



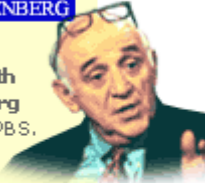
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## What On Earth Is Going On?

THINK TANK  
 SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 2000

ANNOUNCER: Funding for Think Tank is provided by the John M. Olin Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Smith Richardson Foundation.

(Musical break.)

MR. WATTENBERG: Hello, I'm Ben Wattenberg. Too many people, too little water, not enough food, climate too hot, endangered species, what shape is our planet in? Two think tanks, the World Watch Institute, and the Competitive Enterprise Institute have published books that attempt to answer that question. Are they describing the same planet?

Think Tank is joined by Ronald Bailey, science correspondent for Reason Magazine, and author of Earth Report 2000, Revisiting The True State Of The Planet, published by the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and Christopher Flavin, senior vice president and director of research of the World Watch Institute, and coauthor of State Of The World 2000. The topic before the house, what on Earth is going on, this week on Think Tank.

(Musical break.)

MR. WATTENBERG: So how is our planet doing in the year 2000? Let's take a look at a few snapshots. Item, just before the end of the 20th Century the world's population hit 6 billion people. That's three times the number in 1930. But, many demographers point out that the rate of growth is falling rapidly. They expect that population will top out at about 8 billion people and then decline. Anyway, is population growth good or bad? Item, a recent report by the National Academy of Sciences drew this headline: New evidence helps reconcile global warming discrepancies, confirms that Earth's surface temperature is rising. But, has this warming been caused by human activity? What are the consequences?

Item, against predictions food prices have steadily declined over the last several decades, while food production and caloric intake per person has increased. But, is the bread basket big enough for 2 billion more people, plus a diet upgrade for billions of others? Where would the water come from? To find out we are joined by our experts and authors. These are the two books. I am tempted to say they are diametrically opposite, but I think by the time we're through we will find that there may well be some areas of agreement.

Let me just ask you, Chris you first, Ron second, in a word, what is the state of the planet?

MR. FLAVIN: It's a mixed picture, I think you'd have to say. There clearly are some trends where we're making progress, for example, urban air and water

pollution in the United States and most other industrial countries, there have been substantial improvements. There are other areas where there are problems that are both out of control, and in some cases getting a lot worse. For example, loss of tropical forest, loss of some Northern forests is proceeding at a rapid pace, loss of biological diversity is described by many biologists as being one of the most critical problems the world is now facing. Environmental health is a real problem, particularly in many developing countries, breathing unclean air, drinking unclean water, and of course, as you mentioned earlier, climate change remains a very real concern to many scientists.

The one point I think we should all remember is that in those cases where things are getting better, for example, you noted the lower population growth rates, or the improvements in local air quality, generally those are a result of government policy interventions that have occurred in countries, and private citizens a companies have responded to those. And that's what we think needs to happen to deal with the other environmental problems, such as climate change, which today remain unresolved.

MR. WATTENBERG: Okay. So I think we're going to -- something tells me we're going to return to that formula of more government, knowing Mr. Bailey's views. Ron, how does the world stand today?

MR. BAILEY: Actually, what we find in Earth Report 2000 is the trends are fairly positive for the most part. There are some negative trends, some local problems, which Chris has acknowledged. But, overall the planet's health tends to be getting better. As you've noted, world population, or I should say total fertility rates are going down. Therefore the world population should probably top out around 8 billion. That's very good news most likely. Food supplies are up, resource prices are down, pollution trends in the developed world, that is the United States, Europe, Japan, and so forth, as Chris acknowledged, are very, very positive. Also, the forests in the Northern areas, again in the developing world, are improving, growing as a matter of fact.

Tropical forests are continuing to decline, but the problem has largely been misidentified by people in the environmental movement. It isn't population and it isn't economic growth that's causing the problems, it's usually the result of something called open access commons. That is, if you see an environmental problem, let's say fisheries somewhere around the world, fisheries are in fact declining. The reason that fisheries are declining is not because there are too many people eating too few fish, the problem is that no one owns the fish, there's no one there to protect the fish. And the same thing with tropical forests, biodiversity in general.

MR. WATTENBERG: Do I hear you, Ron Bailey, the arch libertarian coming out for further regulation, have some global authority?

MR. BAILEY: By no means, what we need to do is to privatize these resources. We don't have a chicken problem, we don't have a Persian cat shortage, because people own and control and protect those resources. We can do the same thing for the air, the water, for fisheries, for tropical forests. If we, in fact, move in that direction we'll see improvement.

MR. WATTENBERG: If private owners owned square chunks of the ocean, and fishing rights thereon, and let's say there was a huge school of cod there, and they fished out all -- why wouldn't the fish out all the cod?

MR. BAILEY: The same reason that a cattle herder does not kill all of his cows on his farm, because he needs to have more to reproduce later. In fact, we see already New Zealand and Iceland have privatized their fisheries, and they're rebounding quite smartly.

MR. FLAVIN: I think this is very interesting. We, in fact, believe in the use of market forces to solve a lot of these problems. We've advocated environmental taxes, for example. The interesting thing about the proposal --

MR. BAILEY: I'm sorry. Environmental taxes are not market forces.

MR. FLAVIN: Well, I believe they are. We can talk about that later. But, government intervention is required to make the kind of market system for fisheries that he suggested worked. As your question suggests, fish are going to move around a lot, and there has to be some way of allocating, some way of regulating, so I think basically we're in agreement. I'm not against, in principle, in some areas, privatizing some fisheries. But, only the government can make that happen.

MR. WATTENBERG: In this watery moment, let's talk about water, because that's another one that you always hear about. The environmental people are always saying, oh my God, we're running out of water, and the pro-growth people, whatever you want to call them, are always saying, that's bunk, there's plenty of water around. Give me your general take on that, Chris.

MR. FLAVIN: First, I've got to quarrel a little bit, Ben, when you say that the environmentalists are always saying, it's generally scientists. We just talked to someone at USDA, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who just spent several months in China looking at their situation. Water is a regional problem. Clearly, water on a global basis is fairly abundant. But, there are specific areas, parts of the Western United States, Northern China, large parts of Africa, and India where clearly there are shortages of water that are impeding the growth of agriculture, that are impeding urban and industrial development. Now, the solution to that, and we may agree on this, probably the best thing to do with water is to use it more efficiently. We waste a lot of water today. And it's partly because we don't price it properly, we give it away in many instances. Certainly, in the U.S. we've given a lot of water away, the Congress has given a lot of water away to --

MR. WATTENBERG: Water that is not a gift from God, water that is irrigated and piped and whatever.

MR. FLAVIN: And that travels 1,000 miles, and there's a lot federal money that's invested in it. If we paid the market price and then invested in improved efficiency of water use, we would do a lot more with the limited water that we have.

MR. BAILEY: Again, the reason we have water shortages, and whenever you look at a shortage you can almost always find the government standing there behind it, causing a shortage, the reason we have the shortages is because water is the most subsidized substance on the planet, period. Basically what happens is that farmers do not pay anywhere near the cost of producing the water. Therefore, of course they're going to waste it. They don't have any reason to save it. On the other hand, if you privatize it, which is possible to do, either for ground water, or for water in rivers and lakes, and there are ways to do that, if you privatize it farmers will have a market, where they will know the cost of the water that's being produced, and will be encouraged to, in fact, save it and preserve it, and you solve a lot of the problems that way.

MR. WATTENBERG: What about global warming? Let's bring up global warming. Ron, your turn, what do you think of the way this dialogue is playing out? We read that headline from the National Science Foundation, was it?

MR. BAILEY: I think it was the National Research Council

MR. WATTENBERG: I'm sorry.

MR. BAILEY: Actually, the interesting thing about the global warming debate, and we'll find this actually as the new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report comes out, is that the average temperature profile for the end of the next century, as a result of burning fossil fuels or human activities continues to go down and down and down. And now the bottom range of that, even in the current reports, is that the planet is expected to warm up about a degree to a degree and a half centigrade by the year 2100, if current trends continue. And no one is particularly concerned or worried about that.

MR. WATTENBERG: This original set of projections didn't start out at one to one and a half, it stated out at like 4 to 5 percent.

MR. BAILEY: It started out at about three to about six degrees centigrade, when it first started in the late '80s.

MR. WATTENBERG: Do you agree with that?

MR. FLAVIN: I think Ron is exaggerating a bit, I mean, they've come down slightly. But, I think the overall evidence in terms of the possible effects of climate change are very worrisome, in the sense that it is now understood that even a very small change in the global temperature will upset the balance in of the atmosphere a way that could cause catastrophic changes in regional climates. For example, if the temperature changed even slightly we might well see a significant reduction in the availability of moisture in the U.S. corn belt, which basically provides much of the world with its food base.

MR. WATTENBERG: What do you make of the fact that James Hanson of NASA was the original sort of most publicized scientific spokesman, appeared at then Senator Gore's hearings, saying, as I recall, that there is a 99 percent chance that we will have global warming in the 21st Century, and a couple of years ago with very little publicity and ad he said, we don't know anymore what's going on, whether it's going to go up or down, the evidence just isn't available? Same guy, what about that?

MR. FLAVIN: I think that's a mis-characterization, and certainly a mis-characterization of mainstream science. I mean, as Ron has just indicated, the official intergovernmental panel on climate change does project an increase. And, in fact, most scientists believe that we're already experiences global climate change. I mean, the temperatures are rising. If you look at the reports scientific reports, ice is melting all over the world, whether it's arctic, antarctic, glaciers in the Himalayas, ice is melting. There's no question the world is getting warmer, and the vast majority of scientists believe that this is connected with human causes.

MR. BAILEY: At rates that are much lower than the original crisis projected they would be. But, I should point out, ice is melting. For example, a recent report in Science Magazine about the ice shelf in antarctica melting, the fact is that it's melting at the same rate it's been melting for the last 10,000 years, and it hasn't increased at all. And it's right there in Science Magazine, as you say, let's go to the science on this. The models predict that, in fact, what would happen is the atmosphere will warm faster than the surface does. What we find in the NRC report is that is not correct. In fact, the surface is warming faster than the atmosphere, which is the exact opposite of what the models predict. Can we rely on the models for the future? I don't think so.

MR. FLAVIN: This has just been completely contradicted by a new set of studies that have been done that show that basically what is happening, is the very upper parts of the atmosphere are, in fact cooling, and it's because the heat is being trapped closer to the surface. It's exactly what the models projected.

MR. WATTENBERG: Let's go to the grand daddy of all these topics that, it seems

to me, impact on all of them. And I will frankly admit, as you both know, that I have a dog in this particular race, which is the issue of population. The environmental community, you can put that in any phrase you want, that's not a pejorative phrase in my lexicon, has made the point over the last 35-40 years, with increasing intensity, that there are too many people, there's a population explosion, it's growing malignantly, how can we feed these people, where will they get water. And I read the introduction in your book by Lester Brown, and he repeats it and says, well, yes, the rates are coming down a little, but still we're going to have another billion, another billion, another billion, there is this chaotic thing going on. Now, do you agree with that?

MR. FLAVIN: No, we say very clearly and directly, in not only this book but all of our writing, that there is great progress being made in terms of fertility. I'm not sure, maybe you and Ron need to have a debate not his, because Ron is not saying population is not a problem, he's saying that it's great that fertility rates are slowing down, and we may stabilize at 8 or 9 billion.

MR. WATTENBERG: They're not just slowing down, they're negative in almost half the countries of the world. And they're coming down in the developing countries, and people who say you're only going to reach stabilization are, in effect, saying the developing countries won't end up behaving as developed countries, which are negative.

MR. FLAVIN: The key point here, Ben, is that you've got to ask yourself why is this happening? And the fact is that countries around the world have adopted policies, and individuals have made decisions to lower their fertility rates. There are some very strong United Nations, for example, population programs, there are programs to help women in terms of education and healthcare. So, in effect, the world has responded to the alarms that were raised by Paul Ehrlich and others back in the '60s, and this is wonderful.

MR. WATTENBERG: You said the magic words, Paul Ehrlich.

MR. BAILEY: I'm sure that the women in Bangladesh have read The Population Bomb, and are just enacting it throughout their lives. I don't think so.

MR. FLAVIN: Their government might have.

MR. BAILEY: Yes, and the government created the fall in fertility in the United States, Germany, Italy, England, Japan, the government created that? No, people making their choices realizing that they're becoming richer, that their children are going to live longer made the choice for themselves.

MR. FLAVIN: The U.S. government supports family planning, the U.S. government supports domestic family planning.

MR. BAILEY: The U.S. government does not have a population policy.

MR. WATTENBERG: Hold on a minute, fertility rates are falling everywhere, whether there is United Nations presence, whether the government is encouraging a decrease in fertility, or an increase in fertility, it is happening now in sub-Saharan Africa, it is happening now in the Moslem world, where people said it never would. It is happening as a part of modernization. Now, part of modernization is education in reproductive health. So it becomes sort of a --

MR. FLAVIN: Is there a question that this is leading to?

MR. WATTENBERG: Yes, it was a comment on your thought that you put forward that this is happening because the good people of the world, like the World Watch Institute, Paul Ehrlich, and the United Nations were telling people how to behave and the nice little people were listening. And I'm saying, it is

happening organically as health gets better, as people move to cities, as women go into the workforce and so on, and so forth.

MR. FLAVIN: Can I respond?

MR. WATTENBERG: Please.

MR. FLAVIN: If you look at the rate of progress, the rate of fertility decline throughout the developing world, what you find is marked differences between different countries. Some have fallen very rapidly, in fact, there are parts of China today that have lower fertility rates today than the United States does. And then there are parts of Africa, much of the Islamic Middle East, and parts of India, with very high fertility rates. If you analyze what's going on --

MR. WATTENBERG: Very high fertility rates falling sharply.

MR. FLAVIN: Take an example, Iran had rapidly declining fertility rates under the Shah, they then shot up after the Islamic revolution, and now they're coming down again. So to say that there's just some natural law in place here, this has to do with politics, this has to do with public policy, it has to do with cultural norms. It is not a simple social phenomenon that happens on an automatic basis.

MR. WATTENBERG: But, if over a period of 20 years it happens in 180 of 180 countries, you have to say that something macro is going on.

Ron, I'm sorry.

MR. BAILEY: And the other two things you don't mention is where you find high population growth rates still, or high fertility are countries that are poor, where people don't have resources and goods and services, they're afraid for their lives. Therefore, they're trying to, if you will, provide for their old age by having more children, those kinds of things. And the fact of the matter is that modernization and poverty alleviation, through the creation of wealth, is the way to lower population. And government policy sort of trails along behind that, it does something at the margins, it's true, but only at the margins.

MR. WATTENBERG: Time out for a minute. We have gone through a lot of issues, which I wanted to do, so we hear both sides of these things. Let me ask both of you, what is the differing central principle that drives you each, almost predictably, to these differences?

MR. FLAVIN: Well, this is probably not the response you want to hear, Ben, but I hear your characterization of our views at the beginning of this program, and it's simply unbalanced. I mean, yes we think that there are plenty of environmental problems, yes, we think there are certain trends that are going in the wrong direction that need to be reversed. But, we're not saying everything is negative, and we're certainly not against the basic notion that technological progress can and will solve many problems, that there are changes in social norms that are possible. We believe very strongly in the use of market forces. So if you take that as being our point of view, I mean, maybe Ron wants to describe if and why he would disagree with that point of view. I think if you read through out entire book you will see that is, in fact, what we're saying.

MR. BAILEY: First of all, I'd like to say, I think that I've been reading World Watch's studies since they started. And they've moved --

MR. WATTENBERG: In 1984, when they sold --

MR. BAILEY: Millions of copies.

MR. WATTENBERG: It says over 1 million copies sold.

MR. FLAVIN: In roughly 30 languages.

MR. WATTENBERG: In roughly 30 languages, and that's a hell of a job.

MR. BAILEY: I've been reading their report since 1984, and I've noticed a very salutary movement in the direction of adopting more and more of markets to solve the problems, and I congratulate them on coming to see that as the way to go. One of the differences that I see between their approach and mine is they want to use market mechanisms as parts of government policy, I would prefer to allow people to have free choice with markets, and I think they'll make better choices that way.

MR. WATTENBERG: But, Chris is right when he says that to have free choice you have to have some boundaries of regulation set by government. I find it so amusing that the conservatives go around saying, what we really need in the developing world is transparency. Well, what is transparency? Transparency is a set of government regulations that says, you shall transpire, right?

MR. FLAVIN: Exactly, you would not have a stock exchange without the SEC.

MR. BAILEY: Actually, we do have stock exchanges all around the world without the SEC.

MR. WATTENBERG: And they're run by crooks.

MR. BAILEY: Some of them are. But, the fact of the matter is, of course you need governments to protect property rights, and to establish markets and to prevent fraud, and if it does those things, and it privatizes the resources, as opposed to minutely regulating the outflow of every plant, or trying to determine what the proper population size should be, or how many children you should have in your family, as in China, or those kinds of very intrusive government activities, then we'll do fine. We need markets and we need private property, and those things will bring about enormous changes in and of themselves, if we will get the government out of the way.

MR. WATTENBERG: Let me ask you a wrap up question. Let's perform a thought experiment. This is the year 2000, let's turn the clock ahead to the year 2050, and let us posit the pleasant thought, perhaps, that we're all still here, and we're all healthy and alert and have followed the developments of the previous half a century, from 2000 to 2050. I would posit that the argument would go like this, Ron would say those guys were wrong all along. And Chris would say, didn't we do a wonderful job for the world by calling attention to these things so things could work out as well as they have.

MR. FLAVIN: That's right.

MR. WATTENBERG: Is that where this argument ultimately goes?

MR. FLAVIN: I think that could be the case. I mean, for example, you take the issue of climate change. Will we still have a fossil fuel based energy system in the year 2050? I'm actually quite optimistic that we will not. I mean, I think we will actually have moved beyond fossil fuels. There are now oil company scientists that are saying that the stone age did not end because we ran out of stones, and the oil age is going to end long before we run out of oil.

MR. WATTENBERG: Do you agree with Chris?

MR. BAILEY: I do agree with Chris on this, in 2050 who knows what the power system of the world will be. But, it's kind of silly to sit here and think that U.N. bureaucrats, or government bureaucrats or the environmental community can

set up and design the world energy future, that would be like someone in 1900 trying to predict our world of airplanes, air conditioners, cars, whatever, that's just silly.

MR. WATTENBERG: We've got to get out in a minute.

Go ahead.

MR. FLAVIN: That is certainly not what we're doing, or I think any serious people that are working on the climate problem. What we need to do is to, for example, fix the imperfections in the market. There are a lot of market barriers out there, a lot of things keeping the current system in place. Then we need to let the market come forward with these new technologies, fuel cells, photovoltaics, wind turbines, these things are advancing enormously rapidly. And absolutely no bureaucrat should plan this out. The market will have to design the ultimate system. But, as you've indicated, Ben, government has to set the context for this kind of a change.

MR. WATTENBERG: Okay. We are running out of time. Thank you very much Ron Bailey. And thank you Chris Flavin.

And thank you. We at Think Tank encourage feedback from our viewers, it is very important to us. For Think Tank, I'm Ben Wattenberg.

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