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Bee All & End All

The bee holocaust myth is just another example of our strange yearning for catastrophe, writes *Rod Liddle*

THE WORLD IS GOING TO END IN 2012, apparently – hopefully, just before the start of the Olympic Games. Armageddon may come about as a consequence of those monkeys firing up the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, where they have al-Qaeda operatives attempting to create black holes that will swallow the Earth whole, or reduce it to the size of an extremely dense tennis ball.

Imagine seven billion of us trying to stand on a tennis ball. You just hope personal hygiene standards won't be sacrificed. Or perhaps it will be giant solar flares frazzling the Earth, or a sudden reversal of the Earth's magnetic field, which will see us cooked like cheap burgers in a microwave oven. How do we know this? Apparently, the Mayans predicted it. They'll look pretty stupid if they were wrong, the Mayans. Nostradamus predicted it too, and so, of course, did the Bible. One way or another we are destined to perish very soon. There's a film out soon called *2012* that will explain it all, if you're interested.

I wonder where this yearning for catastrophe comes from? It seems to exist inside most of us; perhaps it is a Darwinian trait, a by-product of self-consciousness. Obviously, only people with lime jelly for a brain, or those who have become the captives of some psychotic cult, seriously believe the stuff about 2012. That's easy to demolish through even the most cursory examination of the evidence, plus the knowledge that the Mayans were, as civilisations go, absolutely useless and shouldn't be believed about anything. But normal, apparently sane people seem to wish for catastrophe too: they are determined that calamity will befall us all, and are furious when they are gainsaid.

You hear it every time a "climate-change" evangelist opens his or her mouth – and I wonder if ecological disaster is an upmarket version of the 2012 scenario, a catastrophe the chattering class of every Western country have eagerly bought into, a

politically correct Armageddon that requires us to be endlessly self-flagellating (and even that, we are lectured, will not avert the crisis, nor even much lessen its impact). My own view of climate change

(or global warming, as it used to be called before the evangelists changed tack when they realised everything wasn't getting warmer) is absolutely open. I am a little sceptical of man-made climate change because, for me, the raw statistics do not quite add up, but I certainly wouldn't rule it out. And I also reckon that most of the stuff urged upon us in order to address climate change makes sense for other environmental reasons anyway. But this is not good enough; this makes me a climate-change denier – you will note the implication of such a phrase, its implied resonance – and that's not on.

Because one is no longer allowed even to question climate change: it is a fact, and there's an end to it. And to the believers the "fact" of climate change is a "fact" to be held sacred and never to be challenged. And all the while you feel that these people actually want the Earth to be heating up, the polar bears to die and the floods to engulf so that we will all burn, starve or drown. If somehow it could be proved tomorrow that climate change was a huge con, these people wouldn't be relieved – they'd feel robbed of something intrinsic to themselves.

So what about bees? You will undoubtedly have read many articles over the past year or so telling you that the bees are dying out and that, as a consequence of this, we will die out, too. Bees, we are told, are crucial to the pollination of the world's foodstuffs, so if they die there will be no more food. And they are dying. Is this true? The latest evidence suggests this: there are more bees buzzing around than ever before and even if they all died out it would have only a minuscule effect upon world food production. We'll come back to the evidence for that shortly, but let's look at the bee holocaust myth first.



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There is, we are told, a global pollination crisis caused by a dramatic reduction in the number of bees. We are further told that bees are “largely” responsible for the pollination of world food crops – when a figure is put on this “largely”, it is usually between 70 and 80 per cent. There is a film out at the moment called *Vanishing of the Bees* – another one of those sky-falling-in

eco-docs, like the stuff done by Al Gore about climate change. There’s a non-fiction book called *A World Without Bees* by Alison Benjamin and Brian McCallum, and the notable Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland has written a dystopian fantasy about a beeless world.

There are articles in newspapers and online, such as “Are GM Crops Killing Bees?” (No, they’re not.) The European Union has demanded urgent bee action and British MPs have not been lax, either. There are two early day motions insisting that something be done, sharpish, about the bee holocaust. One MP has on his

There was an article in the academic imprint *Current Biology* recently, summarised and made intelligible for the lay reader in *New Scientist* last month. It’s by two pollination experts, Lawrence Harder from the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, and Marcelo Aizen, a researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina. They set about pinning down a couple of myths.

First, it is not true that there has been a mysterious worldwide collapse in honey bee populations. In fact, managed hives (which contain the bees which do the vast majority of

website the famous quote from Einstein: “If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe then man would only have four years of life left.” And here’s the spooky thing: the bees started disappearing last year – four years, then, takes you up to... aaaaggggh! We’re going to die!

Here’s another spooky thing: Einstein never said that stuff about bees; somebody else made it up and it has somehow got itself attributed to him over the years. This is a lesson; it is how Armageddon works, through Chinese whispers and pseudo-science. And everyone is taken in, not least the politicians.

our pollinating) have increased by a remarkable 45 per cent over the last five years. This is largely down to more managed hives in South

America, Africa and Asia. It is perfectly true that there has been a reduction in the US and Western Europe; this may be partly due to outsourcing to the Third World, where production costs are cheaper, and some reductions in the West may have been the consequence of viruses or colony collapse disorder. But these latter are merely short-term blips. The bee disaster scenario is dependent upon data that is far too regional to take seriously and “not representa-

tive of global trends”. The truth is that there are more bees in the world than ever.

Second, as Harder and Aizen put it: “It is a myth that humanity would starve without bees.” While about 70 per cent of our most productive crops are animal-pollinated (by bees, hoverflies and the like), very few rely on animal pollination completely. Furthermore, most staple foods – wheat, rice and corn – do not depend on animal pollination at all. They are wind-pollinated, or self-pollinating. If all the bees in the world dropped dead tomorrow afternoon, it would reduce our food production by only between 4 and 6 per cent.

Further still, the average yield of animal-pollinated crops has increased quite dramatically over the past decade or so, which you would not expect to see if Armageddon was just around the corner. Harder and Aizen have a warning that luxury foods might be hit by a pollination crisis in the future, because demand for them is outstripping the pollinating capacities of even the increased numbers of bees. But they say: “Overall we must conclude that claims of a global crisis in agricultural production are untrue.” Their paper does not yet seem to have been picked up by the mainstream press, still less the campaigners, the politicians or the distributors of the film *Vanishing of the Bees*.

Nobody likes an Armageddon whipped from beneath their feet like that. You hold on to it, tight, and hope that it’s true.

This is a lesson; it is how Armageddon works, through Chinese whispers and pseudo-science. And everyone is taken in, not least the politicians.