

Book review: Apocalypse Never

Apocalypse Never: Why Environmental Alarmism Hurts Us All

Michael Shellenberger

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Environmental alarmism

Environmental alarmism is certainly prevalent in our culture. It is often the focus of media headlines and documentaries, and increasingly taught to our children in schools. Extinction Rebellion disrupted the transport system of London in October 2019, believing their actions to be justified by the climate crisis. [Reuters reported](#) last year that one in five UK children report nightmares about climate change. Environmental celebrity Greta Thunberg thunders, 'I want you to panic'. How should we, as Christians, respond?

Caring for creation matters

As Christians, we agree with environmentalists that we should care for creation. Their desire that we respect nature and avoid pollution and exploitation is correct. The view of some that Christian theology is to blame for environmental mismanagement is misplaced, however. I wrote an [essay](#) on this for my MA on theology, whilst working for a sustainable investment firm: Noah was the first environmentalist; he was mandated to preserve biodiversity. We, as humans in the image of God, are stewards of God's creation, with a mandate to look after it. The question is not whether we should care for the environment – we should. The question is how should we respond to environmental alarmists?

A provocative book

Michael Shellenberger is an environmental activist and journalist. He is an invited expert reviewer of the next Assessment Report for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). He used to buy into the alarmist environmental narrative, but now he rejects it. This best-selling book is his attempt to correct that narrative.

The book is certainly provocative. Chapters have hard-hitting titles and start with well-known headlines from the alarmist narratives. He then proceeds to take this narrative apart point by point with well-documented scientific evidence.

It is not the end of the world

The first chapter, for example, is titled: 'It's not the end of the world'. He starts by repeating mainstream media headlines claiming that we have only a decade to save the world, that climate change is irreversible, that wildfires in California and Australia are caused by climate change, that civilization will be wiped out, etc. Anyone reading this will be familiar with such claims.

Shellenberger then delves into IPCC reports, and quotes from IPCC scientists and other experts. As may be expected, scientists do not make such apocalyptic claims, and are frequently disdainful of those that do. None of the IPCC reports contain a single apocalyptic scenario. There has been a 92% decline in the decadal death toll from natural disasters since its peak in the 1920s. Both rich and poor societies have become far less vulnerable to extreme weather events in recent decades. The slow pace of sea level rise will allow ample time for adaptation. The Netherlands does very well with one-third of its landmass below sea level, and some areas a full seven meters below sea level. Scientists see no relation between past climates and the amount of area burned in any given year. Humans today produce enough food for ten billion people, a 25% surplus, and experts believe we can increase this by 30% with technological improvements. Climate change policies are more likely to harm food production than climate change itself. Meanwhile population growth peaked decades ago.

No need to panic

The message from chapter one is that, contrary to Greta Thunberg, climate change is not a reason to panic. There is no scientific basis for the alarmist headlines promoted by Extinction Rebellion of millions, or even billions of deaths caused by climate change. Carbon emissions have been declining in developed nations for more than a decade. Global temperatures look more likely to peak at two or three degrees centigrade over pre-industrial levels, than four degrees. But this cannot be credited to climate alarmism. Total emissions from the largest European countries peaked in the 1970s, mainly due to the switch from coal to natural gas and nuclear.

Other chapters follow a similar script. Representative titles are: 'The Earth's Lungs Aren't Burning, 'The Sixth Extinction is Cancelled', 'Have Your Steak and Eat It, Too', 'Greed Saved the Whales, not Greenpeace'. There are a lot of helpful facts and scientific points in here. His points are clear and well expressed. Sometimes I do think his perspective lacks balance, but overall I think he is on the right track: Environmental alarmism is not helping humanity or the planet.

All of this is interspersed with personal stories of people affected by environmental abuse or by misplaced environmental policies. Shellenberg is concerned for the poor. He wants them to be allowed to develop and prosper economically. This means increasing their use of energy, but Shellenberg argues that such economic development will be better for the environment in the long run, as well as for the poor themselves.

Nuclear energy is good

Shellenberg is a fan of nuclear energy, and one of his chapters focusses on this. He has campaigned to save nuclear reactors around the world – for the sake of the environment. He argues that nuclear is the safest and cleanest way to make reliable electricity: 'In fact, nuclear has saved more than two million lives to date by preventing the deadly air pollution that shortens the lives of seven million people per year' (151) he writes. It is also one of the cheapest ways to make electricity. He discusses the famous nuclear disasters of Fukushima and Chernobyl, and concludes that though many people died and suffered as a result, the overall effect was not as bad as was feared – certainly not compared to c.200,000 people killed by the collapse of a hydroelectric dam in China in 1975. He makes the point that, 'The Colorado plateau is more naturally radioactive than most of Fukushima was after the accident' (169). Shellenberg says that he himself believed that nuclear plants could explode like a bomb until he was an adult. This is not true. Environmentalists should support and promote nuclear energy.

Malthusianism has a lot to answer for

Shellenberg does a great job criticising Malthusianism. Malthus claimed back in 1798 that human progress was unsustainable – how wrong he was. Yet his ideas had influence, and were used to justify the poor laws, and refusing famine relief, perpetuating poverty and starving millions. Today, neo-Malthusianism has adapted into environmentalism. Instead of arguing that scarcity of food was the problem, they changed the problem. The problem became environmental destruction caused by over-abundance. Once the population growth rate clearly peaked, it became energy use instead. Sadly, these ideas have a lot to answer for.

Environmentalism is a religion

Shellenberger realises that the root cause of environmental alarmism is religious:

Environmentalism today is the dominant secular religion of the educated upper-middle-class elite in most developed and many developing nations. It provides a new story about our collective and individual purpose. It designates good guys and bad guys, heroes and villains. And it does so in the language of science which provides it with legitimacy (263).

He is clear: Apocalyptic environmentalism 'has replaced God with nature', with scientists playing the role of priests. I would add, that environmentalism has its own versions of Eden, the fall, sin, repentance, redemption, transcendent moral purpose, and apocalypse. As Shellenberger writes:

I believe that secular people are attracted to apocalyptic environmentalism because it meets some of the same psychological and spiritual needs as Judeo-Christianity and other religions (264).

This new religion has gained popularity, as Shellenberg explains, in the spiritual vacuum left since the Enlightenment when Christian morals were discarded as subjective and Western societies were left with no basis for moral objectivity. Into this crisis of faith and purpose stepped environmentalism. Sadly, this religious environmentalism has become more apocalyptic and destructive over time, and increasingly demonises those who dare to challenge its orthodoxy.

An important book

Shellenberg himself is not a Christian. He describes himself as an environmental humanist. His insights are certainly valuable for Christians and others though. The book has [terrific endorsements](#) from high profile commentators who describe it as 'eye-opening', 'essential', 'influential', and 'important'. I agree. Most of the young people in your church, and many older folk too, are probably beholden to environmental alarmism. They are well-meaning, with good intentions and desires, but the underlying narrative they have accepted is false, and even anti-Christian in parts. Apocalyptic environmentalism is, at root, a rival religion with a rival god. To understand it, and how to respond to it, you will find few books better than this one.

Tim Dieppe

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