

The Ideological Environmentalist

Challenging the Orthodoxy of “Green” Science

When he set out to dispute the central claims of the global environmentalist movement, Bjorn Lomborg must have known that he would make some enemies and draw some fire. But he could hardly have imagined the scale of the controversy he would arouse.

Lomborg, a Danish statistician, sought in his 2001 book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* to subject some key environmentalist dogmas to critical scrutiny, and when he did, he discovered that in many prominent cases the facts simply did not support the familiar conclusions.

Lomborg hardly minced words in saying so, arguing that most claims of environmental disaster are totally misguided: “We will not lose our forests; we will not run out of energy, raw materials, or water. We have reduced atmospheric pollution in the cities of the developed world and have good reason to believe that this will also be achieved in the developing world. Our oceans have not been defiled, our rivers have become cleaner and support more life.... Nor is waste a particularly big problem.... The problem of the ozone layer has been more or less solved. The current outlook on the development of global warming does not indicate a catastrophe.... And, finally, our

chemical worries and fear of pesticides are misplaced and counterproductive.”

Lomborg’s hefty book backs up these claims with reams of statistics, data, and analysis (including almost three thousand footnotes, two thousand bibliographical references, and hundreds of figures and charts) that systematically demolish the principal elements of the familiar environmentalist picture of global degradation and impending disaster.

That picture has been at the core of the worldwide Green movement—and combined with a series of proposed policies that amount to a dismantling of Western capitalism and the modern way of life, it has attained the status of dogma for much of the Left in America and Europe.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Lomborg’s book was met with passionate resistance in Green circles worldwide. Activists rejected the book as propaganda; ecologists and earth scientists dismissed Lomborg as lacking credentials and expertise in their field; and many major media outlets just ignored the book and refused to bring it to the attention of their readers, listeners, and viewers. Those that did review it very often engaged in truly stunning, and purely ideologically-motivated, distortion.

Both *Science* and *Nature*, the most prestigious scientific journals in the world, panned the book with sharp critiques that later turned out to be statistically and factually flawed. *Scientific American* went much further, publishing a special 11-page section in its January 2002 edition dedicated to trashing Lomborg's book. The section included an editorial and four separate reviews—all of them by environmental activists (two of whom were actually directly criticized in the book), and all of them thoroughly derogatory. No space was given to scientists or activists who might support the book or to Lomborg himself.

But this attack backfired badly. As it turned out, the magazine's editors and the four critics all made gross errors of fact, both in their descriptions of the book and in their contentions in response to it. Lomborg wrote a lengthy response, answering his critics point by point, but *Scientific American* refused to publish it, and even threatened to sue Lomborg for copyright violation when he posted his response along with the original *Scientific American* text on his own website. Eventually, under pressure, the magazine relented somewhat and published Lomborg's response on its website, where it can still be found today.

But Lomborg's ordeals at the hands of the Green movement were far from over, and the most extreme and absurd assault would come in his own country. In January 2003, an organization with the rather Orwellian name "The Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty" (DCSD) published a scathing, if scantily supported, attack on the book, finally calling it—as we might have guessed—scientifically dishonest. The report relied heavily on the *Scientific American* reviews, and on other popular publications in a number of coun-

tries, but seemed to involve no independent assessment of Lomborg's facts or methods. *The Economist* magazine, which reviewed the DCSD report, concluded that "the panel's ruling—objectively speaking—is incompetent and shameful."

Hundreds of Danish scientists agreed, and filed a protest against the DCSD report, both for failure to adequately assess Lomborg's book, and for what they considered to be an undue intrusion of crass political motives into the work of Danish academics.

In response to the controversy, the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (which oversees the DCSD) formed its own panel to review Lomborg's book and the DCSD report. In December 2003, the ministry released its report, which concluded that the DCSD review of Lomborg's work was "completely devoid of documentation" and unsupported by evidence. "It is not sufficient that criticism of a researcher's work exists," the ministry continued. "The DCSD must consider the criticisms and take a position on whether or not they are justified and why," but "the DCSD has not documented where [Dr. Lomborg] has shown any bias or dishonesty in his argumentation." The verdict of the Danish committee has therefore been overturned, and Lomborg's reputation restored.

In itself, this story of smear campaigns and rank dishonesty by prominent scientists in the service of ideological dogma has much to teach us about the limits of scientific objectivity and the passions bubbling just beneath the surface of many scientific controversies. But more importantly, the Lomborg affair should serve as a cautionary note to an environmental movement that has long since parted ways with the facts of global ecology, and wedded itself

instead to a distinctly leftist ideology that rejects the prosperous and industrious Western way of life more than it concerns itself with the state of the environment.

A properly grounded and responsible environmentalist movement stands to do the world a lot of good. Clearly, we would benefit from a greater awareness of the impact of our actions on our precious planet. But the fact is that capitalism and technology are not inherently at odds with environmental stewardship and real concern for global ecology. In a great many ways, the condition of our environment has improved in recent years without requiring us to abandon our way of life—and indeed, precisely *because* of our adop-

tion of new technologies and innovations. A refusal to accept these plain and basic facts, and an insistence on increasingly implausible doomsday scenarios, does no credit to the environmental movement, and no good for the environment.

There may be cases where the dangers are quite real, and where technological advances may truly have to be restrained for our long-term good. But if environmentalists wish to be taken seriously when they point to these genuine problems, they must base their claims in fact, and must put a stop to the patently dishonest Chicken Little tactics that have too often characterized the Green movement in the past few decades.