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The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future

By Paul Sabin



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Are we headed for a world of scarce resources and environmental catastrophe, or will innovation and markets yield greater prosperity

In 1980, the iconoclastic economist Julian Simon challenged celebrity biologist Paul Ehrlich to a bet. Their wager on the future prices of five metals captured the public's imagination as a test of coming prosperity or doom. Ehrlich, author of the landmark book *The Population Bomb*, predicted that rising populations would cause overconsumption, resource scarcity, and famine—with apocalyptic consequences for humanity. Simon optimistically countered that human welfare would flourish thanks to flexible markets, technological change, and our collective ingenuity.

Simon and Ehrlich's debate reflected a deepening national conflict over the future of the planet. *The Bet* weaves the two men's lives and ideas together with the era's partisan political clashes over the environment and the role of government. In a lively narrative leading from the dawning environmentalism of the 1960s through the pivotal presidential contest between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan and on into the 1990s, Paul Sabin shows how the fight between Ehrlich and Simon—between environmental fears and free-market confidence—helped create the gulf separating environmentalists and their critics today. Drawing insights from both sides, Sabin argues for using social values, rather than economic or biological absolutes, to guide society's crucial choices relating to climate change, the planet's health, and our own.



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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #655060 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Yale University Press
- Published on: 2013-09-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x 1.06" w x 5.50" l, 1.09 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Using a highly publicized thousand-dollar wager made between two scholars as a narrative framework, this gem of a book elucidates the extreme polarity between those who believe human ingenuity can solve the world's problems and those who foresee imminent doom. Sabin (*Crude Politics*) cleverly traces the ideological extremes through the careers of Paul Ehrlich, known for his warnings about explosive population growth, and his lesser known adversary Julian Simon, who advocated that technological advancement and market flexibility would resolve threats of overpopulation. Sabin shows the evolution of both arguments through various presidencies. The Carter administration leaned toward Ehrlich's apocalyptic point of view; whereas Regan thought Simon's theories fit his own, especially in expanded energy production. The contrast between Al Gore and George W. Bush reflects the polarization in the United States over environmental issues. Sabin offers a reasoned summary of the strengths and weaknesses on both sides, but ultimately he is interested in showing "how intelligent people are drawn to vilify their opponents and to reduce the issue that they care about to stark and divisive terms." To this end, Sabin provides a fascinating and highly readable archaeology of political science in America. (Sept.)

Review

"Provides surprising insights for anyone involved in addressing the world's 'wicked problems.' Most of all, it gave me new perspective on why so many big challenges get bogged down in political battles rather than being focused on problem-solving."—Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, "The Best Books I Read in 2013," TheGatesNotes.com
(Bill Gates *TheGatesNotes.com*)

"[A] gem of a book. . . Sabin provides a fascinating and highly readable archaeology of political science in America."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review
(*Publishers Weekly*)

"A brilliant idea for a book. . . Sabin has produced an absorbing narrative of how two people's 'clashing insights' unleashed on the world polarised views of the environmental and resource threats we face in the 21st century."—Fred Pearce, *New Scientist*
(Fred Pearce *New Scientist*)

"In his new book, *The Bet*, Paul Sabin has managed to write a work of serious historical scholarship about a vexing political issue — and make it read like a character-driven novel."—David Leonhardt, *The New York Times*, *Economix* blog
(David Leonhardt *The New York Times*, *Economix* blog)

"*The Bet* provides an important contribution to canonical works in environmental history and environmental studies. It is a remarkable story of a critical moment in the environmental movement, and Sabin has told it expertly."—Frederick R. Davis, Florida State University
(Frederick R. Davis 2013-03-14)

"In telling the story of Ehrlich and Simon's bet, Paul Sabin offers a compelling analysis of two very different, but equally important, ways of understanding the future of humans and the environment that still shape the

world of environmental politics today."—Jay Turner, Wellesley College
(Jay Turner 2013-03-14)

"Paul Sabin's *The Bet* is wonderfully conceived, sharply focused and entertainingly executed. In the story of a famous bet between two men of large egos, he manages to touch on the most basic problems we face in trying to come to terms with our current environmental crisis."—Richard White, author of *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America*
(Richard White 2013-04-04)

"A refreshingly readable and consistently insightful portrait of the ferocious American politics of global population and resources since the 1960s – and of two implacable enemies who strangely resembled one another."—J.R. McNeill, author of *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the 20th-century World*
(J.R. McNeill 2013-04-15)

"Paul Sabin vividly and creatively explores the half century battle over environmental policy by telling the story of the clash—and famous “bet” — between Paul Ehrlich, the prophet of population doom, and Julian Simon, the advocate of technology and markets. My own wager is that *The Bet* will also provide a very valuable and timely framework for understanding today’s great environmental debates. In fact, I will double down on that bet!"— Daniel Yergin, Pulitzer-prize winning author of *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World* and of *The Prize*
(Daniel Yergin 2013-05-13)

"Have you ever wondered why environmental politics became so bitterly divided along partisan party lines? Why does the left believe that climate change will harm us, while the right is certain that technological innovation will prevail? Paul Sabin’s smart, compelling analysis in *The Bet* helps us understand these ideological divides. Beautifully written, non-partisan, and filled with surprising insights, *The Bet* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand modern environmental politics."—Nancy Langston, author of *Toxic Bodies: DES and the Lessons of History*
(Nancy Langston 2013-05-13)

“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.”—Jon Christensen, *Nature*
(Nature Jon Christensen 2013-08-15)

"Informative, charming, and highly readable."—Tyler Cowen, *Marginal Revolution*
(Tyler Cowen *Marginal Revolution*)

"A wonderful new book . . . and a fantastic introduction to population-resource debates of the late-twentieth century. It will be the required first reading on this topic in my future courses."—Roger Pielke, Jr., *The Energy Collective*
(Roger Pielke, Jr. *The Energy Collective*)

“An illuminating, judicious, and engaging examination of the conflict between environmentalists and their critics over the past five decades.”—Glenn C. Altschuler, *Tulsa World*
(Glenn C. Altschuler *Tulsa World*)

A Best Science Book of 2013, *New Scientist*

(*New Scientist*)

About the Author

Paul Sabin is associate professor, Department of History, Yale University. He was founding director of the Environmental Leadership Program and is the author of *Crude Politics: The California Oil Market, 1900–1940*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Callaway:

Nowadays reading books become more and more than want or need but also be a life style. This reading practice give you lot of advantages. The huge benefits you got of course the knowledge even the information inside the book that will improve your knowledge and information. The information you get based on what kind of book you read, if you want get more knowledge just go with education and learning books but if you want sense happy read one along with theme for entertaining such as comic or novel. Often the *The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble over Earth's Future* is kind of publication which is giving the reader unstable experience.

Dennis Bloom:

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Henry Reavis:

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