



## Francis Cries Wolf on Environmental Catastrophe

**Have Faith, Human Ingenuity Will Prevail**

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By now it's old news: Pope Francis came to the United States last week; he visited Washington, New York, and Philadelphia; gave speeches before the United Nations and the US Congress; and met with President Barack Obama, among others.

Cities were partially shut down for the various parades and events. The Catholic leader even graced this writer's neighborhood of Edgewood in central Washington, complete with closed streets and police on every corner. But far more important than my failed errand-running was the substance of the comments that Francis made during his handful of speeches.

Most notable was the recurring appeal to "do something" about the environment. Francis made clear that he feels that the United States is not doing enough to combat climate change. Beyond that, he thinks that rampant consumerism is driving far too much environmental damage.

He feels there is a universal "right to the environment," as noted in his speech before the United Nations. Together, the pope's recent comments portray a distinctly pessimistic feeling about the environment.

It's almost as if he thinks some kind of environmental apocalypse is in store for humanity. Sound familiar?

Francis's twin attacks on consumerism and environmental despoilment could be seen as a simple statement against materialism and the production process that allows it to exist. That makes sense for a person charged with motivating people to elevate religion over worldly desires. But beyond a moral attack on materialism, the positions he takes exude an aura of politicized pessimism.

And that pessimism seems unwarranted. Fear that capitalism is ripping society to shreds makes little sense after watching the century-long decline of command-and-control socialism and the liberalization of markets once dominated by autocrats and elites. While many remain poor, billions have left absolute poverty.

Whether consumerism helps or hurts people's worldly well-being is a question of economics, not faith. And the numbers show, to quote the title of Stephen Moore and Julian Simon's excellent book, *It's Getting Better All the Time*.

But is this consumerism harming the environment in ways that humans cannot handle? Are we mortgaging our future by polluting today, so we can have our cars, homes, and gadgets? It's unlikely. While the pope is right to decry global warming as a serious problem, it will not be impossible to cope with.

Julian Simon famously called the human mind "the ultimate resource." That is, human ingenuity, when challenged, can and will solve problems that we as a civilization face. This may seem blindly optimistic, but, unlike Francis's doomsaying, there is plenty of evidence to back up this statement.

Humans have successfully fought scourges which other creatures could only wish to defeat. Ingenuity, from the rise of the plow to the Green Revolution, has effectively ended systemic famine. Diseases have been curtailed; life expectancy has risen; and even those born weak and frail can not only survive, but thrive.

When faced with environmental challenges, humans do not simply die: we innovate. When we realized that the ozone layer was being damaged by chlorofluorocarbons, we took action, and we seem to have remedied the problem. It may have taken global action and regulation, but it worked.

How about another example: the quintessential public-goods problem of fishery depletion is in a taming process using catch-share agreements. Problem identified. Experiments completed. Action taken.

Few expected Francis to be quite as political as he was during his trip to the United States. Yet his particularly political version of pessimism pervaded nearly every public speech. This pessimism feels unwarranted. He may be right; we may be bringing about our own environmental catastrophe. But Francis should have more faith in humanity.

We've succeeded in overcoming environmental challenges in the past. It's not certain, but there's not a reason to think that it'll be any different next time.