

Let's Stop Scaring Ourselves

By Michael Crichton

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This year I turned 62, and I find I have acquired—along with aches and pains—a perspective on the world that I lacked as a younger person. I now recognize that for most of my life I have felt burdened by highly publicized fears that decades later did not turn out to be true.

I was reminded of this when I came across this 1972 statement about climate: “We simply cannot afford to gamble...We cannot risk inaction. Those scientists who [disagree] are acting irresponsibly. The indications that our climate can soon change for the worse are too strong to be reasonably ignored.” This author wasn’t concerned about global warming. He was worried about global cooling and the coming ice age.

We’re all going to freeze! Or is it sizzle?

It may be mostly forgotten now, but back then many climate scientists shared his concern: Temperatures around the world had fallen steadily for 30 years, dropping half a degree in the Northern Hemisphere between 1945 and 1968. Pack ice was increasing. Glaciers were advancing. Growing seasons had shortened by two weeks in only a few years.

In 1975, *Newsweek* noted “ominous signs that weather patterns have begun to change...with serious political implications for just about every nation.” Scientists were predicting that “the resulting famines could be catastrophic.”

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But it is now clear that even as *Newsweek* was printing its fears, temperatures already had begun to rise. Within a decade, scientists would be decrying a global warming trend that threatened to raise temperatures as much as 30 degrees in the 21st century. Such predictions implied palm trees in Montana, and they have since been revised downward. By 1995, the UN midrange estimates were about 4 degrees over the next 100 years. Although concern about warming remains, the prospect of catastrophic change seems increasingly unlikely.

Oh no, it’s a population explosion!

Similarly, for all of my adult life, informed people have lived in continual anxiety about an exploding world population and the inevitable resulting mass starvation and environmental degradation.

In the 1960s, experts like Paul Ehrlich spoke with conviction: “In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death.” Ehrlich argued for compulsory population control if voluntary methods failed. In the 1970s, The Club of Rome (a global think tank) predicted a world population of 14 billion in the year 2030, with no end in sight.

Instead, fertility rates fell steadily. By the end of the century, they were about half what they were in 1950, with the result that many now expect world population to peak at 9 billion or so and then to decline. (It’s estimated to be about 6 billion today.)

And mass starvation never occurred either. Instead, per capita food production increased through the end of the century because of the “green revolution” resulting from increased agricultural efficiency and better seeds. Grain production increased as much as 600% per acre, bringing unprecedented crop yields around the world.

Along with the big fears have been dozens of lesser ones.

These changes were exemplified by the rise of India, which in the 1960s was widely acknowledged to be a symbol of the overpopulation disaster. Western children were chided to finish their food because of the starving children in India. By 2000, however, India had become a net exporter of grain, and Americans were worried about outsourced jobs to that nation's highly educated workforce. Almost no one concerned about population spoke of an explosion anymore. Instead, they discussed the new problems: an aging population and a declining population.

We're running out...of everything!

The 1970s saw the use of computers to predict future world trends. In 1972, The Club of Rome used its computers to warn us that raw materials were fast running out. By 1993 we would have exhausted our supplies of gold, mercury, tin, zinc, oil, copper, lead and natural gas. Yet 1993 came and went. We still have all these things, at prices that fluctuate but over the long term have generally declined.

What seems to be more accurate is that there is a perennial market for dire predictions of resource depletion. Human beings never tire of discussing the latest report that tells us the end is near. But, at some point, we might start regarding each breathless new claim with skepticism. I have learned to do so.

The machines are taking over!

Any catalog of false fears and counterfeit crises must include examples of the ever-present threat posed by technology. Nobody of my generation will ever forget the looming crisis of too much leisure time, an issue much discussed in the 1960s. Since machines would soon be doing all our work, we needed to learn watercolor painting and macramé to pass the time. Yet, by the end of the century, Americans were regarded as overworked, overstressed and sleepless. The crisis of leisure time had gone the way of the paperless office.

More sinister were the health threats posed by technology, such as the fears about cancer from power lines. The great power-line scare lasted more than a decade and, according to one expert, cost the nation \$25 billion before many studies determined it to be false.

Sinister health threats posed by technology—such as fears about cancer from power lines—eventually were shown to be false.

Ironically, 10 years later, the same magnetic fields that were formerly feared as carcinogenic now were welcomed as healthful. People attached magnets (the best ones were imported from Japan) to their legs and backs, or put magnetic pads on their mattresses, in order to experience the benefits of the same magnetic fields they previously had avoided. Magnet therapy even became a new treatment for depression.

Be very afraid!

Along with all the big fears have been dozens of lesser ones: saccharin, swine flu, cyclamates, endocrine disrupters, deodorants, electric razors, fluorescent lights, computer terminals, road rage, killer bees—the list goes on and on.

In this tradition, the association of cell phones and brain cancer has emerged as a contemporary concern, flourishing despite a lack of conclusive evidence of any direct link. I was drawn to one British study which suggested that cellular radiation actually improved brain function, but it got little publicity. And, of course, the best-documented hazard from cell phones—their use while driving—is largely ignored. (Handheld cell phones are only marginally more dangerous than speaker phones. The real danger comes from using a phone at all while driving.)

Fittingly, the century ended with one final, magnificent false fear: Y2K. For years, computer experts predicted a smorgasbord of horrors, ranging from the collapse of the

stock market to the crash of airplanes. Some people withdrew their savings, sold their houses and moved to higher ground. In the end, nobody seemed to notice much of anything at all.

"I've seen a heap of trouble in my life, and most of it never came to pass," Mark Twain is supposed to have said. At this point in my life, I can only agree. So many fears have turned out to be untrue or wildly exaggerated that I no longer get so excited about the latest one. Keeping fears in perspective leads me to ignore most of the frightening things I read and hear—or at least to take them with a pillar of salt.

For a time I wondered how it would feel to be without these fears and the frantic nagging concerns at the back of my mind. Actually, it feels just fine.

I recommend it.

Michael Crichton earned his medical degree in 1969 but chose to pursue a writing career rather than become a physician. He is the author of many best-selling books—including "The Andromeda Strain," "Jurassic Park" and "Prey"—and the creator of the TV series "ER." His new novel, "State of Fear," will be published on Tuesday by HarperCollins.