

THE SKEPTICAL CON

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For too long, people have been fooled by the health police and their endless litany: tobacco kills those who smoke and those nearby, while adding billions to health care costs. Here are the facts: millions have smoked to an old age, and millions of non-smokers have died young. Cigarettes reduce stress and improve self-esteem and peer acceptance among teenagers, while health consequences, such as yellow teeth, are manageable. People worry about smoky bars and restaurants, but on average there is enough clean indoor air for every Canadian. Anti-smoking activists rarely consider the costs of their success, including unemployment for oncologists, sore throat lozenge-makers and corner store cashiers.

And finally, someone has provided for the environment the same service I just did for tobacco. In *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (*TSE*), Bjørn Lomborg debunks the myth of a degraded planet. For his efforts, he has received tumultuous applause. But just as health advocates might dispute my choice of "facts" about tobacco, there has been a vigorous reaction to Lomborg's claims from scientists and environmentalists alike. The result has been a sharply polarized, but ultimately absurd, controversy.

By Lomborg's own account, the story began in 1997. In a Los Angeles bookstore, the Danish professor of statistics (and Greenpeace member) came across Julian Simon's well-known claims that the world is becoming ever richer and cleaner. Shocked, he set out to prove Simon wrong. But to his professed surprise, he found Simon's account, if not always exactly right, to be quite convincing. In 1998, he presented his views in several newspaper articles and a book in his home country, provoking vigorous debate. The English-speaking world, however, only took notice with the publication of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* in 2001.

Lomborg's basic argument can be quickly summarized. The world is cleaner, and people are healthier and more prosperous than ever before. More progress is coming. Problems such as waste disposal, contaminants, food scarcity and acid rain are far less serious than is widely believed. Cures for problems like climate change



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— National Post

may be worse than the disease. New technologies such as genetic engineering promise large benefits, but risk rejection because of irrational fears. These fears have been generated by environmentalists twisting the scientific truth, and are eagerly spread by media that prefer scare stories.

ADORATION AND REACTION

Oddly, the media supposedly addicted to bad news just loved Lomborg's happy tale. The *Daily Telegraph* of London proclaimed it "a remarkable book, probably the most important book on the environment ever written." The *Economist* went even further:

"This is one of the most valuable books on public policy – not merely environmental policy – to have been written for the intelligent general reader in the past ten years.... *The Skeptical Environmentalist* is a triumph." The *National Post* weighed in with an estimate of the book's political consequences: "*The Skeptical Environmentalist* marks a critical environmental moment.... We can forget those dreary old idols: Paul Ehrlich, Lester Brown with his Worldwatch Institute, Greenpeace and all the others. They have been exiled into the darkness. Eco-optimism can begin to rise over the Earth. After Lomborg, the environmental movement will begin to wither."

During the last months of 2001, this frenzy of adoration galvanized a scientific community already concerned, given recent events, that environmental issues had been relegated to the political margins. Email distribution lists hummed, and articles, even special issues of journals, were quickly planned. Dozens of scientists and others active in environmental affairs lined up to critique Lomborg's claims. Peter Gleick, a water expert cited by Lomborg, noted that there "is nothing original or unique in Lomborg's book.... What is new, perhaps, is the scope and variety of errors he makes." Paul Ehrlich claimed that "*TSE* is packed with nonsense, old and new.... The book is full of distortions, and demolitions of straw men, often 'documented' by repeated references to dubious secondary sources."

TWISTING THE EVIDENCE

Close examination by experts quickly identified many problems with Lomborg's arguments. As I did in my claims regarding cigarettes, Lomborg uses evidence inappropriately. He often relies on uncertain data, without, however, acknowledging the uncertainties. For example, to counter claims of widespread deforestation, he states, on the basis of statistics from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, that forest cover has increased during the last 50 years. But these statistics are problematic: they are the creation of national agencies that often have an interest in over-

estimating forest areas. "Forest" land can include once diverse forests now replaced by single-species plantations, or partially cleared land, or, indeed, land with no trees at all, but that is still classified as "forest." Lomborg appears to be either unaware that environmental data can be uncertain, or chooses to ignore this.

Inconsistent interpretation of data is also seen in how Lomborg's assessment of their credibility varies according to how well they support his argument. For example, the as-yet hypothetical benefits of genetically modified organisms Lomborg accepts as proven, while their potential risks, even those that have been directly observed, are "exaggerated." And while estimates of the economic costs of climate change action are reliable, predictions of the impacts of climate change itself are merely hypotheses. There are, evidently, limits to Lomborg's skepticism.

Lomborg also tends to define problems narrowly. In his view, only certain aspects are relevant. For example, he suggests that concerns regarding the impact of waste disposal are exaggerated, because landfill sites take up a relatively small area of land. Almost no mention, however, is made of other impacts of these sites, such as contaminant leaching, truck traffic, or the waste of energy and materials.

A more general bias is also evident. Only those impacts that affect humans directly, and that can be expressed in economic terms, usually enter the picture. Other species, and ecosystems, are often ignored. Thus, loss of biodiversity becomes less urgent because most species lack economic value. The ecological impacts of climate change, such as damaged coral reefs and loss of Arctic ice (the essential habitat of polar bears) are also ignored, as are indirect effects of ecosystem damage on human health.

Finally, Lomborg relies, wrongly, on a global perspective. Regional trends and inequalities are often more important, but these are usually missed when the focus is on the entire planet. That the world as a whole has enough water means little to the millions of people in water-short regions, or to those whose supply has been eliminated through industrial pollution, large-scale water development or privatization. Similarly, global forest trends influenced by small increases in forest cover in developed countries, mask bigger decreases in tropical areas, where biodiversity is often greater. Very often as well, the crucial dimension of an environmental problem is not absolute quantity of a resource, but inequalities of access. A global focus ignores this.

USING AND MISUSING SCIENCE

From the start, Lomborg presents his account as a reasoned, science-based examination of environmental issues – a counterweight to the partial or biased use of science encountered in environmental debates. His 2930 footnotes drive home the point. But while he claims to be rescuing good, respectable science from the clutches of environmentalists, my survey of the reviews of his book did not uncover a single environmental scientist thanking him for this service. Instead, as I have noted, dozens of scientists have condemned his errors and distortions, across a range of disciplines. In short, the image he presents of a strictly scientific, factual account is an illusion.

If *The Skeptical Environmentalist* is not a factual account of the state of the world, what is it? Ultimately, it's a political statement. Lomborg is insisting on four things: on proof of harm before acting on environmental problems; on restricting concern to problems that affect humans directly; on the global view as the only source of reliable knowledge; and on the irrelevance of inequalities of wealth and power to environmental problems. Each of these points has powerful political implications. Lomborg is rejecting four widely accepted ideas: the need for a precautionary approach to risks; the value of an ecological, rather than a human-centered perspective on the environment; the value of local, human experience as a way of understanding the world; and the need for justice in any vision of a sustainable future.

The Skeptical Environmentalist shows how a heavy use of science is no guarantee of objectivity: values and political preferences will still operate, shaping how data are selected, interpreted and used. This is not necessarily a problem: values infuse virtually all accounts of the world. Honest recognition of this, as in classics such as *Silent Spring*, only enhances the value of a careful presentation of scientific information. What is deplorable are arguments cloaked in the apparatus of science, imparting a spurious objectivity to political preferences, and denying the possibility of reasoned dissent. ▲

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Follow Up

www.lomborg.com Lomborg's own Web site.

www.anti-lomborg.com Environmental writers, academics and activists expose flaws in Lomborg's analyses.

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