



A few reviews of Lomborg's "Cool It"

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[Editor's note by Super G] *There's an advertisement for Bjorn Lomborg's new book on the left. The editors and staff debated whether or not to run the ad. On one hand, Lomborg's attempt to "muddy the waters" in the discussion on climate change can be seen as counter-productive to goals of The Oil Drum. On the other hand, a policy that separates editorial and advertising decisions can prevent advertisers from unduly influencing our content. (The corollary is that we have run ads we don't like.) In the end, we've decided to run the ad alongside the critiques of Lomborg's book below.*

Bill McKibben in the [New York Review of Books](#):

Doubtless scientists and economists will spend many hours working their way through *Cool It*, flagging the distortions and half-truths as they did with Lomborg's earlier book. In fact, though, its real political intent soon becomes clear, which is to try to paint those who wish to control carbon emissions as well-meaning fools who will inadvertently block improvements in the life of the poor.

Just ask yourself this question: Why has Lomborg decided to compare the efficacy of (largely theoretical) funding to stop global warming with his other priorities, like fighting malaria or ensuring clean water? If fighting malaria was his real goal, he could as easily have asked the question: Why don't we divert to it some of the (large and nontheoretical) sums spent on, say, the military? The answer he gave when I asked this question at our dialogue was that he thought military spending was bad and that therefore it made more sense to compare global warming dollars with other "good" spending. But of course this makes less sense. If he thought that money spent for the military was doing damage, then he could kill two birds with one stone by diverting some of it to his other projects. Proposing that, though, would lose him much of the right-wing support that made his earlier book a best seller—he'd no longer be able to count on even *The Wall Street Journal* editorial page.

The Wall Street Journal is indeed more supportive:

[A Calm Voice in a Heated Debate](#)

In this world of Republicans and Democrats, meat-eaters and vegetarians, dog lovers and cat lovers, we have a new divide. On one side are global-warming believers. They've

heard Al Gore's inconvenient truths and, along with the staff of Time magazine, feel "worried, very worried." Humanity faces no greater threat than a warming Earth, they say, and government must drastically curb carbon-dioxide emissions. On the other side are those who don't think that the Earth is warming; and even if it is, they don't think that man is causing it; and even if man is to blame, it isn't clear that global warming is bad; and even if it is, efforts to fix it will cost too much and may, in the end, do more harm than good.

Standing in the practical middle is Bjorn Lomborg, the free-thinking Dane who, in "The Skeptical Environmentalist" (2001), challenged the belief that the environment is going to pieces. Mr. Lomborg is now back with "Cool It," a book brimming with useful facts and common sense.

Given that the "middle" for the WSJ is usually the position halfway between theirs and Hillary Clinton's (on foreign policy) or Robert Rubin (on the economy), one can presume that it's the same in this case...

Meanwhile, Chris Mooney writes on [DeSmogBlog](#) about Lomborg's book comments on hurricanes, his area of expertise:

Lomborg starts off his treatment of the hurricane-climate issue by showing how some environmentalists have over-hyped the science, either by directly linking climate change to individual events like Hurricane Katrina or by ascribing too much certainty to conclusions that are still the subject of considerable expert debate. Here, the "skeptical environmentalist" does indeed score some easy points: Greens should have been much more cautious on this subject in the wake of Katrina. Lomborg is also right to note that even if we're worried about worsening hurricanes due to global warming, it doesn't necessarily follow that our most immediate policy solution should simply be to cut greenhouse gas emissions. We are committed to significant warming no matter what happens, and if this warming is going to spark stronger or more destructive hurricanes on average, the most immediate policy prescription ought instead to be investing in better hurricane preparedness (although of course there are many other valid reasons to cap emissions).

But from here, Lomborg grows increasingly misleading. Before long, we find him citing a late 2006 statement from the World Meteorological Organization as representative of the current scientific consensus on the relationship between hurricanes and global warming. There's nothing wrong with the statement itself, but Lomborg reduces its ten points down to only three--all of which cut in Lomborg's ideological favor--while failing to share the rest of what we know with his readers. In fact, read in full, the statement outlines a number of ways global warming should worsen hurricane impacts that are a matter of consensus (to say nothing of potentially larger magnitude changes that are still debated but that may well be happening). Consider these two "consensus" points that Lomborg completely omits: "It is likely that some increase in tropical cyclone peak wind-speed and rainfall will occur if the climate continues to warm. Model studies and theory project a 3-5% increase in wind-speed per degree Celsius increase of tropical sea surface temperatures"; and "If the projected rise in sea level due to global warming occurs, then the vulnerability to tropical cyclone storm surge flooding would increase."

Having downplayed some of the more troubling elements of the scientific consensus-- and simply dismissed the possibility of more dramatic changes that are currently being debated--Lomborg then seizes on one item in the WMO statement in particular--"The recent increase in societal impact from tropical cyclones has been largely caused by rising concentrations of population and infrastructure in coastal regions"--and runs with it. It is indeed an accepted position among hurricane specialists that the spike in recent storm damage is largely the result of having more people and property in harm's way. But from here Lomborg leaps to the totally incorrect conclusion that changes to hurricanes themselves as a result of global warming are a concern that can be minimized.

(...)

As a result, when it comes to hurricanes, he only tells the side of the story that will help him downplay the seriousness of global warming.

Salon also has its own [book review](#):

Global warming is not as bad as it's made out to be, argues Bjørn Lomborg. But he cherry-picks evidence to manufacture a scientific and economic consensus that doesn't exist.

They also have an [interview with Lomborg](#) himself:

I agree that when you make it more expensive to use fossil fuels, people will spend more money on research and development. But let's not buy things right now that make us feel good but result in fairly trivial carbon cuts. As you probably know, we have lots of windmills in Denmark. We felt incredibly good about this in the '80s and '90s. So we spent a lot on windmills that turned out to be inefficient. Now we basically have to take down all our old windmills and put up the new efficient ones. My point is that maybe we shouldn't have put up the first ones. We should have invested in research and development and waited to put up bigger, better windmills.

But wasn't that a necessary process? Creating the first windmills is what led to the development of better ones.

Yes, but if you want to get a better windmill, maybe you put up one or 10 or even 100. Economists disagree on this. But you don't need 1,000 or 10,000. My point is: Don't do stuff before it's efficient, but make sure you get faster to the point where it gets efficient.

(...)

I'm simply saying, "Don't trust me, just like you shouldn't trust Jim Hansen."

(...)

It's true that a lot of people say that Kyoto is an insurance, although it's typically not

economists. It's shrewd but it's a drastic misuse of the word "insurance." Insurance means that you pay a small premium and if an unlikely event happens, you get all your money back. If your house burns down, you get the money so you can buy a new house. It amounts to a reduction in the chance of something bad happening. But by buying insurance against climate change, if your house burns down, you don't get anything. You could say you get a door back.

To use my favorite metaphor, saying "insurance" is like talking about lowering the speed on highways. It ensures you a little more safety, but it also has clear costs. And we need to have a conversation of asking, How quick should we drive? Clearly it shouldn't be 250 miles per hour, and likewise it shouldn't be 5 miles per hour. We need to have that sensible discussion. I'm happy to have the discussion of whether it should be 55 or 50, but I think it's silly when people come and say it should be 5.

(...)

You write: "Alarmism has a long history in the climate debate. Perhaps most chillingly, this was evident in the witch trials of medieval Europe." Are you really comparing Gore, Bill McKibben, the Natural Resources Defense Council, New Scientist magazine to the leaders of the Inquisition?

No, no, not all.

What's the purpose of that analogy?

It's to point out that weather has always been a huge part of human discourse.

To finish, the final word to Bill McKibben, from the first review above:

Lomborg casts himself as the voice of reason in this debate, contending with well-meaning but woolly-headed scientists, bureaucrats, environmentalists, politicians, and reporters. I got a preview of some of these arguments in May when we engaged in a dialogue at Middlebury College in Vermont; they struck me then, and strike me now in written form, as tendentious and partisan in particularly narrow ways. Lomborg has appeared regularly on right-wing radio and TV programs, and been summoned to offer helpful testimony by, for instance, Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, famous for his claim that global warming is a hoax. That Lomborg disagrees with him and finds much of the scientific analysis of global warming accurate doesn't matter to Inhofe; for his purposes, it is sufficient that Lomborg opposes doing much of anything about it.

But Lomborg's actual arguments turn out to be weak, a farrago of straw men and carefully selected, shopworn data that holds up poorly in light of the most recent research, both scientific and economic. He calculates at great length, for instance, his claim that the decline in the number of people dying from cold weather will outweigh the increase in the number of people dying from the heat, leading him to the genial conclusion that a main effect of global warming may be that "we just notice people wearing slightly fewer layers of winter clothes on a winter's evening." But in April 2007, Working Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the panel of experts whose scientific data he prefers to cite, released a report showing, among

many other things, that fewer deaths from cold exposure "will be outweighed by the negative health effects of rising temperatures world-wide, especially in developing countries."



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