

When environmentalism becomes a crime against humanity

By Ivo Vetger, 18 March 2015

These are strong words, but they're no exaggeration. By whipping up groundless fears about genetically engineered foods and misinforming governments in developing countries, Greenpeace and other anti-GMO lobby groups are condemning millions of people to easily preventable malnutrition and death.

Patrick Moore, a founder and former member of Greenpeace, has accused the environmental group of crimes against humanity over its opposition to Golden Rice, a genetically-modified variety that fortifies rice with vitamin A.

Denying a healthy diet to millions of poor children

"They [Greenpeace] are wealthy Westerners flying in jets around the world telling other people to stop using fossil fuels," he writes in an email to me. "They are well fed and they would deny a healthy diet to millions of poor children. They are guilty of a crime against humanity as defined by the International Criminal Court as they are 'knowingly contributing to the suffering and death of civilian populations'."

Moore left the organisation in 1986 because he felt it had largely achieved its purpose of raising environmental awareness, and it was starting to over-reach in its campaigns. He has since often spoken up about what he sees as the group's growing environmental extremism. (A tip of the hat goes to Paul Evans, of the Galileo Movement in Australia, for putting me in touch with Moore.)

"Greenpeace has lost the 'peace' in its name..."

"It is a testament to Greenpeace's heartlessness that they could turn a blind eye to the millions of poor parents who watch helplessly as their children go blind and die before their eyes," Moore says. "Greenpeace has lost the 'peace' in its name and is now only concerned with the ill-defined 'green' which apparently excludes the welfare of children."

Golden Rice was invented in 1999 by Ingo Potrykus, a professor emeritus of plant sciences at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, and Peter Beyer, a professor of cell biology at the University of Freiburg, in Germany. The two applied gene technology to fortify rice with beta-carotene, which is a precursor to vitamin A and turns the rice a characteristic yellow.

Since 2005, it has been available with the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as part of its 'Grand Challenges in Global Health' project, which funds innovative solutions in improving health outcomes among the world's poorest people.

The Cartagena Protocol for the obstruction of science

Unfortunately, commercial availability is only the first step in a drawn-out bureaucratic process, and no amount of philanthropic or corporate funding can speed this up. Under the Cartagena Protocol for the obstruction of science, Golden Rice is subject to piles of paperwork before it can legally be cultivated as food. No country has yet approved it, and environmental

activists like Greenpeace and GM Watch are pulling out all the stops to prevent them from doing so.

“Vitamin A deficiency is one of the most important causes of preventable childhood blindness,” reports the World Health Organisation (WHO), “and is a major contributor to morbidity and mortality from infections, especially in children and pregnant women, affecting the poorest segments of populations, particularly those in low and middle income countries.”

Vitamin A is critical

Vitamin A is also critical during and after pregnancy, helps to reduce the risk of mother-to-child HIV transmission and can make children more resistant to measles, diarrheal diseases and malaria. Malnutrition is a factor in more than half of all child deaths after the first month of life.

Measures to combat vitamin A deficiency are diverse, and include encouraging breastfeeding, promoting small-scale vegetable gardens, one-time high-dose supplementation and food fortification. The WHO and the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef) claim to have averted 1.25 million deaths since 1998 with their interventions. However, this pales by comparison to the yearly 1.3 million to 2.5 million deaths among children of pre-school age that could be prevented with adequate vitamin A intake in the poor countries most at risk.

20 million children have needlessly died

These numbers imply that since the availability of Golden Rice in 2005, some 20 million children have needlessly died of causes attributable to vitamin A deficiency.

“Golden Rice has the potential to eliminate [these deaths] entirely if it is available,” says Moore. “If Golden Rice was the cure for a disease like malaria, cancer, or Ebola it would have been approved 10 years ago,” he says. “It is only because it was produced with genetic science, and that there are anti-human groups like Greenpeace, that Golden Rice is not available to the children.”

Moore leads a campaign group, Allow Golden Rice Now, which recently toured the Philippines, Bangladesh and India. “We need to change the view of the general public, many of whom have been influenced by the lies they have been told by Greenpeace and others,” he told me.

Vague predictions of catastrophe and doom

They ran into stiff opposition. Activists and lobby groups penned a press release denouncing the campaign, filled with strong assertions and vague predictions of catastrophe and doom.

Here’s a sample: “Unpredictable toxic by-products can also be created and over-expression can also increase the potential toxicity of Vitamin A in the form of transgenically expressed retinoic acid and can also exacerbate unintended metabolic effects as well as instability.”

Meaningless jargon meant to trick you

This reads like a Star Trek script: the words sound plausible to the untrained ear, but they are just meaningless jargon meant to trick you into believing fiction.

The reason for the fuzzy rhetoric is that there is no evidence whatsoever of “unintended metabolic effects” or “toxic by-products”, predictable or otherwise. The scary jargon is designed to manipulate people who know no better. Its aims are to scare bureaucrats into prohibiting modern agricultural biotechnology, applied science that could dramatically improve people’s lives.

Moore cites “the case in the Philippines where a judge ruled against [pest-resistant] brinjal on the grounds it was not right to take the food from one ‘eater’ (the worm that attacks brinjal) and give it to another eater (humans).”

In the Philippines, supposedly grass-roots acts of vandalism against Golden Rice field trial sites turned out to have been orchestrated by local environmental groups linked to Greenpeace. Elsewhere, Greenpeace has also proudly bragged about the destruction of biotech test crops, although courts have taken a dim view of their criminal actions.

Does it not occur to these groups that they look disingenuous if they destroy field tests and then tell the public that there has not been enough field testing?

The green prejudice against capitalism

Opponents also raise the spectre, terrifying to the left, of “control of food and agriculture by agrobiotech corporations”. By making it sound like an evil, faceless conspiracy, activists gloss over the fact that such companies have long been the only bulwark standing between growing populations and famine. The green prejudice against capitalism also ignores that some of the biggest biotech companies generously donate genetic farming technology to the developing world.

The conspiracist notion of corporations that are determined to “control” the world’s food supply is ironic given that governments – with the European Union in the lead – have been threatening developing countries with import bans if they dare allow farmers to plant biotech crops.

The insinuation is doubly dishonest

The insinuation is doubly dishonest, because there is no corporate involvement in Golden Rice at all. The International Rice Research Institute, a non-profit group founded in the Philippines in 1960, developed the crop, long before any of these environmental activist groups existed. Golden Rice seeds will be distributed free to farmers, and they will be able to replant their own seed in subsequent seasons.

For anti-GMO activists like Greenpeace, the problem with accepting Golden Rice is this. If they oppose it, they condemn millions of children to blindness and even death. If they support it, the exception will be the thin end of a wedge that splits open their closed-minded opposition to genetic engineering in food. This would look like an embarrassing retreat. Saving face before Western donors and media obviously trumps the lives of a few million poor children in third world countries.

India named Greenpeace as a “threat to national security”

Things may be starting to change, however. A report into the activities of foreign-funded NGOs in India last year named Greenpeace as a “threat to national security”.

“It appears that the new government in India is favorable towards the development of genetically modified crops, including Golden Rice,” says Moore. “I believe we are on the verge, in India, Bangladesh, and other South Asian countries, [towards acceptance of Golden Rice].”

Moore is far from the only outspoken critic of environmental groups and the governments that support them. Speaking recently in Pretoria, former UK environment secretary Owen Paterson struck a similar tone. At an event hosted by the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), a non-profit group that helps to share the benefits of biotechnology with resource-poor farmers in the developing world, he accused the European Union and Greenpeace of “condemning millions of people in developing countries to economic dependency on aid, starvation and death by their refusal to accept the science behind genetically modified crops and other life-saving advances in plant sciences”.

An organised, fanatical antagonism to progress and science

In his impassioned defence of agricultural biotechnology, Paterson said, “Not since the original Luddites smashed cotton mill machinery in early 19th century England, have we seen such an organised, fanatical antagonism to progress and science.”

He outlined the many successful projects, in Africa and around the world, and made short work of several anti-GMO myths. These include the notion that farmers are stupid and would choose to plant crops that makes them economically worse off, that returning to small-scale, traditional farming methods would benefit the environment, that biotech crops are unsafe to eat, and that they do not confer any consumer benefits. In each case, he cites research to demonstrate that the exact opposite is true.

His entire speech is worth a read. One notable example of the sort of dishonest propaganda he highlights concerns the notorious claim by Greenpeace, that farmers in India have been committing suicide after beginning to plant genetically modified crops. It has been uncritically repeated in the popular press as “the GM genocide”. Paterson cites a peer-reviewed study that shows the exact opposite is true. “Professor Ian Plewis from the University of Manchester clarifies that farmer suicide rates in India are similar to the best estimates of the rates in Scotland and France, around 30 per 100,000 farmers. While these rates are still tragic, they existed at the same level prior to the introduction of GM cotton to India. He states, ‘In fact, the available data does not support the view that farmer suicides have increased following the introduction of Bt cotton. Taking all states together, there is evidence to support the hypothesis that the reverse is true’.”

These lies actively harm or kill millions of people

This kind of disinformation about biotechnology, spread by anti-GMO groups, is not just a fashionable quirk of elitist snobs, which only matters to people who insist on peasant-grown organic Roma tomatoes. These lies actively harm or kill millions of people in the developing world. Anyone who supports these groups is complicit.

And they call this “progressive”

By opposing the scientific means by which these deaths can be avoided, environmental extremists are imposing a kind of medieval iniquity upon the world, in which witches are burnt for interfering with nature and the deaths of children must be accepted as the will of an angered god. And they call this “progressive”.