



## Episode 573: The Overpopulation Myth (and Mars, Too)

Guest: Robert Zubrin

**WOODS:** I love talking to people who can speak intelligently about a zillion things, because I know there'll be no dead air in the episode. A lot of stuff to talk about. In particular, I've never done an episode — here we are at number 573 on the subject of overpopulation, and of course this is a free market-oriented show. The idea is that society can more or less arrange itself, and one of the criticisms of that is that if you leave people to their own devices, well, they're going to produce too darn many people, and this is going to put tremendous burden on the Earth's resources and on living standards, and you know the standard line here. How do you go about answering that, because there is a superficial plausibility to that? You can understand why somebody would think that if there are too many people, we're just going to be too darn crowded. There won't be enough stuff to go around, and we're really going to regret having had so many people. Why is that the wrong way to think?

**ZUBRIN:** Well, it's wrong for a number of reasons. First of all, it's simply counterfactual. As the world's population has gone up, the standard of living has gone up and significantly, and so that's simply a fact. Now, why has it turned out that way? In other words, we go back — you know, my book *Merchants of Despair* takes this discussion back 200 years to the seminal polemicist on this issue, which was Thomas Malthus, who in 1800 put forth exactly this argument. You know, here we are, so many hungry people in the world, and if the population increases they'll all be starving all over the place, because population is going to outrun production.

And this turned out to be amazingly wrong. That is, when Malthus wrote his book in 1800, the average income per capita in the world was in today's dollars about \$180 per year. Now, today the world has seven times as many people as there were when Malthus wrote. When he wrote there was about a billion people; now there's seven billion. And the average income per person is about \$9 or \$10,000 per year in today's money. So the population has gone up 50 times, and the total product has gone up 350 times. No one has ever been so spectacularly wrong, and this has been true at every step along the way.

Back in 1968, there was a bestseller, *The Population Bomb*, written by Paul Ehrlich. Now at that time, the world had about 3.5 billion people, and he said by the year 2000 there's going to be 7 billion people, and there are hungry people today; they'll be starving in the streets in the year 2000, and not just in India and China, but in the

United States, and we need to have population control. But what happened? The average income per capita in 1968 was about \$3,000; now it's \$9,000. So the population has doubled, and the per capita income has tripled, and the total product has multiplied six times.

And you know, the thing that was so spectacular about Ehrlich's mistake was that in his own lifetime — I mean, he wasn't just wrong about the future; he was wrong about the past. Ehrlich was born in 1931 when the population of the world was little more than half of what it was in 1968. If his theory was correct, people should have been richer in 1931 than they were in 1968, which is exactly the opposite of the truth. So he was arguing against facts that he could have known from his own childhood.

So why, though, is it wrong? It's wrong, because it isn't like there's population on one side and there's production on the other side, and you know, are the producers going to keep up with the population. No, it's the people who are doing the production, and the more people there are, the more producers there are, so every mouth comes with a pair of hands.

But it's much better than that, because every mouth not only comes with a pair of hands; it also comes with a mind, and so the more people there are, the more inventors there are, and inventions are cumulative. So we are much better off today, not only because there is a global workforce of 7 billion people working for us with a global division of labor and a global market that spurs investment and production, we are better because of the larger number of people that existed previously.

I mean, let's say Malthus had actually been listened to and his ideas enforced, so there had been half as many people in the world in the 1800s as there actually were. Well, okay, they would have used less coal, but we're not hurting for the coal they used. But if there were half as many people in the 1800s, there would have been half as many inventors. So you can give up either Thomas Edison or Louis Pasteur; take your pick. Which would you rather give up, electricity or the germ theory of disease? In other words, we are much richer today because there were more people in the 1800s rather than less, and our standard of living depends on all the innovations that they did. And similarly, if we want to reduce population today, we would impoverish the future, not enrich it.

**WOODS:** What if you had somebody who's not necessarily a complete skeptic, but somebody who would concede everything you just said and say, I agree that of course it would have been preposterous to do these things and we have benefitted from the larger population, but this trend can't go on forever. There are inherent limits to the extent to which population can increase while maintaining prosperity. Are there any such limits, and if there are, are there any ways that a free society can manage them?

**ZUBRIN:** I don't believe there are such limits, and I believe that the argument that there are limits is a polemic against a free society, and that is its purpose. I mean, look, fundamentally — and my book *The Merchants of Despair* goes through this. This argument has taken many forms, from Malthus who said there wouldn't be enough food

to the Nazis who said there isn't enough land to go around to the population controllers to the Club of Rome who said there isn't enough natural resources to go around, and now today we have the global warmists who say there might be enough natural resources but there isn't enough right to use the natural resources, so we should — in other words, the problem isn't that we don't have enough coal and oil; it's that we have too much, and we must stop using it, despite the fact that we have it. It all takes the following form: there isn't enough of X to go around; therefore, human aspirations must be constrained, and therefore someone must be empowered to do the constraining, and therefore tyranny is necessary. And this is precisely why this argument and the intellectuals who reformulate it constantly have never lacked for sponsors, because it's an argument for tyranny, and that is ultimately why it is sponsored.

**WOODS:** All right, that's an important point, because even I sometimes — you'd think after doing hundreds and hundreds of episodes I'd be a little bit more cynical about things, and I'm inclined to take things at their face value sometimes and not realize that the point of the program is the so-called unintended consequence. That's not some accidental afterthought. These people aren't stupid. They know what they're doing.

**ZUBRIN:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** You have an article, by the way — this is not directly related, but it's on the general subject of radical environmentalists — on the subject of green power, in particular, green power in Germany, and your article has a headline indicating that this is very much going to hurt the poor in Germany. And what I want to raise with you is Paul Krugman in a number of columns over the past several months has been claiming that, although in the past it was only hippies and, you know, crazy utopians who thought that wind and solar power would ever amount to a hill of beans, he says that the fact is their capacity and their cost per unit of energy, these things are getting much, much better for us, and so we should look to these sources as being realistic alternatives. Has there been any such trend, as far as you can see?

**ZUBRIN:** No. The electricity and fuel prices in Germany have been quadrupled as a result of the insistence of its government of suppressing economic energy sources in favor of those that cost more. Furthermore, it must be said that Germany and Europe is being laid open to Russian domination by suppressing their own fracking. In other words, Europe could be self-sufficient in natural gas and have much cheaper gas and electricity prices, but they have suppressed it, making themselves dependent upon high priced, overpriced Russian exports. And so not only are they suppressing the standard of living of the European people and suppressing European economic growth, which is the cause of the global economic malaise today, but they are also facilitating the expansion of Kremlin tyranny into Europe.

**WOODS:** I want to go back to population control for a minute. I'm sorry; I shouldn't jump around, but so many things to talk about with you, I want to make sure I get to them all. With population control, it's obvious what the China policy is and that that

was implemented with population control ideas in mind and the idea of scarcity and we need to limit the population. That's a really obvious case of where these ideas can go, but I bet most of this has been more subtle, and I would think, for example, of population control programs that maybe the U.S. government might be helping to support via international agencies around the world. Can you talk about that?

**ZUBRIN:** Well, sure. Okay, before World War II we had the eugenics movement, which was very strongly allied with Nazism, which said that the population growth of the non-Nordic people had to be stopped because they are destroying the racial stock of the world and there's only so much land in the world and it should be reserved for the better people if we're to have a better world. Now, as a result of the fact that we went to war with the Nazis, this movement lost credibility in the United States, and in fact, the people who were sponsoring it had to quickly abandon it.

However, after the war, within just a few years the eugenicists came out again, but you could no longer talk about these goals in the same terms. It was no longer respectable to talk in these eugenicist, Nazi-type terms. So instead, they simply said that the world has a population problem, and it's using up the world's resources, and so forth. Now, this didn't have that much traction, but then they latched onto the Cold War, and during the Cold War, if you wanted to sell anything, you would say we need to do this to stop communism. So they came up with the idea that they could sell this to the political elite by saying, well, you know, the population growth in the third world is going to provide the cannon fodder, the legions for the communist world revolution, and so U.S. foreign policy has got to be linked to population control.

And in 1966, they managed to pass a rider to the Foreign Aid Act that would make foreign aid contingent on the receptive countries implementing population control. The first victim was India. In 1967, there was a famine in India. Indira Gandhi came over here looking for help. Some people told Johnson, okay, we should make it that they help us in Vietnam, but instead the population controllers said no, no, no, we should make the condition that they impose population control. And so they did, and it was a brutal program. And then later on this spread to numerous other third world countries. Now, these population control programs did anything but help the U.S. in the Cold War. They made us enemies among the people of the third world, because they were being subject to this kind of oppression on the basis of U.S. sponsorship.

But furthermore, these programs were not only racist in the large, they were racist in the small. That is, within each of the recipient countries, there generally is some ethnic group that has power and another that they despise, so naturally the population control program within countries were always used by the dominant group to oppress the people they hate. So for instance, it would be the high caste Brahmins doing population control on the Untouchables. In Sri Lanka it was the Sinhalese doing it to the Tamils. In Peru, the Hispanic people doing it to the indigenous Indian people, and so forth. And in Africa, Tribe A got the power doing it to Tribe B, who they've always hated.

And this has been a massive global atrocity done with U.S. tax dollars, and this is discussed at length in my book *Merchants of Despair*, how this worked. And people, Planned Parenthood and various other population control organizations have reaped billions of dollars of taxpayer money carrying out these programs in third world countries. And manufacturers — for instance, the Dalkon Shield IUD, which was banned in the United States, they were able to sell it to the U.S. foreign aid program to use in third world countries, so they were able to sell their junk abroad, paid for by U.S. tax money, stuff that is not even legal to use in the United States because of the damage it does to women. I mean, it's incredible the things that have gone on here in our name and with our money.

**WOODS:** Let me raise a — again, I'm trying to think of devil's advocate sort of objections. Let's say we had an honest eugenicist, and let's say we had a eugenicist who didn't even care about race, who just said I just want the best specimens of mankind; that's what I want. And the eugenicist may say to you, the problem with your theory about population is it assumes that population will grow in such a way that we will get people who produce more than they consume. But our concern is that there's no reason to expect that, that maybe we will get population growth among people — because it seems like the more intelligent and the wealthier have fewer children — we get people who maybe consume more than they produce, reproducing, then that is going to put a crunch on resources. What would be the way to answer that?

**ZUBRIN:** Well, that it's counterfactual. Look, the basic fact is this: is there are people who are constructive and people who are destructive, but on average, the average human being in the world over the course of history has created more than he or she has destroyed, and the proof of that is if the average person destroyed more than they created, we'd have nothing here at all right now. Okay, the fact that there has been a net product, that we've built cities and universities and civilization and art and science and medicine and all of this proves that the average person creates more than they destroy.

And by the way, this is the crux of the matter. Are human beings on average destroyers or creators? The anti-humanists argue that they are destroyers, and therefore the role of government should be to limit human numbers, activities, and liberty in order to preserve this preexisting creation, which human beings as a virus are destroying. Whereas if you take the point of view that human beings are fundamentally creators, then the essentially role of government must be to protect liberty at all costs so that humans can be free to create as much as they can. And that is where this all comes down to: whether you want liberty or whether you're looking for an excuse to suppress liberty.

**WOODS:** Dr. Zubrin, I don't think it's possible to have you as a guest without also saying a little something about Mars. Even though it's not directly related to this subject, I still feel compelled to ask you about it, and I'm going to do that right after we pause for this message.

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Dr. Zubrin, along with links to your books and work on Mars, you founded something called the Mars Society, and you favor – well, what exactly is that you favor? I don't want to put words in your mouth.

**ZUBRIN:** Okay, now, I've written a number of other books, but aside from *Merchants of Despair*, the one that I would like to bring to the attention of the listeners is my primary book on Mars, which is called *The Case for Mars*. And what that book outlines is how we can send humans to Mars in our time, not 30 years from now or 100 years from now, but within the next two-term presidential administration, and I think we should do it, because we need to show the world what free men can do, and we need to open up a new planet to human civilization.

But if you want to know how it fits with this previous discussion, let me read you a quote from Paul Ehrlich, who we have already discussed in this show, and his protege, John Holdren, who is currently President Obama's science advisor. And they wrote a book together in 1971, called *Global Ecology*, and they said the following, and I quote: "When a population of organisms grows in a finite environment, sooner or later it will encounter a resource limit. This phenomenon described by ecologists as reaching the carrying capacity of the environment applies to bacteria in a culture dish, to fruit flies in a jar of agar, and will apply to man on this finite planet."

In other words, the ultimate arguments of the anti-humanists is that at the end of the day, we are confined to one planet, and so we're nothing but fruit flies in a jar of agar, and we need to have the wise scientists supervising this jar that we're in limit our numbers so we can make the agar last as long as possible, and it's perfectly within their right to kill some of us so that the others can live a little bit longer. Okay, this is an outrageous position.

And what is the ultimate refutation of it? I do not believe we are about to run out of resources on Earth any time soon, but so long as we are confined to the Earth, this argument has the appearance of credibility. There's only so much to go around; therefore, somebody has got to be crushed. Well, we open up space, we open up Mars as a new world, we're proving that human creativity has the capacity to open up a universe of resources to human kind. And in other words, we are completely blowing the top off this anti-humanist argument. We're showing that everything we have comes from human creativity, that the ultimate resource is not land.

In fact, land was not a resource until people invented agriculture. It's not oil. Oil was not a resource until people found oil drilling and petroleum refining and automobiles and other kinds of engines that could use gasoline. It's not uranium. Uranium wasn't a resource until we developed nuclear power. The ultimate resource is human creativity, and this is what can open up the universe to us. The reason why we need to go to Mars is to show that there is no limits and that human beings can be free forever.

**WOODS:** That's almost the only argument that appeals to me, because if it's a case of, well, this is just something that scientists would like to try out, well, all right, but a

lot of people have priorities and I don't see why those should trump everybody else's. I mean, the most obvious objection, and no doubt you've responded to it, is that as soon as you land on Mars you realize that this planet is completely waging war with you at all times. There's a sense in which you are not intended to be there, in every way. Dust storms are just a small part of the problem, and gravitation and bone loss and all these things that you hear about. But also, if I'm not in a suit and I'm not in a contained area, how am I going to survive? It seems like the possibilities of death are so overwhelming that why would I want to try it?

**ZUBRIN:** Well, look, here's the thing. In a very real sense, human beings are not native to the Earth; we're native to Kenya. That's our natural habitat. We are actually tropical animals. That's why we have these long, thin arms with no fur on them. But here I am, I'm talking to you from Colorado right now in the middle of winter, and no human being in the true state of nature could survive a single winter night here in Colorado. You have to develop technology for human beings to leave our natural habitat in the Kenyan Rift Valley and go global, go into ice age Europe and Asia and North America, because we developed technologies like fire and houses and clothing and big game hunting, which required weapons that could kill at a distance, and language to coordinate our activities so that we could actually take on mastodons and giant bison and so forth. In other words, we have become a global species by conquering new environments through our technological creativity. And I would argue that the challenge posed to us of Mars is actually less than ice age Europe posed to early tropical man.

And it is by using our ingenuity, by taking on new environments that we have expanded our reach, and we have created a global civilization with vastly greater possibilities than ever could have been had we remained a bunch of tribes living in the Kenyan Rift Valley, and if we use our ingenuity again, we can become not just a global species but an interplanetary and ultimately interstellar species with millions of civilized planets orbiting millions of civilized stars with all sorts of civilizations, language, dialects, great histories of heroism and contributions to technology and invention and new literatures and vast new possibilities, as greater in concept and expanse to what we have today was to what we had when we lived in Kenya.

But you know what? I do think that that is the human future, provided we stay free. And if we do it, if we leave Earth, if we establish free human societies throughout this reach of the galaxy, with all their magnificent technologies and civilizations that will exceed our own — that will seem as magical to us today as ours with out airliners and electricity and Internet would be not only to the people of the Kenya Rift Valley but even to the people of the middle ages 1,000 years ago, — when those people look back at this time and look at what we did in launching this project, they will wonder at us.

**WOODS:** Well, I'm going to direct people to [TomWoods.com/573](http://TomWoods.com/573), because there they'll find the Mars Society, which is [MarsSociety.org](http://MarsSociety.org), but in case they forget that it's at /573. We'll have *The Case for Mars*. What is the title of your — it's a playful title that I like about, it's like a survival guide to Mars?

**ZUBRIN:** Oh, I have a sort of science humor book, called *How to Live on Mars*. That's sort of a humorous take on the whole thing. It's a guide to immigrants to Mars from an old hand. Then it's a mixture of science and satire and humor and science fiction. It's a fun book.

**WOODS:** Okay, all right, well I'll direct people there too. And I mean, perhaps at some point this calls for a whole episode, but as I say, given your association with the Mars Society and all this work, I love talking about overpopulation, but it would seem — it would be like, you know, having Shakespeare on to talk about the weather and not talk about his drama, so I felt I did need to at least get your basic overview of that question expressed. And I appreciate your opinions and your work; particularly this *Merchants of Despair* book is very important. I just had a gentleman a guest of the show who's formerly of Greenpeace, who's just completely turned around and said these people are all crazy and they're anti-human, so I think it's important to expose this, especially because young kids in school are getting the impression that people who care about the environment are really just wonderful people who just want to make sure that everybody is well taken care of and that our resources are conserved.

**ZUBRIN:** Sure.

**WOODS:** And no doubt there are such people, but they don't seem to be running these organizations.

**ZUBRIN:** No, they're not. In fact, Erhlich's book, which called for population control, was published by the Sierra Club.

**WOODS:** I didn't know that, actually. That's very interesting.

**ZUBRIN:** Yes.

**WOODS:** You think of Sierra Club, and you just think of wilderness, and it's harmless.

**ZUBRIN:** No. Look, here's the thing. Okay, the 1970s, there was a cooling trend in climate, and the anti-humanists made much of this. They said look, there's going to be a new ice age, and it's caused by pollution, caused by industry. It's caused by too much economic growth. It's out of control. It's got to be put under control. Put us in control. Then in the '80s, the climate shifted to a warming trend, and they said, oh, there's global warming; it's being caused by industry and too much economic growth. It's out of control. It's got to be put under control. Put us in control. The problem is always different. The solution is always the same. And that's what people don't understand. This thing, global warming, isn't about the weather. It's about liberty or tyranny.

**WOODS:** Well, on that note, I will again say thanks, and I hope we can talk to you again in the future, and best of luck with your work, and thanks so much for your time.

**ZUBRIN:** Thank you.