endanger-

ing our very existence" worsen.

Ehrlich's reminiscences about students and colleagues are remarkably funny, insightful, loyal, and generous. But he does not suffer fools gladly, and his book includes pointed barbs at science deniers and "destructive segments of the American population" who reinforce the pathology of unlimited growth, kowtow to the fossil fuel industry and other corporate interests ("psychopathic engines of social and envi-



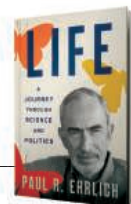
Paul Ehrlich and an assistant catch checkerspot butterflies in California's Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve in 1960.

ronmental destruction"), and fail to act on the world's problems.

In 1968, the Ehrlichs wrote *The Population Bomb*, which shined a spotlight on the famine, social collapse, and environmental destruction that they believed would come to pass if population growth and other environmental threats continued to expand exponentially. It garnered massive public attention but was also attacked by free-market economists who assumed infinite growth is always good, optimists who believed technology can overcome adverse consequences of expanding popula-

Life: A Journey Through Science and Politics

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tions, and some who criticized the book for failing to adequately acknowledge the role of consumption, wealth inequality, and racism in the population debate.

In *Life*, Ehrlich decries how his concerns about population growth were co-opted by racists who argued that the cure was to stop certain populations (almost always nonwhite) from reproducing and by those who turned a blind eye to consumption by the rich. Indeed, throughout the book, he reflects on the roles racism and sexism have played in his own experiences, including his efforts to organize sit-ins to desegregate restaurants as a graduate student in Kansas and to push back against the racist claims of eugenicist William Shockley, with whom he overlapped at Stanford University.

Modern understanding of the issues of population, inequality, consumption, and technology is far more nuanced than when *The Population Bomb* was first published. Ehrlich himself, together with Anne and other collaborators, helped define the intertwined role these factors play, but as he puts it, bringing down population numbers remains necessary to realizing "justice and equity and creating a world with any chance of sustainability."

Ehrlich still fears that we are headed for political and social unrest or even environmental collapse, but despite his deep pessimism, he acknowledges that we are making progress. Birth rates have dropped because of improved education, availability of contraceptives, information about family planning, and decreasing poverty. Action on climate change is accelerating. Concern for the environment is growing. If these trends continue, he writes, "the prospects for humanity would brighten considerably."

Life is also Ehrlich's reflection on the inevitability of his own death. He laments declining health and physical abilities and watching longtime friends and colleagues pass away, although "the thought of living forever has no appeal and being dead itself holds no fears." His greatest regret, he says, is not knowing the ultimate fate of humanity. Whatever our eventual fate, we are likely to be better off because of Ehrlich's remarkable contributions. ■

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