Junk Science Week: Norman Myers’ sinking ark

[Peter Foster](http://opinion.financialpost.com/author/peterfosternp/" \o "View all posts by Peter Foster)  Jun 14, 2011 – 9:57 PM ET | **Last Updated: Jun 14, 2011 10:26 PM ET**

[](http://financialpostopinion.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/0-foster2.jpg)***Oxford environmentalist wildly ­predicted 50 million climate refugees***

**By Peter Foster**

Alarmist projections fall apart as they fail to materialize. Junk theories tend eventually to be junked. A case of the former is the failure last year of 50 million “climate refugees” to appear on schedule. An example of the latter is a recent study that suggests that forecasts of species loss have been significantly exaggerated.

What links these two cases is the man who both made the 50 million projection and was also perhaps more than any other person responsible for hyping the extinction scare, Oxford environmentalist Norman Myers. Intriguingly, the more Prof. Myers is proved wrong, the more he goes on the attack, while his backers castigate critics rhetorically for just not “caring” about refugees and extinction.

Prof. Myers’ projections of 50 million climate refugees by 2010 was enthusiastically pushed by the United Nations Environment Program, UNEP, in a website map put up in 2005. When blogger Gavin Atkins pointed out earlier this year that the areas that were meant to witness a refugee exodus had in fact shown healthy population growth, UNEP removed the map. The problem was that UNEP had funded Prof. Myers’ research, which had been widely regurgitated by other UN agencies and governments, and cited in the alarmist U.K. Stern review.

Stephen Castles of the International Migration Institute at Oxford declared that Prof. Myers’ methodology was crude and his projections “absolute nonsense.” When Prof. Myers was interviewed by the BBC, instead of defending his methodology, he proceeded to point out how many countries and refugee camps he had visited — as if science were based on Air Miles. He suggested that the lack of evidence was analogous to the fact that “You can’t prove that smoking causes cancer.” He told New Scientist: “It may be very difficult to demonstrate that there are 50 million climate refugees, but it is even harder to demonstrate that there are not.”

This is not the first time that Prof. Myers has been linked to wild exaggerations in the cause of promoting “an entirely new mode of Earthling existence.” In his 1979 book, The Sinking Ark, while acknowledging that the current recorded rate of species loss was one a year, he “supposed” that one million species might be lost by the end of the 20th century, i.e. 40,000 a year. The millennium has come and gone, but there is no evidence that even a score of species have disappeared, let alone a million.

The fact that Prof. Myers’ species loss claim was unscientific was pointed out by economist Julian Simon 20 years ago — when extinction was being played up to coincide with the 1992 UN Rio conference. Ten years later, Bjorn Lomborg — who was prompted to environmental research by what he believed was Professor Simon’s excessive optimism — agreed in The Skeptical Environmentalist that species loss had been enormously exaggerated (and that Prof. Simon had been right to be optimistic).

Mr. Lomborg pointed out that insofar as species-loss projections had a scientific basis, it was in correlation with loss of habitat. However, he noted that the models did not fit with real world experience. The forest of the Eastern United States had been reduced to just 1%-2% of its previous area, but this had resulted in the loss of one forest bird. The Puerto Rican rain forest had been cut by 99%, but just seven of 60 bird species had become extinct. Almost 90% of the Atlantic rain forest had been cleared in the 19th century, but the Brazilian Society of Zoology could not find a single extinct species.

Confirmation that projections of loss based on the “species-area relationship” are exaggerated came recently from a study in the journal Nature by biologists Stephen Hubbell and Fangliang He. They suggested that assumptions of species loss had been exaggerated by as much as 160%. In fact, while this appears to expose yet another example of going with the alarmism and not checking the science, it still leaves the alarmism largely in place. Indeed, Prof. Hubbell claims that the world still faces an “extinction crisis” and could lose 20%-50% of species over the next 100 years, even though he admits that those projections might be based on the science he has refuted, and also depend on catastrophic climate projections coming to pass. He conspicuously does not criticize Norman Myers.

Stephen Castles, the Oxford don who said that Prof. Myers’ refugee projections were “absolute nonsense,” nevertheless also claimed that scaring people in order to take action on climate change was “a very laudable motive.” Oli Brown of UNEP suggested that Norman Myers deserved praise for sticking his “head above the parapet.” The metaphor is telling; it caters to environmentalists’ self-image of being under siege by wicked forces that would fecklessly destroy the world. Such a Manichean perspective tends not to make for good science.

As the piece opposite suggests, a sensible approach to species loss is “conservation triage,” assessing specific risks objectively then prioritizing action, rather than proposing grand and impractical schemes for managing global climate, or changing human nature.

Perhaps the biggest question is this: Given the non-appearance of those 50 million refugees, why has nobody made a bigger deal of the non-extinct million species? One projection seems certain: As the ark of his dubious science sinks below the non-rising waters of reality, you won’t receive any apologies from Norman Myers.

Posted in: [FP Comment](http://opinion.financialpost.com/category/fp-comment/)  Tags: [Bjorn Lomborg](http://opinion.financialpost.com/tag/bjorn-lomborg/), [endangered species](http://opinion.financialpost.com/tag/endangered-species/), [extinctions](http://opinion.financialpost.com/tag/extinctions/), [Julian Simon](http://opinion.financialpost.com/tag/julian-simon/), [junk science week 2011](http://opinion.financialpost.com/tag/junk-science-week-2011/), [Norman Myers](http://opinion.financialpost.com/tag/norman-myers/), [Peter Foster](http://opinion.financialpost.com/tag/peter-foster/)