

*The Bet* examines contrasting views of the future, as in this 1980s *New Yorker* cartoon.



## ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

# The biggest wager

Jon Christensen unpacks the fraught story of a biologist, an economist, and the polarization of US environmental policy.

In 1980, economist Julian Simon challenged biologist Paul Ehrlich to bet on the future price of a basket of raw materials then worth US\$1,000. Ehrlich and two of his colleagues chose five metals crucial to the economy at the time: chromium, copper, nickel, tin and tungsten. Ehrlich bet that prices would rise because of increasing scarcity and demand. Simon bet that they would not. The loser would pay the difference in price after a decade. Simon was at greater risk: prices could have risen indefinitely. But Ehrlich lost: in October 1990, he sent Simon a check for \$576.07. End of story, right?

Not so fast, argues historian Paul Sabin, who in *The Bet* attempts to use their wager to narrate parallel biographies of Simon and Ehrlich, as well as a US political environmental history of the past half-century. The result is a revealing tale. We see the evolution of Simon's 'cornucopian' view of ongoing population growth supported by human ingenuity; his open conflict with Ehrlich's steadfast 'neo-Malthusian' argument that there are real ecological limits to growth; and how both standpoints have influenced US environmental politics. So extreme were their stances that they could be viewed as fomenting a "bitter contest

over the future", Sabin writes.

For instance, Ehrlich famously predicted in his 1968 book *The Population Bomb* (Ballantine Books) that hundreds of millions would starve to death in the coming years. A year later he said, "By the year 2000 the United Kingdom will be simply a small group of impoverished islands, inhabited by some 70 million hungry people ... If I were a gambler, I would take even money that England will not exist in the year 2000." By contrast, Simon viewed the population explosion as "a triumph for mankind". Humanity, Simon believed, was "the ultimate resource". He held that human enterprise would continue to solve

**The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future**  
PAUL SABIN  
Yale University Press:  
2013.

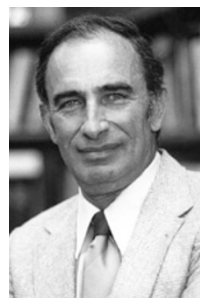
emerging problems and improve life on Earth, and as resource supplies diminished, prices would rise, driving discovery of more reserves or the creation of substitutes.

In *The Bet*, Sabin traces these competing ideas through the energy crisis of the late 1970s, attempts at US immigration reform in the 1980s and the stand-off over climate change in the 1990s. He sees echoes of the conflict embodied in Simon and Ehrlich's wager in Jimmy Carter's loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election, the environmental movement's ongoing lack of a unifying leader, and even the paralyzing political divide over climate change in the United States today. Ultimately, the bet is used to explain the whole messy evolution of US environmental politics from the early 1970s, when Republican Richard Nixon was an environmental champion, to today, when Republican environmentalists are an endangered species.

Sabin recognizes the complexities of the larger political story he tries to tell. He was a participant on its edges as director of the



Julian Simon.



Paul Ehrlich.

non-profit Environmental Leadership Program before joining the history faculty at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. And he acknowledges that there are other explanations for the divide in thinking on US environmental policy: the shift of the Democratic and Republican parties to more ideologically consistent blocs, business-led backlashes against environmental regulation, and the success of conservative think tanks in staking out positions in public-policy debates on these issues. But he

**“Ultimately, the bet is used to explain the whole messy evolution of US environmental politics.”**

wants to convince the reader that the clash is not played out only in the corridors of power. The wager, he asserts, “stands for much, much more — our collective gamble on the future of humanity and the planet”.

Sabin uses the bet as a synecdoche — a narrative device in which a part stands for a whole, in this case environmental politics. In the end, this is simplistic and blurs cause and effect, explanation and interpretation. Sabin bemoans the polarization that is the very structure of a wager, as if it were an important cause of the larger divide. But bets can be useful — they can clarify what is at stake and, by doing so, help us to frame thinking about the future of the planet.

On a personal level, this is a sad tale of two very smart men who talked past each other for years, until in one telling moment they put their convictions on the line. After their wager was decided, they descended into ad hominem attacks. It is depressing to think that Sabin might be partly justified in making this a metaphor for the environmental politics of our age.

On the other hand, there is the story of John Holdren, a secondary character in *The Bet*. A physicist who co-authored several books with Ehrlich and joined his wager against Simon, Holdren is now US President Barack Obama’s senior science adviser. How does Holdren’s boss bet on the future? “I can’t predict what will happen over the next 40 years,” Obama once replied when asked to wager his own bet. But, he continued, “I am — and always will be — full of hope about what the future holds”. ■

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*Perpetual Disunity*, a photo by Mark Kessell from his *Perfect Specimens* series.

## Q&A Mark Kessell

# Life-cycle imager

Medic-turned-artist Mark Kessell creates prints evoking evolution and human development using the early photographic form of the daguerreotype. As his latest show opens in New York, he talks about shooting portraits of primates, forceps, the nearly dead and the newly born.



### What is *Perfect Specimens*?

It’s a photographic life cycle of *Homo sapiens*. I tried to make images that anyone could recognize as distinctly human, showing conception, fetal development, birth, senescence and death. I want the photographs to raise questions about what it means, from a biological perspective, to be human.

### Can you tell me about the fetal specimens?

There is a bizarre little human skeleton from around 1890, with enlarged eye sockets and no brain. The way it is mounted in a bottle, grinning upwards and perched on a little spike, seems to mock the tragedy for baby and mother. There is also a perfectly normal four-month-old fetus that is uncurled and standing upright and looks like a little alien. You can see the blood vessels under its translucent skin; the top of the skull

has not yet fused. In another bottle there are tiny identical triplets, spontaneously aborted. These little guys once shared the same blood, but now they are forever alone.

### How do you capture birth and death?

For birth, you find a brave woman with a generous partner, and as the baby comes out you stand between her legs with a camera. It’s unforgettable and inspiring, but also disturbing as that huge head emerges through such a small aperture. For death, I get permission from relatives to document the final moments of their loved one. One photo shows the lips of a woman who has spoken her last words. Many avoid the subject, but death is a biological process, so why pretend?

### What part does your medical training play?

I didn’t take pictures until I was 39, when, on a road trip around Australia, my girlfriend handed me a disposable plastic camera. Within a year, I’d given up medicine and was attending art school in Manhattan. At first, I imagined shooting remote landscapes for *National Geographic*, but then I thought,