



## IN MEMORIAM

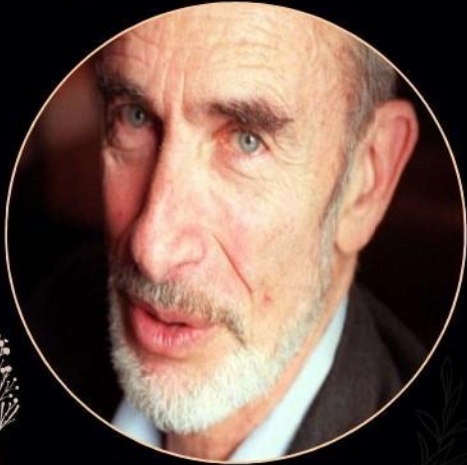
## Obituary, Professor Paul R. Ehrlich, ForMemRS, 1932 – 2026

*Obituary*  
**Professor Paul R. Ehrlich, ForMemRS**  
 1932 — 2026

*Linking nature, society and environment*

- Population and social pressure
- Resource use and environmental stress
- Biodiversity and ecosystem loss

*A vision of health and sustainability*




**1932 — 2026 | A legacy for future generations**

Ehrlich became widely known as an advocate for a smaller world population. He had been impressed by the presence of other people and their pressure on one another during a visit he and his wife Anne made to India. The Ehrlichs' book *The Population Bomb* (1968) argued that millions would die in the 1970s because overpopulation would be unsustainable [1-3]. Many of the book's predictions were falsified. But the authors maintained that the general warning remains valid, and indeed one can argue that it has not been overturned. For example, the Green Revolution checked the problem of famine to some extent, but it has not removed famine altogether, and preventing famine depends on commercial seeds and chemical fertilizers. Areas which appear to have a better relation between population numbers and geography, such as Australia, have inadequate water for agricultural purposes [4]. The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), where some countries depend on desalination (distilling) of water, have realized that their desalination plants are not immune to war and that they cannot rely on chemical fertilizers.

Undoubtedly, the pressure of too many people present in any limited space leads to a rise in aggression, the breakdown of equitable relations, and a deep mistrust expressed often by random

violence. The social violence of the U.S. resulting from the absurd tolerance of gun ownership (justified by the argument that the Constitution's 'right to bear arms' allows military weapons to be sold to civilians with no checks on them for psychological stability) tends to reinforce social mistrust and validate that social aggression.

Paul Ehrlich gained public attention because he was effective in his use of language and his statements of fact. He appeared many times on the *Johnny Carson Show*. This made him accessible to many. Like E.O. Wilson, Ehrlich struck a recognizable chord and it could be said that Wilson's grimmer thoughts in the context of his sociobiology buttress the general position taken by Paul Ehrlich. Ehrlich, Wilson [5,6], Lovelock [7,8], and *Limits to Growth* [9] prolong the influence of Malthus [10].

Thus, if there have not been famines equivalent to the expansive destruction of the Black Death (1347-1351), it should be noted that the plague which originated in Hong Kong and gripped Bombay (1896-1899 recurring in winter to 1914) has emerged elsewhere since then; that Covid-19 and HIV have flourished in areas of Africa comparable in extent to those affected by the Black Death, and with similar social effects. In early 2026, the welfare state is no longer a confident assumption. There are numerous threats to populations; and among them is the prospect of incurable infections (and mass deaths) because of widespread antibiotic resistance.

Paul Ehrlich was a Crafoord Laureate in biosciences, an honour of which he was justly proud, “for his research on the dynamics and genetics of fragmented populations and the importance of the distribution pattern for their survival probabilities”. This recognizes his fundamental work in co-evolution and refers to species such as orangutans. Ehrlich was formed as an entomologist with a special interest in butterflies. As Bing Professor of Population Studies, Department of Biology, Stanford University, he remained active and productive by travelling strenuously to share his knowledge and understanding worldwide. He provoked thought and tried to change the world, but realized that the international power structures favour consumerism and wealth accumulation and could not care less about the adverse environmental consequences of their behaviour. His work requires acceptance of the fact that mankind does indeed face final choices in the Anthropocene, and so the approaches of coercion and cooperation should be combined.

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