

The New York Times

Economix

Explaining the Science of Everyday Life

JULY 26, 2010, 1:35 PM

Armageddon Wars: Overpopulation Vs. Global Warming

By [DAVID LEONHARDT](#)

Branding Greenland Group

My colleague Ross Douthat has a nice [column](#) today that reminded me of the famous 1980 bet between [Paul Ehrlich](#) and [Julian Simon](#).

Mr. Ehrlich, an ecologist, expected population growth and economic growth to set off a mad scramble for natural resources. Mr. Simon, an economist, expected human ingenuity to outpace resource destruction.

They bet \$1,000 on the price of five metals, 10 years in the future — 1990. Mr. Ehrlich thought the price would be high, because demand for the metals would increase much faster than supply. Mr. Simon won the bet handily. (If you want the fuller story, [this 1990 Times Magazine article](#) by John Tierney is terrific.)

Mr. Douthat mentions Mr. Ehrlich in his column today, to explain why Republicans have blocked action on global warming:

The Seventies were a great decade for apocalyptic enthusiasms, and none was more potent than the fear that human population growth had outstripped the earth's carrying capacity. According to a chorus of credentialed alarmists [including Paul Ehrlich], the world was entering an age of sweeping famines, crippling energy shortages, and looming civilizational collapse.

It was not lost on conservatives that this analysis led inexorably to left-wing policy prescriptions — a government-run energy sector at home, and population control for the teeming masses overseas.

The analogy to global warming is obvious. Just as ingenuity came to the rescue in the past, allowing people to use resources more efficiently than they ever had before, it could do so again — providing us with ways to emit far less carbon for every dollar of gross domestic product.

And I — like many others, I imagine — would be thrilled if that were what the future held. But I think there are two big reasons to doubt that we're on another Ehrlich-Simon path when it comes to global warming.

The first is basic economics. When the problem is resource scarcity, companies and individuals have a powerful incentive to become more efficient. It keeps their costs down. Mr. Simon understood this, and it's the fundamental reason he won the bet.

But global warming is different. The fact that carbon emissions are warming the planet doesn't make it more expensive to produce those emissions. So companies do not have an

ever-increasing incentive to emit less — the way they would if the problem were, say, a lack of oil. Global warming doesn't solve itself the way that resource scarcity does.

The second reason is the accumulation of evidence. Almost as soon as Mr. Ehrlich and Mr. Simon made their bet in 1980, Mr. Simon's prediction started looking good. In 1981, as Mr. Tierney wrote, "grain prices promptly fell and reached historic lows during the 1980s, continuing a long-term decline." (Mr. Tierney noted that an ally of Mr. Ehrlich ignored this trend at the time and focused instead on "blips in the graph.")

In recent years, though, anyone who had bet against global warming would look as wrong as Mr. Ehrlich did. The Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets are shrinking [at an accelerating rate](#). Scientists have recently revised upwards their predictions of sea-level rises. The planet's 10 hottest years on record, according to NASA, are: 2005, 2007, 2009, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2004, 2001 and 2008. This year is on pace to displace 2005 as No. 1.

The ultimate goal of climate legislation — be it the bill that the House passed last year or the bill that died in the Senate last week — is to align the incentives better, so human ingenuity can be harnessed to fight global warming. The bills would increase the cost of emitting carbon, thereby giving companies reason to emit less. Absent that, the best bet seems to be that emissions will keep rising and the planet will keep getting hotter.