

Tyler Morning Telegraph

'Overshoot Day' is a political fiction

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The facts are clear and indisputable. There are more people than ever, yet less hunger and far less grinding poverty than ever. We're using more energy than ever to power our economies and improve lives, yet economists are worried about an energy glut, as oil prices keep dropping.

And overall, consumption is up, yet resources keep up with demand.

So why do fictions such as "Overshoot Day" persist? Overshoot Day, as covered by Time magazine and the Weather Channel and other news outlets, is the day "when humanity's annual demand for the goods and services that our land and seas can provide - fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, wood, cotton for clothing and carbon dioxide absorption - exceeds what Earth's ecosystems can renew in a year."

Allegedly, that day fell on Aug. 13 this year.

"We're not even nine months into 2015, but by Wednesday humans had consumed an entire year's worth of natural resources since Jan. 1, according to the Global Footprint Network," Time reported.

According to Mathis Wackernagel, president of the Global Footprint Network, "We look at all the resource demands of humanity that compete for space, like food, fiber, timber, et cetera, then we look at how much area is needed to provide those services and how much productive surface is available."

Except that calculation is demonstrably wrong. The Cato Institute has a useful breakdown of Overshoot Day's individual claims.

"Since millions of people rose from extreme poverty and starvation over the past few decades, the world is consuming more fruits and vegetables than before," Cato explains. "We are also producing more fruits and vegetables per person than before. That is, partly, because of increasing yields, which allow us to extract more food from less land."

How about meat? We must be running out of that, right? Actually, no. Although rising standards of living mean more people are consuming meat, we are seeing better farming methods increasing supplies.

How about timber? Don't we hear a lot about deforestation?

“It is true that the world is losing forest area, but there is cause for optimism,” Cato says. “The United States has more forest area today than it did in 1990. As Ronald Bailey says in his new book ‘The End of Doom,’ ‘In fact, except in the cases of India and Brazil, globally the forests of the world have increased by about 2 percent since 1990.’”

And cotton, too, is benefiting from improved farming methods. This has additional benefits.

“Not only does this mean that we will not ‘run out’ of cotton (as the Overshoot Day proponents might have you believe), but it also means consumers can buy cheaper clothing,” Cato contends.

The bottom line here is that human ingenuity is an immeasurable resource that these doomsayers always fail to take into account. “Peak oil” theorists, for example, who said we would run out of available petroleum, didn’t foresee on improvements in drilling methods (and hydraulic fracturing) in their apocalyptic scenarios.

Likewise, those touting Overshoot Day are false prophets. What’s really in shorter supply these days is human misery.