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Book Review: The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future by Paul Sabin

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PAUL SABIN

The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. 320 p. \$18.00 (pbk.).

In 1980 Julian Simon, a professor of economics and business at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, wrote a stinging critique of the environmental movement in *Science* ("Resources, Population, Environment: An Oversupply of False Bad News") and provoked Paul Ehrlich, Stanford biologist, ardent environmentalist, and celebrated author of *The Population Bomb* (1968), into making a very public wager: pick a thousand-dollar "basket" of any five metals and if by 1990 its price increased, then Simon would pay him the difference. If it decreased, Ehrlich would have to pay Simon. An increase in resource prices seemed a sure bet to Ehrlich, who had argued that a rapidly increasing population was overwhelming the Earth's capacity to support it. Believing that market forces would react to shortages, even of nonrenewable resources, with expanded efficiency, productivity, and a search for substitutes, Simon thought not. In 1990 Ehrlich had to write Simon a check for \$576—but this didn't end the debate over the relationship between population and resources. Paul Sabin, a Yale historian, uses the bet to frame his story about the competing visions of Earth's future held by environmentalists and their critics. He finds that aspects of the bet have come to characterize the ongoing debate over environmental policy: it

is a “winner take all” contest; it is highly partisan, with each political party having picked its side; and different disciplinary starting points lead to irreconcilable end points—such as Ehrlich’s placing (p. 35) the Earth’s maximum sustainable population at 1.5 billion versus Simon’s contending (p. 205) that “the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next 7 billion years” already exists. Sadly, as Sabin illustrates in Chapter 5, the gap between the two positions has narrowed little in the decades since the bet. Today environmentalists point to climate change and severe water shortages as evidence that the Earth can no longer cope with continuous economic growth, while their critics contend that falling commodity prices foreshadow an era of unprecedented growth. *The Bet* provides an excellent map of how we got to this point. Chapters 1 and 2 provide brief intellectual biographies of Ehrlich and Simon. There were many similarities. They were born three months apart, grew up in nearby suburban New Jersey communities, went off to Ivy League colleges the same year, and loved being in the limelight. There was one big difference: one studied biology and the other economics. Chapter 3 traces how biologist Ehrlich’s “limits to growth” approach rose to prominence during the 1970s, culminating in President Carter commissioning *The Global 2000 Report*, which predicted that poverty and hunger would “haunt the globe” by century’s end. Chapter 4 documents the rapid rise of economist Simon’s “cornucopian” approach during President Reagan’s first term. Population growth was declared a non-issue, market forces were unleashed in a flurry of deregulation, and an ardent critic of the Environmental Protection Agency was placed at its head. While Sabin ends with a plea that “common ground” needs to be found if effective environmental policy is to be established, a clear map pointing to where that common ground might be has yet to be found.—D.H.

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