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Sir David Attenborough is wrong about capitalism and profit

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“I think that the standard of living of the western cultures... civilised countries... is going to have to take pause,” Sir David Attenborough said on a BBC podcast last week. “The excesses that the capitalist system has brought us have got to be curbed somehow.”

The beloved documentary host and naturalist increasingly echoes the radical green movement, with him even once describing human beings as a “plague on the Earth.”

Attenborough has frequently railed against “overpopulation”. Now it’s capitalism and the profit motive in his sights.

The common theme of his pronouncements is that human beings, through our desire for betterment and selfish fertility and consumption decisions, blight the planet and exhaust its resources.

Such claims about capitalism are weirdly ahistorical for someone so versed in environmental history. For one, holding up the profit motive as a cause of environmental degradation conveniently ignores that communist states that abolished profits were themselves hugely environmentally destructive.

Countries behind the Iron Curtain suffered awful air and water pollution. The Aral Sea was largely destroyed. Acid rain corroded buildings and statues in Krakow. The results of all these tragedies were dreadful for both natural environments and human health.

Yes, the Soviet Union was then striving for heavy industry, not conservation. But central planning has led to other environmental and human disasters too, not least recent famines.

This relative weakness against capitalist countries is no surprise: embedded within the profit motive Attenborough bemoans are the incentives to economise on inputs and divert resources to what people actually value.

Here’s what we know about that: there can be short-term trade-offs between human activity and our natural world (see below how air pollution fell during the nationwide lockdown).

But over time, capitalism brings more wealth, and more wealth allows us to better protect the environment.

As we have attained higher and higher living standards, we have had fewer children, demanded more in the way of human services than manufactured goods, and become more environmentally conscious. With economic growth, then, comes both the resources and the innovation to better achieve our increasingly green social goals.

To say that we should “pause” growth in living standards in the advanced world, as if the economy is some resource-eating machine that can be switched off, is therefore not only immoral to poor populations in rich countries, but fundamentally misunderstands what economic growth actually is.

Growth isn't just about accumulating stuff that requires pillaging the earth. It's about productivity growth — getting more from less. To pause growth, you'd have to pause ideas that achieve this desirable objective too.

In fact, there's little evidence capitalism is significantly depleting the planet of its treasure. If Attenborough, Prince Charles and others were correct in that assertion, we would resource prices skyrocketing.

But looking at a basket of 50 global commodities between 1980 and 2017, my colleague Marian Tupy and his co-author Gale Pooley found real prices fell by an average of 36 percent, at a time when the global population rose 70 percent and global GDP 190 percent.

It turns out that under a capitalist system we put to use our most productive resource (our brains) to economise, excavate, replenish, or extend use of scarce resources in pursuit of profits, in turn leaving them relatively abundant.

While it's certainly true that through much of the 19th and 20th centuries growth went hand-in-hand with greater use of the earth's raw materials, Andrew McAfee's brilliant book, *More From Less*, has documented how recent decades have seen rich countries “dematerialising.”

That is, using less of the earth's raw materials, not just relative to population, but in absolute terms too (even after controlling for imports).

Don't believe him? Look at trends in the weight of fizzy drink cans, or the amount of steel used in cars, or think about all the things the smartphone in your pocket has replaced. Gone are the days of notepads, calendars, clocks, photo albums, stock trackers, bank visits, digital cameras and video cameras, gaming devices, music devices, trips to travel agents, GPS trackers, phone books, alarm clocks, stop watches, compasses, calculators, radios, newspapers, and more.

This phone example is representative of how GDP is decoupling from raw material use generally. Even on energy, we are seeing more GDP growth per unit of CO2 globally.

“Economic growth is not the enemy of the environment,” McAfee concludes. He agrees that profit-seeking competition is one of the killer features of our world that encourages the slimming, optimising, swapping, recycling and replacing of inputs that actually helps reduce pressure on the environment.

Of course, we shouldn’t be Panglossian and talk as if capitalism alleviates all environmental problems caused by humanity. Clearly there are still acute challenges, including littered oceans, carbon emissions, species facing extinction, and polluted air in many metropolises - even if coal is now being phased out by renewables.

Some of these are collective action problems that do require either tweaking incentives or else forging international agreements on property rights or regulations.

Yet Attenborough should not fall for the “nirvana fallacy” — comparing an envisaged unspoiled world to the naturally imperfect one in which we live. The longing for a better life, including comfort and consumption, is inherent to humanity. What matters is how these energies are harnessed.

Economic systems are institutional frameworks that shape and incentivise our desires. On this, the growing body of evidence is clear.

Capitalism has embedded within it incentives to be conscious of not overusing the earth’s resources. It brings a global enrichment that facilitates a greater willingness to protect the environment. Competitive capitalism is not the primary cause of planetary stress, but part of the solution to the challenges Attenborough cares about.

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