

## **The Green Scare Problem**

By Matt Ridley, The Wall Street Journal, 14 August 2015

Raising constant alarms—about fracking, pesticides, GMO food—in the name of safety is a dangerous game.

‘We’ve heard these same stale arguments before,’ said President Obama in his speech on climate change last week, referring to those who worry that the Environmental Protection Agency’s carbon-reduction plan may do more harm than good. The trouble is, we’ve heard his stale argument before, too: that we’re doomed if we don’t do what the environmental pressure groups tell us, and saved if we do. And it has frequently turned out to be really bad advice.

### **Making dire predictions for a living**

Making dire predictions is what environmental groups do for a living, and it’s a competitive market, so they exaggerate. Virtually every environmental threat of the past few decades has been greatly exaggerated at some point. Pesticides were not causing a cancer epidemic, as Rachel Carson claimed in her 1962 book “Silent Spring”; acid rain was not devastating German forests, as the Green Party in that country said in the 1980s; the ozone hole was not making rabbits and salmon blind, as Al Gore warned in the 1990s. Yet taking precautionary action against pesticides, acid rain and ozone thinning proved manageable, so maybe not much harm was done.

Climate change is different. President Obama’s plan to cut U.S. carbon-dioxide emissions from electricity plants by 32% (from 2005 levels) by 2030 would cut global emissions by about 2%. By that time, according to Energy Information Administration data analyzed by Heritage Foundation statistician Kevin Dayaratna, the carbon plan could cost the U.S. up to \$1 trillion in lost GDP. The measures needed to decarbonize world energy are going to be vastly more expensive. So we had better be sure that we are not exaggerating the problem.

### **The remedies sometimes prove worse than the disease**

But it isn’t just that environmental threats have a habit of turning out less bad than feared; it’s that the remedies sometimes prove worse than the disease.

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are a case in point. After 20 years and billions of meals, there is still no evidence that they harm human health, and ample evidence of their environmental and humanitarian benefits. Vitamin-enhanced GM “golden rice” has been ready to save lives for years, but opposed at every step by Greenpeace. Bangladeshi eggplant growers spray their crops with insecticides up to 140 times in a season, risking their own health, because the insect-resistant GMO version of the plant is fiercely opposed by environmentalists. Opposition to GMOs has certainly cost lives.

Besides, what did GMOs replace? Before transgenic crop improvement was invented, the main way to breed new varieties was “mutation breeding”: to scramble a plant’s DNA randomly, using gamma rays or chemical mutagens, in the hope that some of the monsters thus produced would have better yields or novel characteristics. Golden Promise barley, for example, a favorite of organic brewers, was produced this way. This method still faces no special regulation, whereas precise transfer of single well known genes, which could not possibly be less safe, does.

### **Again, green precaution increases risks**

Environmentalists are currently opposing neonicotinoid pesticides on the grounds that they may hurt bee populations, even though the European Union notes that honeybee numbers have been rising in the 20 years since they were introduced. The effect in Europe has been to cause farmers to return to much more harmful pyrethroid insecticides, which are sprayed on crops instead of used as seed dressing, hitting innocent bystander insects. And if Europeans had been allowed to grow GMOs, then less pesticide would be necessary. Again, green precaution increases risks.

Nuclear power has been energetically opposed by the environmental lobby for decades, on the grounds of danger. Yet nuclear power causes fewer deaths per unit of energy generated than even wind and solar power. Compared with fossil fuels, nuclear power has prevented 1.84 million more deaths than it caused, according to a study by two NASA researchers. Opposition to nuclear power has cost lives.

### **Based almost entirely on myths and lies**

Likewise widespread opposition to fracking for shale gas, is based almost entirely on myths and lies, as Reason magazine's science correspondent, Ronald Bailey, has reported. This opposition has substantially delayed the growth of onshore gas production in Europe and in parts of the U.S. That has meant more reliance on offshore gas, Russian gas, and coal—all of which have greater safety issues and environmental risks. Opposition to fracking has hurt the environment.

In short, the environmental movement has repeatedly denied people access to safer technologies and forced them to rely on dirtier, riskier or more harmful ones. It is adept at exploiting people's suspicion of anything new.

Many exaggerated early claims about the dangers of climate change have now been debunked. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has explicitly abandoned previous claims that malaria will likely get worse, that the Gulf Stream will stop flowing, the Greenland or West Antarctic Ice sheet will disintegrate, a sudden methane release from the Arctic is likely, the monsoon will collapse or long-term droughts will become more likely.

### **The environmental impact of wind power is worse than expected**

Meanwhile, on the other side of the ledger, in contrast to our experience with acid rain and the ozone layer, the financial, humanitarian and environmental price of decarbonizing the energy supply is proving much steeper than expected. Despite falling costs of solar panels, the system cost of solar power, including land, transmission, maintenance and night-time backup, remains high. The environmental impact of wind power—deforestation, killing of birds of prey, mining of rare earth metals—is worse than expected. According to the BP Statistical Review of World Energy, these two sources of power provided, between them, just 1.35% of world energy in 2014, cutting emissions by even less than that.

### **The argument is positively obscene**

Indoor air pollution, caused mainly by cooking over wood fires indoors, is the world's biggest cause of environmental death. It kills an estimated four million people every year, as noted by the nonprofit science news website, SciDev.Net. Getting fossil-fueled electricity and gas to

them is the cheapest and quickest way to save their lives. To argue that the increasingly small risk of dangerous climate change many decades hence is something they should be more worried about is positively obscene.

*Mr. Ridley is the author of “The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves” (HarperCollins, 2010) and a member of the British House of Lords.*