

**APOCALYPSE NEVER: WHY ENVIRONMENTAL  
ALARMISM HURTS US ALL**  
(MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER)

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Whenever, which is often, I see in the media that “experts say . . .,” I immediately assume what follows is lies. The utter tone-deafness of using this locution, given that many, if not most, people assume as I do, amazes me. Or it did, until I realized it isn’t actually propaganda. Rather, for the media, the mouthpiece of the Left, the invocation of supposed experts has become an incantation, one that wholly substitutes for reason and by its magic keeps at bay the night, dark and full of terrors. Michael Shellenberger’s *Apocalypse Never* is a counter-spell, a book-length evisceration of environmental “experts,” and although it will have no impact on true believers in the religion of environmental apocalypticism, it strengthens resistance to the alarmists’ war against humanity.

This book raises a key question for me—when constructing a new politics under Foundationalism, how should we address the natural world? Shellenberger’s goal, like mine, is human flourishing. His core point is that the lies we have been sold, or had forced down our throats, about nature’s relationship with humans are antithetical to achieving human flourishing. In truth, Shellenberger says, human increase of powers goes hand-in-hand with protecting and valuing the natural world. I think this is true—certainly casual destruction of nature should be forbidden, but that is not an actual problem in the modern Western world, and has not been for a long time. The undeniable reality is that a world which has increasing resources and tools allows humans to protect nature, but in a hardscrabble world, nature will always come in second place to survival, and to a decent level of comfort.

Shellenberger has impeccable progressive credentials, working since his youth in the 1980s for a wide range of left-wing causes. This allows him to be heard; if a conservative wrote this book, most people would never hear about it, since right-leaning books are today wholly ghettoized so that our ruling classes need never be troubled by their content. As his activist career progressed, Shellenberger focused more and more on environmental matters, ultimately falling in with what is called “environmental pragmatism” or “environmental modernism.” This is

rejection of environmental hysteria, offering instead practical solutions to known environmental challenges, from animal extinctions to global warming. And today he works full time in this area, with a focus on expanding the use of nuclear energy, of which more later.

For the past two hundred years, two basic philosophies have dominated views of man's relationship with nature. The best treatment of this conflict is Charles Mann's excellent *The Wizard and the Prophet*, which profiled and contrasted Norman Borlaug, architect of the Green Revolution, and William Vogt, failed prophet of a population apocalypse that never arrived. In short, this is a conflict between cornucopians, wizards, who see human ingenuity as inevitably offering solutions to our problems, especially limitations imposed by nature, and Malthusians, prophets, who see disaster looming just ahead when we run out of clever solutions. One hundred percent of the time, so far, the cornucopians have been right and the Malthusians wrong, but this has never stopped the latter, which is why Shellenberger wrote this book.

Power, the production of usable energy, is the driver of human civilization, and always has been. Vogt (whom Shellenberger mentions), Paul Ehrlich and other similar apocalyptic prophets, whose thinking until very recently was mandatory for all correct-thinking people in the ruling classes, actually saw power generation as a great evil. They openly wanted the Third World to die off, and they feared power would allow longer, better lives for the ants (shades of the famous Orson Welles Ferris wheel scene in *The Third Man*). Power is the crux of the matter—in truth, unlimited cheap power would produce a paradise, at least in the material realm, but against all the evidence, the doomsayers deny this fact.

Shellenberger's goal is to show why such Malthusian thinking is defective, and to destroy the related idea that nature is Gaia, a self-regulating system that man in his arrogance only disrupts. Not only are both ideas empirically false, and obviously so, but as Shellenberger discusses, they are beliefs integral to a drab and pathetic secular religion that serves primarily to feed the emotional needs of so-called environmentalists. It appears to reject Christianity, but is in fact a substitute with close parallels—though offering, “[i]n place of love, forgiveness, kindness, and the kingdom of heaven . . . fear, anger, and the narrow prospects of avoiding extinction.” Still, this religious belief of Malthusians is only to be expected, because like all people, climate activists seek transcendence

and immortality. But environmentalism as practiced today is gnostic, hating humans and seeing their presence as an evil, and feeds this belief with outlandish claims on a wide range of topics.

To counter this gnosticism, *Apocalypse Never* is, as its title implies, a systematic dismantling of every single apocalyptic environmental claim, using detailed facts and statistics. Shellenberger writes to show that despite the existence of some real environmental problems, none of them are apocalyptic. All are subject to alleviation or cure through competent management and the use of appropriate technology. But in the developed world the public—us, that is to say—is fed a combination of exaggeration and lies. Even when honest scientists honestly analyze data and come to measured conclusions about possible future problems, the media in cooperation with pressure groups invariably cherry pick the worst case scenario, exaggerate or lie about it, and spread falsehoods on that basis while appealing to authority to ignore any pushback—even from the original scientists.

*Apocalypse Never* is not the most exciting read—in fact, it's pretty boring, with endless dry declarative sentences and innumerable footnotes. But it's complete, and it's effective. The false prophets of apocalyptic environmentalism end up exposed for the frauds they are. And much of it is fraud, not just religious belief, for so-called environmentalists also lie for the same other reasons lies are always told in public policy today—some combination of personal gain, usually but not always monetary, and the desire for power over other people. The dominant reason is the search for transcendence, for meaning in a world of liquid modernity, but all three reasons drive the endless production of lies.

False claims of looming environmental catastrophe harm all of us, but most of all poor people in the Third World, both immediately in the form of direct harms such as starvation, and in the form of delayed advances to greater flourishing. A small set of groups and individuals are responsible for many of the lies, though they are enabled by our sensationalist media (and, what Shellenberger does not say, a constellation of politically-connected leftists who obtain benefit from all this, racking up money and power). Shellenberger's two main specific targets are the British movement Extinction Rebellion, an odious death cult, and the grifter Bill McKibben, the William Miller of the current age. (Miller was an early-nineteenth-century American preacher who convinced

thousands of the imminence of the Second Coming.) No surprise, the mentally-ill child charlatan Greta Thunberg comes in for a good deal of criticism as well.

I hadn't paid much attention to Extinction Rebellion, although I remembered when working-class Britons had assaulted members who were trying to shut down electric trains, an episode Shellenberger mentions. I vaguely assumed that the "extinction" in their name referred to their desire that humanity become extinct, but apparently that's not true—it refers to their false belief that a mass extinction event of Earth's flora and fauna is occurring, a claim Shellenberger trivially disproves. In fact, they say they want to prevent humanity's collapse, although as with most environmentalists, they are obviously opposed to humanity as a whole, with the exception of themselves and their friends.

After introducing his basic framework, Shellenberger turns his focus to one environmental topic after another—all the topics that are continuously pushed by today's media. Global warming exists, but is not apocalyptic, and there is no science behind the idea of "tipping points." Wildfires in California, Brazil, and Australia are not at all unprecedented and are due primarily to human expansion combined with failure to properly manage forests (such failure driven by environmental extremist ideology). The Amazon forest is neither "earth's lungs" nor disappearing.

Plastics in the ocean come almost exclusively from third world states with non-existent waste management systems—and, more importantly, plastic is a miracle material that has saved countless species from extinction by providing substitutes for horn and other natural materials. Shellenberger heaps contempt on the idea we should go "back to nature"; in very many areas, we "save nature by not using it." This substitution of technological materials for natural materials cannot be driven by concern for animals, but must be driven by demand for better materials. For example, petroleum for lighting saved the sperm whale, but the switch to kerosene for lighting was made possible by profit-driven searching for products with higher energy density, not a decline in the number of whales, much less concern for the whales. Demand, not command, drives energy transitions, which inevitably aid nature if they increase energy density, not harm it. (I also learned that whale oil used to be used in margarine. And that Greenpeace had nothing to do with "saving the whales," despite their incessant propaganda.)

There is no mass extinction event underway. The polar bears are doing fine. True, habitat loss is a big problem in the third world—and the solution is to make it possible for humans to live comfortably without having to constantly clear land, by offering natural gas and cheap electric power (instead of wood, the obtaining of which destroys habitat); by making clean, attractive cities with good jobs; and by using technology to increase farming efficiency. Instead, ignorant do-gooder Westerners try to shove “solutions” that accomplish nothing other than exacerbating problems down the throats of the locals. Thus, for thirty years, the West has tried to impose bogus “sustainable development” on poor countries, denying them large-scale power generation and trying to substitute inadequate small-scale generation, and demanding energy use be kept low. But “there is no rich low-energy nation just as there is no poor high-energy one.” Failure, though, is never punished; Western freebies continue to be misdirected, as William Easterly also details in his books *White Man’s Burden* and *The Tyranny of Experts*.

Natural gas is great, although not as good as nuclear. GMO fish (and presumably other GMO agricultural products) are outstanding. But lies are made up and propagated about both by environmental extremists, wealthy educated elites, such as McKibben and the Sierra Club. And they, in turn, are heavily funded by industries and interests that stand to suffer from switches to products and methods that are actually more environmentally friendly. To solve most of these problems, what we need is a massive turn to nuclear energy, which is entirely safe. It won’t solve all our problems, but it is the best way to address most of them, from global warming to third-world development that will save animals and landscapes there.

What about “alternative energy,” solar and wind? A crock. Low power density is stupid, and will always be stupid. Poor countries therefore cannot “leapfrog,” skipping ahead to a fantasy world of local use of solar and wind and never using mass power generation. So-called renewables are unreliable, expensive, and short-lived, not to mention tremendously destructive of wildlife (for which exemptions, rather than punishment, are meted out, although an ordinary citizen would be in jail for killing one migratory bird). (As far as I can tell, although Shellenberger doesn’t go into it in great detail, all analyses purporting to show that solar and wind energy is economically viable completely ignore both government

subsidies and the fact that the lifespan of the infrastructure is very short.) The biggest financiers of demands for renewable energy are gas companies, who stand to benefit from increased demand for natural gas-fueled electricity plants that are necessary when coal is forbidden and the closure of coal plants sold as a turn to renewables. (Shellenberger notes that it's a myth that climate skeptics are well-funded; in truth, climate activists are funded to the tune of tens or hundreds of billions of dollars annually, while the two largest climate skeptic organizations combined have a budget of \$13 million.)

Remember biofuels? Yeah, me too. Also a crock. "American taxpayers poured an astonishing \$24 billion into failed biofuels experiments from 2009 to 2015." Touted "solutions" like cellulosic ethanol turned out to use as much resources, and create as many emissions, as sugarcane ethanol.

Vegetarianism does almost nothing to reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, contrary to myth—and anyway, given that plant-based diets are cheaper, the money saved, in a classic example of the rebound effect, in practice goes to increase energy use in other areas. Shellenberger himself, like a great many people, is an apostate vegetarian, similar to my college friend who ran the "Animal Rights Coalition" on campus, but one day, noticing he was tired all the time and injuries healed slowly, eagerly ate a burger and never looked back, becoming much healthier. As Shellenberger documents, meat is healthy, and most vegetarianism is driven by disgust, not rationality. (Which is a bit strange, since supposedly disgust is an emotion that tends more to drive conservative political beliefs.) Dense meat production is better because it prevents the destruction of natural landscapes and habitats. I part ways with Shellenberger here somewhat; he is certainly correct that dense meat production is less destructive, but here, as everywhere, he is a pure pragmatist, unwilling to suggest that the underlying problem in the developed world is lack of virtue, in this case the vice of gluttony and the sin of factory farming. I'd be interested in seeing a discussion between the Virginia farmer Joel Salatin and Shellenberger; Salatin maintains that we could have both low-density meat production and adequate meat, but I suspect that his definition of "adequate" is not the same as for the normal fat American of today. In any case, vegetarianism will not save the natural world.

Perhaps realizing that endless recitation of data is dull, Shellenberger humanizes his stories by visiting the Congo. He talks to, among other people, an ordinary woman farmer, and he uses the Congo as his exemplar for several of his topics. We all know the Congo is in terrible shape due to war (apparently in part fomented by the Rwandans), but I was a little surprised that only twenty percent of the people who live there have any access to electricity. Shellenberger's complaint is that environmentalists, who control crucial funding sources such as the IMF, for decades have prevented Third World countries such as the Congo from building large power projects, especially hydroelectric dams, insisting that they instead use grossly inefficient micro-power sources (but not wood!). It's not just power; the terrible flooding that affects both urban and rural Congo isn't the result of global warming, as some claim; it's because Congo totally lacks the water management systems implemented over the past two hundred years in every Western country—which require organization and capital, but those are not regarded as relevant to “sustainability,” and so are mostly not funded at all.

While this complaint is no doubt true, it is also true that Third World countries have a terrible track record of actually keeping large power projects in service, due to the incompetence and corruption embedded in the vast majority of Third World cultures. Congo could have electricity for everybody with its own resources—it's rich, and under colonialism, huge progress was made toward all such forms of infrastructure. As soon as colonialism ended, of course, these countries fell back, since their ruling classes are devoted to tribal looting. This is the oldest story in the book—the wonder is how the West escaped from this, not that the Congo is a hellhole. No doubt Western leftist straitjacketing of Congo doesn't help, but that's not the only reason the Congo does not have adequate power or drainage.

I think narrowly focusing on Congo may be an error by Shellenberger, since it has been the site of a hugely destructive war for more than a decade, the death toll of which is, supposedly, only exceeded by World War II. Africa has other countries, such as Ghana, about which less is heard, and many of these are getting money from the Chinese, under Belt and Road, to create the infrastructure the West denies to them. Shellenberger does not talk about this (or China, who you can be sure doesn't care about phantom environmental apocalypses), but this

seems like an alternative path to success for African countries, if they can overcome the debilitating effects of their own cultures. I am curious how more stable Third World countries are doing on increasing power generation, but those facts don't appear here.

To save nature in the Congo and elsewhere, Shellenberger prescribes more manufacturing jobs in cities. More manufacturing allows more wealth that can alleviate rural poverty and end use of primitive techniques, instead substituting high-yield farming that reduces land use. However, the degree to which this can lift the Third World further out of poverty is disputed; as Richard Baldwin discusses in *The Great Convergence*, simply because some countries have succeeded through moving to manufacturing, in some recent cases successfully entering global supply chains as critical partners, does not mean later entrants will have the same success. And for Shellenberger it is a feature, not a bug, that industrialization always and everywhere leads to declining populations, for he does buy, at least a little, into Malthusian beliefs about population. He doesn't make the logical connection that ultimately that will be bad for the human race, but to be fair, he no doubt thinks that is a management problem for his descendants, and not the problem he is addressing right now. Which is fair enough.

And what should we do, most of all, everywhere around the world? We should massively fund nuclear power. Shellenberger now heads a group called Environmental Progress dedicated to this end. Large amounts of high-density power will allow Third World countries to flourish, and will alleviate every single environmental challenge, without exception. Thus, to the extent environmental problems are real, they are management problems, and Shellenberger offers a specific solution. He's right that nuclear is wonderful; I've never seen any coherent objection to nuclear power, nor does Shellenberger identify any. All objections are sheer emotivism all the way down.

The problem, though, with arguing that religious believers are wrong is that it is an impossible argument to win. So does this book matter? I mean, not a single environmental apocalypticist of prominence or consequence is even going to read this book, much less change his mind, much less change his public positions. They'll just shriek "Burn the heretic!"



Yes, it matters because a change is coming, and we need smart people who keep us informed, even if we may not agree with them on all political matters. I neither know nor care what Shellenberger thinks about, say, abortion, guns, or BLM terrorists. I don't mind that this book is boring. What matters is that a man of his expertise can help build a new world when the time comes. I think I'll keep his name in my contacts list.