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Media Sheep

How Did *The Skeptical Environmentalist* pull the wool over the eyes of so many editors?

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COMMENTARY

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How did The Skeptical Environmentalist pull the wool over the eyes of so many editors?

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Last summer, a now-infamous book called *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* caused a great splash in the media. Written by a young Danish statistician, it was presented as a shocking reexamination of the “facts” about the world’s great environmental issues—it claimed that environmental scientists and organizations were falsely alarming the public about such problems as global warming, deforestation, and pollution. The gist of the book, echoing a now-familiar claim of the late Julian Simon and such right-wing organizations as the Competitive Enterprise Institute, was that whatever environmental problems exist will solve themselves, and no interventions by governments are needed.

Serious environmental scientists who looked into the book to find out how the author had come to such conclusions quickly dismissed it as a foolish polemic written by a non-scientist, and did not bother to respond to it. Much to their dismay, however, editors at the *Economist*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* all published glowing reviews by writers who were apparently unfamiliar (whether willfully or through

lack of reading) with what peer-reviewed scientists say. Taking Lomborg’s words at face value, the world’s media jumped on the bandwagon, issuing a plethora of derivative stories “revealing” that Lomborg had exposed environmentalists as *wrong about virtually everything they were saying*.

These stories took environmental scientists by surprise (most had never been asked by the reporters for their views), and months passed before the scientists realized they would have to respond—or else watch Lomborg’s claims confuse legislators and regulators, and poison the well of public environmental information.

But respond they did, demonstrating in field after field that it is Lomborg’s book, not the work of tens of thousands of their colleagues, that has duped the public. On these three pages, we have summarized just a few of the main claims Lomborg makes, and what the experts have to say about them. The summaries are followed by some brief comments about how such a fraud could have occurred, and what dangers it signals about how environmental information is being disseminated to the public in today’s media.

Lomborg’s Claims—and the Scientists’ Responses

On Forest Cover

Lomborg writes that according to what he calls “the longest data series” available, forest cover has expanded since 1950. To make this claim, he uses an agricultural data series that the U.N. discontinued in 1994 because of inaccuracies, according to the head of the U.N.’s Forest Resources Assessment, who also notes that this agriculture production data was never intended to determine forest cover in the first place.

The record: The U.N.’s Forest Resources Assessment actually says that since 1980 an average of 16 million hectares of natural forest has been converted to other uses each year. During the 1990s alone, the assessment reports that the world lost 4.2 percent of its natural forests. And because the U.N. only reports what has been *permanently* converted, not what is logged and left to, perhaps, regenerate, the actual amount is much greater. According to the World Resources Institute, “almost half the world’s original forest is gone, much of it since 1970.”

On Fisheries

Lomborg writes that “marine productivity has almost doubled since 1970.”

The record: Eleven of the world's 15 most important fishing areas have declined in fish populations, and catches of the most commercially valuable species have declined by one-fourth since 1970. Lomborg's deceptive "doubling" is based on the fact that fishing operations now rely heavily on landing species that were considered "trash" in the 1970s, and on landing juveniles because the full-sized fish are now increasingly scarce. (See also this issue's Environmental Intelligence disclosure that much of the presumed increase in global productivity was based on falsified data issued by Chinese government officials.)

On Biodiversity

Lomborg says that biodiversity loss will be "0.7 percent over the next 50 years."

The record: Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson notes that even the most conservative species extinction rates published by authorities in the field are at least 10 times higher than that.

On Global Warming

Lomborg claims, repeatedly, that the Kyoto Agreement to reduce CO₂ emissions is a waste of time and money because it would not prevent global warming, but merely "buy the world six years." He cites calculations that if the Kyoto agreement were implemented in full, "the temperature increase that the planet would have experienced in 2094 would be postponed to 2100."

The record: This argument is a classic straw man. The treaty does not cover a 100-year span; it goes only through 2012. Everyone involved in the Kyoto process knows that the agreement falls far short of forcing the deep cuts in CO₂ emissions that are necessary to significantly slow global warming over the next century, and that the Kyoto agreement is only a first step, not a 100-year policy.

On Water

Lomborg says that we do not have to worry about running out of fresh water because we will be able to cheaply desalinate ocean water. To support this claim he says that the "price today to desalt sea water is down to 50–80 cents per cubic meter."

The record: Peter Gleick, one of the world's leading experts on fresh water, notes that Lomborg's "price today" is an estimate based on a plant that has not yet been built. The actual prices for desalination, on which scientists have worked for many years, are between \$1 and \$2 per cubic meter, and "even if they were to drop by a factor of two, they would remain well out of reach of most water users."

How Did This Happen?

It has been said that it is easier for a very respectable-looking man in a suit to steal \$10 million by sitting down with a bank officer than for a shabbily dressed man with a gun to rob one percent of that amount from a teller. In the Lomborg case, what may have thrown book review editors off at first was that the book was published by Cambridge University Press—one of the most hallowed names in scientific publishing. In retrospect, though, it appears that someone did an "end run" around Cambridge's usually rigorous procedures. Lomborg's book was not published by the natural sciences division of the press, whose editors would have quickly identified the book's ineptness. Instead, the project was quietly spirited through the social sciences division, reportedly without the natural sciences people even knowing of its existence until late in the game. Why that happened is a story waiting to be uncovered.

Then, once the book came out, there was the appeal of Lomborg's utopian refrain that any problems that do exist will easily be solved by future technology or future human ingenuity—and that no present intervention is therefore needed. This argument is music to the ears of the many business interests who oppose government regulations or interventions. The industry-funded Competitive Enterprise Institute, one of the leading right-wing opponents of the Kyoto process (and, indeed, of all efforts to reduce fossil fuel emissions to slow global warming), rolled out the red carpet for Lomborg when he came to Washington last fall on his book tour. On October 4, a CEI-sponsored anti-Kyoto group, the Cooler Heads Coalition, hosted a congressional and media briefing for Lomborg at the U.S. Capitol.

Finally, there was the problem of media obliviousness to the process of scientific review. You might expect that

publications reviewing the book would seek out leading scientists in all the relevant fields, especially when the author himself was “not myself an expert as regards environmental problems.” But instead of seeking scientists with a critical perspective, many publications put out reviews by people who were closely associated with Lomborg. In the October 2 *Wall Street Journal*, the Competitive Enterprise Institute’s Ronald Bailey (who had earlier written a book called *The True State of the World*, from which much of Lomborg’s claims were taken) wrote a rave review of Lomborg’s book, calling it “superbly documented and readable.”

The *Washington Post* supplement *Sunday Book World* took a tack that was a bit more difficult to detect, assigning the book review to Dennis Dutton, identified as “a professor of philosophy who lectures on the dangers of pseudoscience at the science faculties of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand,” and as the editor of the web site, *Arts and Letters Daily*. The *Post* did not tell its readers that Dutton’s web site features links to the Global Climate Coalition, an anti-Kyoto consortium of oil and coal businesses, and to the messages of Julian Simon—the man whose denial that global warming was occurring apparently gave Lomborg the idea for his book in the first place. It was hardly surprising that Dutton anointed Lomborg’s book as “the most significant work on the environment since the appearance of its polar opposite, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, in 1962. It’s a magnificent achievement.”

At Worldwatch, we had direct experience with the failure of the media to check out Lomborg’s “facts.” In July of 2001, Nicholas Wade of the science section of the *New York Times* called Worldwatch and asked for our response to Lomborg’s book, including his claim that global forest cover was not decreasing.

As it happens, Worldwatch senior researcher Janet Abramovitz is well versed in this area. She explained to Wade that Lomborg was using discontinued data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization that was never intended to measure forest cover in the first place. She gave Wade the name and phone number of the official in charge of these statistics at FAO in Rome, so that Wade could check whether Lomborg’s choice and interpretation of the data were correct. But Wade told Abramovitz that he “did not have time to check every original data source.”

More than three weeks went by, however, before the *New York Times* story appeared. Wade wrote that Lomborg had used “the longest data series of annual figures available” from the FAO to show that forest cover had increased slightly between 1950 and 1994—the very data series that Abramovitz had warned Wade was incorrect. After the article appeared, the FAO official confirmed to Worldwatch that Wade never called to check whether Lomborg was using the right data.

The Full Critiques

Harvard’s Edward O. Wilson expressed the exasperation of many of his colleagues when he wrote: “My greatest regret about the Lomborg scam is the extraordinary amount of scientific talent that has to be expended to combat it in the media. We will always have contrarians like Lomborg whose sallies are characterized by willful ignorance, selective quotations, disregard for communications with genuine experts, and destructive campaigns to attract the attention of the media rather than scientists. They are the parasite load on scholars who earn success through the slow process of peer review and approval.”

***The Skeptical Environmentalist* “reads like a compilation of term papers from one of those classes from hell where one has to fail all the students.”**

— Stuart L. Pimm, Union of Concern Scientists

Nonetheless, many scientists took time away from their studies to set the record straight about what the condition of the world is—and what work must be done to achieve a sustainable future. Here’s where you can find the most comprehensive critiques of Lomborg’s claims in each of the major environmental fields covered (or not covered, in some cases) by *The Skeptical Environmentalist*:

***Scientific American*, January 2002:** “Misleading Math about the Earth: Science defends itself against *The Skeptical Inquirer*,” with articles by Stephen Schneider on global warming, John P. Holdren on energy, John Bongaarts on population, and Thomas Lovejoy on biodiversity. <www.sciam.com>

***Nature*, 8 November 2001, pp. 149–50, volume 414:** “No need to worry about the future,” Stuart Pimm and Jeff Harvey. <www.nature.com>

***Science*, 9 November 2001, 294: 1285–87:** Michael Grubb, “Relying on Manna from Heaven?” <www.sciencemag.org>

Union of Concerned Scientists: “UCS Examines *The Skeptical Environmentalist*,” with articles by Peter Gleick on water, Jerry D. Mahlman on global warming, and E.O. Wilson, Thomas Lovejoy, Norman Myers, Jeffrey A. Harvey, and Stuart L. Pimm on biodiversity. <www.ucsusa.org/environment/lomborg.html>

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