

## BOOKS: ENVIRONMENT

## Relying on Manna from Heaven?

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"Good news" generally doesn't make headlines. The good news message of Bjorn Lomborg's book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, is an exception. Rarely has a book whose core message is "don't worry" attracted such a fanfare. Senior editors in diverse media, some of whom seem to have been itching for years to give the environmental movement its comeuppance, have showered Lomborg's thesis with unprecedented attention. All the more important, therefore, to ask: "How good is it?"

That is a remarkably hard question to answer. Lomborg has compiled an immense amount of data to support his fundamental assertion that in many respects the environment is getting better rather than worse and to argue that we should not worry much about the state of the world. These are two distinct theses. For the most part, I find his analysis of the first contention compelling but his case for the second woefully inadequate. Along the way, he revels too much in slaying caricatures and falls into some of the same traps of selectivity for which he lambastes the environmental movement.

The book's breadth is certainly impressive. The 25 chapters and almost 3000 endnotes cover a huge array of environmental, social, and economic trends. Lomborg's individual chapters, such as his early discourse on why we hear so much bad news about the environment, range over wide fields. Through much of the first half of the book he offers a detailed and well-developed antidote to environmental doom-mongering. He establishes a convincing case that, in general, humanity is better off today than it has ever been in terms of standard welfare measures and of many environmental indicators. Lomborg presents extensive data and arguments—admittedly, much of it the fodder of standard debates in the economics community—to argue that the world will not run out of core resources over this century. He sets these optimistic conclusions against "the Litany" of pessimistic prognoses by "the environmental community." Essentially, life is getting better by almost any measure, and there will remain plenty of food, forests, water, energy, and

non-energy resources: Malthus, turn in your grave. Considering pollution, the air is cleaner, forests are not dying from acid rain, marine systems have recovered rapidly from oil spills and other insults, and the United States has realms of space left in which to dump any conceivable volumes of this century's wastes. His message is clear: the environmentalists are wrong.

Although the broad coverage and the statistical detail are impressive, three problems emerge with Lomborg's case. One is its presentation as a rebuttal of the Litany, a portrayal of environmentalism focused on barely a dozen veterans of the environmental movement who the author singles out for criticism. By exposing their inadequacies, he implies that the whole panoply of environmental concerns is misguided. So much for statistical representation. To any modern professional, it is no news at all that the 1972 *Limits to Growth*

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Measuring the Real State of the World**  
by Bjørn Lomborg

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(1) study was mostly wrong or that Paul Ehrlich and Lester Brown have perennially exaggerated the problems of food supply. Nor are more balanced views confined to obscure academics. The point about these claims was made clearly and through the mass media a decade ago by Jessica Matthews, then at

the World Resources Institute (WRI). But she continued to insist on the reality of other environmental problems, and her name is absent from Lomborg's much-touted footnotes. Indeed WRI, one of the world's leading environmental institutes, scarcely features. Also sparse are the names of innumerable eminent scientists who have offered more nuanced views, except where they can be cited in support of the author's sweeping counter-Litany.

Similarly, Lomborg focuses on his bete-noir individuals and institutions at the expense of the most authoritative general efforts to assess the state of the environment. The key reviews by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2), the United Nations Environment Programme (3), the World Bank (4), and the WRI (5) are occasionally mined for data, but their analyses, which are far less reassuring than Lomborg's, get little recognition—one senses these do not provide the soft targets that Lomborg likes. The European Union's official assessment (6) is not even in the reference list. Lomborg's coverage cannot be as comprehensive as

these collaborative efforts by teams of experts, and, although wide, it is curiously selective. Acid rain may not kill many trees, but Lomborg pays little attention to its undisputed impact on Scandinavian lakes. The volume of waste may be small in the vastness of North America, but that doesn't make either the amounts or the toxicity of waste any less of a problem worldwide. And so forth. The book contains no discussion of the awful incidents that led African nations to negotiate a continental (and subsequently global) ban on the international dumping of toxic wastes that the wealthy industrialized world would not tolerate at home. Lomborg generally pays inadequate attention to serious environmental problems in developing countries, and his casual assumption that they too will improve as we all get richer brings us to the crunch issue.

For although the above flaws are irritating and show some disrespect for the huge effort put into professional environmental monitoring and assessment, the third problem—a stunning lack of attention to cause and effect—is far more dangerous. There are a few grudging references to cases where the role of legislation is so obvious that Lomborg could hardly avoid mentioning it in passing. But through 352 pages of text and 182 pages of footnotes, only one paragraph and one note (without a reference) explicitly address the question of whether the observed improvements have come as manna from heaven or have been driven by environmental concerns and the resulting policies. Lomborg simply dismisses the latter suggestion as being

often misleading or even incorrect. Air pollution in London has declined since the late nineteenth century, but for the greater part of the twentieth century this has been due to a changes in infrastructure and fuel use and only slightly, if at all, connected to environmental worries expressed in concrete policy changes....

As far as I could find, that is essentially all the attention Lomborg gives this crucial issue. And the one, unreferenced example he uses to buttress his assertion is simply wrong. The huge improvements in London's air have been very much driven by policy. Most radically, the 1956 Clean Air Act banned raw coal combustion across large swathes of London, and a long series of domestic and European legislation governing vehicle exhausts has done much to clean up mobile sources. The dramatic impact evident from 1957 onwards is obvious in Lomborg's own graph. His denial of the fundamental cause is, at best, inexcusable ignorance, when the issue of cause and ef-

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fect is so central to the case he tries to build.

Lomborg's basic assertion on this matter is followed by an acknowledgment that legislation might play a role, but he insists that that doesn't mean governmental action was justified. "Even to the extent that worries have mattered in policy decisions, as they undoubtedly have in, say, air pollution," he writes, "this does not assure us that our resources could not have been put to better use. Kindling public concern...as seen from a democratic viewpoint, skews the unbiased choice of the electorate."

Apparently, Lomborg assumes the public believes every environmental scare story, and none of the exaggerated claims of opponents to environmental policy. Hence, we will spend too much on environmental protection. His footnote complains of insufficient cost-benefit appraisals of environmental policy, but in invoking democracy as the arbiter he digs a grave for his own policy thesis. If he believes in the democratic mandate, he should consider the popularity of a campaign to repeal the legislation that has made London livable. Indeed, the most striking feature of environmental policy is its durability. With surprisingly rare exceptions, environmental regulations have almost always proved considerably cheaper than their opponents had claimed they would, and hardly any are repealed on grounds of costs. Changing behavior or developing technologies to improve the quality of public life—once policy has mandated it—generally prove easier and less costly than feared. This is well documented for the U.S. experience with acid rain and a host of other cases (7)—a statistical trend worthy of citation in this book.

The list of environmental improvements driven by public concerns and policy is almost endless, and I suspect these explain most of the environmental recoveries that Lomborg charts. One can also speculate what the Scandinavian lakes, the ozone hole, and so forth might be like now in the absence of protective policies. In addition, the huge improvements across land, air, and water have been achieved at a cost generally reckoned to be well under two percent of gross domestic product in developed countries (2).

The ultimate irony is that Lomborg could have presented his mass of data as a tribute to the effectiveness of environmental policy. That he chooses to do the opposite says far more about him than about any claimed objectivity of his statistical analysis.

The author's perspective assumes particular importance when we turn to the

future. It was hard for me to evaluate the chapters on chemical fears and biodiversity loss. I was initially reassured by Lomborg's seemingly well-argued case that these problems are hugely exaggerated. However, these are not my fields, and my reassurance was dented by finding a website that lists papers in which fellow Danish researchers rebut Lomborg's claims in these and other areas (8).

Climate change (to which Lomborg devotes the longest chapter in the book) is my field, and I can only describe his analysis of it as at best inconsequential. On the scientific issues, he does nothing more than place himself firmly at the optimistic end of a wide spectrum of opinion amid legitimate uncertainties, and he picks somewhat selectively from the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to justify his position. He also views the potential impacts through the painfully narrow lens of a well-off Northerner. He shows no appreciation for the practical or the moral dimensions of impacts upon potentially billions of people, who are already far worse off than ourselves and who share no responsibility for causing the problem. There are also significant distortions of mainstream views and the IPCC work. His account offers nothing new or insightful, and readers would do far better to read the IPCC reports themselves and reach their own conclusions.

Lomborg accepts that there is a climate problem, but he basically believes that technologies will solve it without either economic or behavioral incentives. His position resembles one of the IPCC scenarios, and he essentially dismisses the others. In doing so, he ignores the whole point of scenario analysis, which is built on the experience that the thing most individual predictions have in common is being wrong and the challenge is to minimize risks.

The book reaches its nadir when Lomborg turns to climate economics and the Kyoto Protocol. He appears to swallow all the "seven myths" peddled by many treaty opponents, including exaggerations of its economic costs (9). His position reflects ignorance of the protocol and of the underlying economic and political debates that went into its formation (10). He neglects the fundamental economics of technical change: the literature of the past 40 years demonstrates unequivocally that effective development and dissemination of technology require economic incentives (7, 11–14), such as those embodied in Kyoto's commitments. Improvement does not fall as manna from the heavens, or purely from government research and development

laboratories for that matter.

That, at heart, encapsulates the flaws in Lomborg's thesis. Many (though not all) aspects of the environment are getting better—good. Therefore, environmentalists are stupid—a complete non-sequitur. And technologies will solve any outstanding problems, so we don't need policy—generally wrong. As a counter-Litany, this seems more misguided and more dangerous than the Litany that Lomborg attacks. Doubtless he would complain that this summary distorts his views. However, the principal tone of the book and the surrounding publicity invite such an interpretation, and Lomborg has done nothing to dispel it. That is the pity of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*; perhaps it was just too ambitious. While reading the statistical analyses, I thought it could help lift the environmental debate to a new level of maturity. It hasn't, and I doubt it can. Reading the rest—and seeing how keen certain media have been to promote some of the less rigorous contrarian fodder it contains—I fear it risks doing the opposite.

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