



Insight

40 Years Later: Air Quality Has Never Been Better

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From [Carpe Diem](#)

Earth Day (April 22) is only six weeks away, and I just noticed that the EPA recently updated air quality data for 2008 and thought it was worth featuring now in anticipation of the 40th anniversary of Earth Day:

Predictions made around the time of the first Earth Day in 1970:

“Air pollution is certainly going to take hundreds of thousands of lives in the next few years alone,” Paul Ehrlich in an interview in *Mademoiselle* magazine, April 1970.

Ehrlich also predicted that in 1973, 200,000 Americans would die from air pollution, and that by 1980 the life expectancy of Americans would be 42 years.

“By 1985, air pollution will have reduced the amount of sunlight reaching earth by one half...” *Life* magazine, January 1970.

“Man must stop pollution and conserve his resources, not merely to enhance existence but to save the race from the intolerable deteriorations and possible extinction,” *The New York Times* editorial, April 20, 1970.

The world will be “...eleven degrees colder in the year 2000. This is about twice what it would take to put us into an ice age,” Kenneth Watt, speaking at Swarthmore University, April 19, 1970.

“We are in an environmental crisis which threatens the survival of this nation, and of the world as a suitable place of human habitation,” biologist Barry Commoner, University of Washington, writing in the journal *Environment*, April 1970.

MP: Here we are 40 years later, the U.S. population has increased by more than 50%, traffic volume (miles driven) in the U.S. has increased 160%, and real GDP has increased 204%; and yet air quality in the U.S. is better than ever - nitrous dioxide, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide and lead have all decreased between 46% and 92% between 1980 and 2008 (see chart).

Air Quality: NO₂, SO₂, CO, Lead 1980 to 2008

