Dear Editor: re The planet will shake us off like fleas

Dan Banov did not say that there were no problems on earth. He stated that things were getting better in every way, and all the evidence from long term trends affirms his statement.

The problems that do exist do not indicate a world in decline and certainly not “a planet spiralling toward critical mass”.

Alarmists distort the actual state of the world by focusing too often on short term reversals, downturns and aberrations to long term trends.

Over the past few years I had an online discussion with a former professor of mine, Bill Rees. Bill is Canada’s chief alarmist. He is the originator of the Ecological Footprint model and his alarmist themes are promoted regularly by other alarmists such as David Suzuki.

Bill Rees’ central argument is that humanity consumes too much and as a result we are exhausting resources and destroying nature. It is all going to come crashing down in some soon-to-arrive environmental apocalypse. To support his argument for calamitous decline Bill uses a set of indicators that he claims prove his argument. Forests are disappearing, agricultural land is in serious decline, species are becoming extinct at huge rates, fisheries are being exhausted, and so on.

I took a close look at Bill’s main indicators, going to the best sources of data available (e.g. FAO- Food and Agricultural Organization- for forestry, fisheries and agricultural stats, and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, among others, for species data). A note of caution- though some of these sources are recognized as leading data sources, they are often staffed with alarmists who ignore their own hard data to engage in unwarranted alarmism.

And what does the best evidence say about these various natural resources? Forest cover in the 1940s was about 4.0 billion hectares with a world population of approximately 2.4 billion people. With near 7 billion today how much forest is left? About 4.0-4.3 billion hectares depending on which report you refer to. Where is the forest holocaust claimed by alarmists?

World fisheries- are they going to be fully exhausted by 2048 as alarmists claim? No. Not at all. The two leading researchers (one a former leading alarmist) have concluded that some 75% of ocean species are fine while 25% are stressed but these species recover well when pressure is alleviated. Only a few are in real danger. And the growing aquaculture industry is replacing ocean catch as a source of food fish.

Species loss- continues at historical rates of about 1.5 species per year (while there is a lot of exaggerated speculation, there is no sound evidence of higher rates). And this rate of loss is at its lowest level over the past four centuries. The 1992 IUCN report noted that there was no evidence at all of any serious species extinction. A number of wrong assumptions had been employed by alarmists leading to the wildly exaggerated claims of species loss (lack of recognition of species ability to adapt to secondary habitat, and wrongly assuming species loss was strictly related to forest loss).

So also with agricultural land- no evidence of any overall serious decline in this resource. Problem areas of erosion, yes. But even this situation was noted to have been exaggerated. And for good measure I invited the leading agricultural scientist heading the new world agricultural land degradation study into our discussion with Bill Rees. He agreed the degradation (erosion) status had been exaggerated. And what about the 3.5 billion hectares of available rain-fed land that we don’t even use (we only use some 1.5 billion hectares of the total 5.0 billion available for food production, other estimates of available unused land are even higher). And with ongoing advances in crop productivity we in the Western world are returning significant areas of land back to nature. We can grow more on less land.

And the world poverty situation, according to World Back reports, has been undergoing a stunning decline. Even formerly basket cases in Africa are now surging forward. Nobel laureate economists at the recent Davos conference stated that by the end of this century poverty will have been conquered and wealth spread to all of the world’s population. This is a continuation of a long term trend. Absolute poverty declined from about 35% of the world population some 50 years ago to less than 17% today. China alone has lifted some 300 million people out of poverty over the past 30 years.

My challenge to Bill Rees was that if the indicators you employ do not support your argument then shouldn’t you revisit your central argument and abandon it? If the evidence does not show that humanity is consuming too much and destroying nature, then isn’t it time to abandon your alarmism over the state of the world? But Bill is committed to his ideology and mythology. Two legs bad, four legs good (he wants a wilderness world with a much lower human population living in primitive conditions).

And that I find most disturbing in environmental alarmism- its anti-human stance. Humanity as virus, AIDs, cancer, a curse on the earth. No, we are as natural as anything else on the planet. And what we do is as natural as termites building nests, or bees building hives.

I would encourage anyone concerned about the state of the world to read the modern tradition of progress studies by people like Julian Simon (Ultimate Resource, Its Getting Better All The Time), Greg Easterbrook (A Moment On the Earth), Indur Goklany (The Improving State of the World), Bjorn Lomberg (The Sceptical Environmentalist), and Matt Ridley (The Rational Optimist). These people look at the long term trends which all show improvement. Things are getting better all the time. And they do not deny that problem areas remain. But carefully watch the tendency to focus on short term reversals, setbacks, and downturns which are often aberrations to long term trends that overall are improving. Remember Professor Pimental’s mistake (see Sceptical Environmentalist) of looking only at a five year reversal of increase in tuberculosis and ignoring the much longer trend of decline in this disease. The long term trends give us a correct view of the true state of the planet.

And for an even more encompassing background set of trends that show endless improvement, note the three great emergences of the cosmos, life, and human civilization. All three have shown endless progress toward something better, something more developed, more complex and more advanced.

Most helpful in the thoroughly documented research of the modern progress scholars noted above is that human economic development and growth, though often demonized by alarmists, is the very thing that saves the world. Alarmist alternatives have consistently proven destructive to the poor and to nature (e.g. the biofuels fiasco abandoned now by even Al Gore).

So Dan Banov was right on the money. The world is becoming a better place for all life. The future will be even better. Enough of this irresponsible traumatizing of children with unwarranted alarmism about the state of our planet. Alarmist apocalyptic scenarios have a one hundred percent failure rate. What our children face is a bright future with unlimited opportunities on a planet that gets better all the time. As Easterbrook said, nature has long awaited for what humanity brings- consciousness of something better and a concern to create that better world.

Wendell Krossa