



Globally, humans are better off today than on the first Earth Day

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Let me date myself right away by saying that I attended a demonstration on the first Earth Day, in 1970. The mood, as I recall it, was both joyous and solemn. Joyous because we were collectively celebrating, for the first time in U.S. history, the natural world around us. Solemn because the voices from the podium were issuing dire prophecies about the fate awaiting that natural world.

Such warnings were heard everywhere then. The Nobel Prize–winning biochemist George Wald explained to an audience at the University of Rhode Island that unless immediate action was taken, civilization would end within 15 or 30 years. According to Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich, author of The Population Bomb, that kind of prediction was overly hopeful. In an interview published for Earth Day, Ehrlich proposed that the planet had only two years left to change course before all “further efforts [to save it] will be futile.” Too optimistic still, believed Earth Day national coordinator Denis Hayes. In an Earth Day–timed article for the *Wilderness Society* magazine, Hayes argued that it was “already too late to avoid mass starvation.”

It’s easy to understand why they believed this: The global situation was calamitous. At the time of the first Earth Day, about one out of every four people in the world was hungry—“undernourished,” to use the term preferred by the United Nations. About half the world was living in extreme poverty. The average life expectancy in Africa was a mere 45.6 years. Roughly half of Latin America and the Caribbean lacked electricity and access to education. Famines in West Africa had just killed about a million people. Wars, revolts, and insurgencies were raging in Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines), Africa (Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Portuguese colonies), the Middle East (Oman, Yemen, Jordan), and Latin America (Nicaragua, Colombia, Mexico). A flu pandemic that began in Asia was exploding through much of the rest of the world; it would kill a million people before it was over.

Environmental trends were, if anything, worse. Harbors from London to Los Angeles, Boston to Bombay (now Mumbai), were choked with waste. Most of the planet’s great rivers—the Danube, the Tiber, the Mississippi—were undrinkable. Leaded gasoline released poisonous fumes into the air in such vast quantities that the average U.S. preschooler had four times more lead in his or her blood than what would now require urgent action. So much smog enveloped cities that *Life* magazine predicted early in 1970 that “by 1985 air pollution will have reduced the amount of sunlight reaching Earth by one-half.”

By the first Earth Day, a recently founded international organization, the Club of Rome, was already working on what would become a stunningly influential book: The Limits to Growth, published in 1972. The Limits team created a computer model of the world, then used it to project future demand for resources such as coal, iron, natural gas, and aluminum. In graph after graph, the book depicts a race to a peak of production, followed by a ruinous decline as the planet is stripped bare. To avoid ruin, the team emphasized, humankind's lurching course forward "must stop soon."

That didn't happen. The world turned out differently from the predictions—and, in many ways, better. Thanks to technological advances, political and economic reforms, and cultural changes, average human physical well-being has, by almost every measure, improved since 1970. Nowadays, according to the UN, just one out of nine people worldwide is undernourished, even though our numbers have more than doubled in the past 50 years. The chance that a child will be hungry in our era is lower than it has been in recorded history, and as relief efforts have improved, famine deaths, once common, have become increasingly rare. (Hundreds of millions of people are still underfed, but it's important to recognize what has been accomplished.) Partly because of better health and nutrition, average global life expectancy has risen by more than 13 years since the first Earth Day, with most of the increase occurring in low-income places. All the while, incomes have been rising and pollution levels falling—almost, but not quite, everywhere. Billions of people now belong to something that resembles the middle class.

Meanwhile, resources such as steel and aluminum are far from running out, and generally cost the same or less. In the history of our species, nothing like this gush of good fortune has occurred before. It is the signal accomplishment of the postwar generation and its predecessor.