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Book Review: Betrayal of Science and Reason: How
Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens Our Future

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Betrayal of Science and Reason: How Anti-Environmental Rhetoric Threatens Our Future.

Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich.

Island Press, Covelo, California, 1996.

Paul and Anne Ehrlich had three goals in writing *Betrayal of Science and Reason*, first "to counter the erroneous information and mis-representations put forth by brownlash (authors)"; second, to reach a broad audience of readers, including journalists, scientists, and citizens and "provide them with accurate scientific information they can use to evaluate critically and counter the commentary of the brownlash," and third, "to encourage other scientists to speak out and become involved (in environmental issues)."

The Ehrlichs identify and refute specific fallacies in the statements of such brownlash authors as Julian Simon, Gregg Easterbrook, Charles Mann, and Mark L. Plummer. These brownlash authors provide many statements of anti-environmental rhetoric. The Ehrlichs note that many brownlash authors cite the writings of contrarian scientists. Contrarian scientists are those who take a drastically different view from that of the scientific consensus. Furthermore, contrarian scientists frequently ignore basic principles of scientific methodology in reaching their conclusions.

The Ehrlichs demonstrate how statements by brownlash authors are used to create confusion and doubt in the minds of concerned citizens. Doubt and confusion saps the will of citizens to engage in needed, collective political action. The Ehrlichs conclude, correctly in the estimation of this reviewer, that only concerted, radical action based on strong consensus on the necessity for social change will provide us with any chance to avoid social disaster.

The Ehrlichs document the consensus in the scientific community concerning the current human dilemma. They conclude that "to a very large degree, that consensus is based on first principles, such as the following: it is impossible to have exponential growth of the human population at anything like today's rates for very much longer; adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere will change the climate; agriculture is dependent on reasonably stable climates; habitat destruction causes extinctions." In support of these statements the Ehrlichs include the complete text of *The World's Scientists Warning to Humanity*, signed by 1,575 scientists in 1992, in the appendix of their book.

While admitting that there has been good news for certain environmental trends over the past decades, the Ehrlichs put the good news in the perspective of increasing human disruptions of natural systems.

Throughout their book, the Ehrlichs distinguish between misrepresentations of scientific literature and making predictions based on scientific theories that turn out wrong. "The first is not part of the scientific process; the second frequently

is.”

They conclude that the stakes are much too high to allow brownlash authors to go unchallenged. ”Not only do brownlash messages confuse and mislead the public on the importance of the environmental situation, they are being adopted and used as a basis for critical policy decisions - often without careful examination of potential consequences of those decisions. Brownlash commentary needs to be exposed for what it is: polemics based on a fundamental misinterpretation of scientific knowledge and the scientific process.” (p.201)

The Ehrlichs conclude by calling upon scientists, journalists and teachers to present environmental science accurately and clearly to the public and to policy-makers. They urge scientists to get involved with public policy issues, explain science to the electronic media, and attack the mis-representations of brownlash authors.

While the Ehrlichs write only about mis-representations of scientific theories, other authors, such as Gary Snyder and George Sessions, have noted the confusion engendered by mis-representations of environmental philosophy. Gary Snyder, in a recent essay in *Wild Earth* (Winter 1996/97 ”Nature as seen from Kitkitdizze is No ’Social Construction’”) states that

conservationists and environmentalists have brought some of this on themselves. We still have not communicated well on the question of ’why value biodiversity?’ Many if not most citizens are genuinely confused over why such importance appears to be placed on hitherto unheard-of owls or fish. Scientists have been heard from, but the writers and philosophers among us (me too) should speak our deep feelings for the value of the non-human with greater clarity. We need to be more creative, stay fresh, write clean prose, eschew obscurity, and not intentionally exaggerate. And we need to comprehend the pain and distress of working people everywhere.

The betrayal of science and reason and deliberate anti-environmental campaigns designed to confuse citizens has made the work of activists, scientists, and environmental philosophers more difficult. However, we can present arguments in ways that lay people can understand; we can work with responsible journalists and we can write articles for newspapers and popular journals that encourage strong political decisions based on the scientific consensus and principles of environmental philosophy. Expose rhetoric; expose phrases such as ”forest health” and expose the mis-representations of brownlash authors.

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