Can Nineveh Repent Again?


The subtitle of this volume by Paul and Anne Ehrlich—Politics, Consumption, and the Human Future—is evocative of the book’s contents; the title, One with Nineveh, is evocative of its forebodings. The thrust of One with Nineveh is to confirm the thesis of the “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity,” issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists in 1992, that “human beings and the natural world are on a collision course.” The evidence of that collision course is organized around the useful identity introduced by the authors some time ago:

Impact = population × affluence × technology,

where affluence is gross national product (GNP) per capita and technology is impact per unit of GNP. Much new and old information is clearly and convincingly presented in this framework, interspersed with apt personal recollections. The authors make no attempt to present the scientific or economic first principles from which the world scientists’ understanding and consequent warning follow. Instead, they present a wealth of empirical evidence, along with commonsense arguments, to show that the warning is valid.

The textbook written earlier by the Ehrlichs and John Holdren, Ecoscience: Population, Resources, Environment (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1977), took a more basic conceptual approach that focused on equipping the student reader to follow the scientific arguments. I mention this not because I think the Ehrlichs should have written a textbook this time around, but to lament the fact that Ecoscience has long been out of print; evidently the publishers thought the book should be “dumbed down,” and the authors disagreed. As one who taught undergraduates from that book for several years, I can testify that those students found it accessible—sometimes with a little help, but then what was I there for? Also, the Ehrlichs probably felt their time was better spent educating the general public up to some minimum rather than helping dumb down the universities. After all, in a democracy policy cannot rise above the level of understanding of the average citizen, and the Ehrlichs deserve a standing ovation for all they have done to raise that average, as well as for extending the margins of knowledge.

I cannot review here the authors’ extensive summary of the facts and issues underlying population policy, immigration, economic growth and its limits, inequality, corporate reform, globalization, and so forth. I can, however, report that the discussion is fair and judicious, gracefully written, and without obeisance to the icons of political correctness or to too-easy, dispassionate consensus.

The book’s policy recommendations mostly involve getting prices right, in the many senses of that term. For example, parents should bear most of the cost of having children; growth-inducing subsidies, especially in agriculture, should be eliminated; and consumers should bear the full social and environmental cost of their consumption. The authors’ support for a consumption tax is especially welcome, but I would have been happier if, instead of offering a mild critique, they had rejected the value-added tax in favor of a tax on throughput (that is, a tax on “that to which value is added,” the metabolic flow from source to sink, not on the value added to that flow by labor and capital, which is really income). Also welcome were suggestions for limiting the power of corporations—their size and their phony status as persons under the Bill of Rights. The authors recognize that more is required than the many good policies they identify: “Nothing less is needed than a rapid ethical evolution toward readjusting our relationship with nature so that the preservation of biodiversity becomes akin to a religious duty” (p. 270). “Preservation of biodiversity” may sound like an innocent technical term, but as the Ehrlichs show, it really means limiting the scale of the human occupation of our finite globe. Neoclassical economists have so far either aggressively ignored this limit or, in effect, treated it as a religious matter by defying technology as savior.

The last point leads me to the evocative and enigmatic title. The phrase “one with Nineveh” comes from Rudyard Kipling’s 1897 poem “Recessional,” most of which is prominently reprinted at the beginning of the Ehrlichs’ book, with the remaining stanzas supplied in the endnotes. I had not read the poem since freshman English, and I find it even more moving now than I did then. But why did the authors choose it for their title and epigraph? Is it just a literary hook to snag English majors, or a credo foreshadowing the book’s message? I think the latter, but it is not easy to spell out the reasons, which may be why the authors left this task to the reader. Speculation is irresistible. A “recessional” is the closing hymn sung as the choir exits the sanctuary. Did Kipling mean that in 1897, Western civilization’s “worship service” had already ended, and that in the future the danger would be that we forget what is worthy of worship—hence the refrain “lest we forget”? Kipling’s poem is a hymn, in fact a prayer, since every stanza addresses God in an attitude of contrition and supplication. Far from a celebration of imperialism, something often reasonably enough attributed to Kipling, this poem is a prayer of repentance for the national sins of imperialism. Could the