

WITH BJORN LOMBORG, THE SKEPTICAL ENVIRONMENTALIST



Bjorn Lomborg is an associate professor of statistics in the Department of Political Science at the University of Aarhus in Denmark. In 1998 he published four lengthy articles about the state of the environment in the leading Danish newspaper, which resulted in a firestorm debate spanning over 400 articles in major metropolitan newspapers. The articles lead to the publication of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* in 2001, which has now been published around the world. He is a frequent participant in the environmental discussion, with commentaries in such places as New York Times, Globe & Mail, Daily Telegraph, and the Economist. In November 2001, Bjorn Lomborg was selected *Global Leader for Tomorrow* by the [World Economic Forum](#). In February 2002, he was named director of Denmark's national [Environmental Assessment Institute](#). The Frontier Centre interviewed Bjorn Lomborg in early November.

Frontier Centre: At what specific point in the preparation of your book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, did you begin the change from the pessimistic "Greenpeace" worldview to the optimistic "Julian Simon" worldview?

Bjorn Lomborg: When we started checking the data, we realized that much data points to things getting better. This is not optimism, though, but merely stating what the international organizations tell us.

FC: We're you surprised at the vitriolic response to your book as exemplified by the infamous "Scientific American" editorial?

BL: I think one has to consider whether it was necessary to be so vitriolic if I was so obviously wrong. But I have given a detailed response to Scientific American, which is available at my homepage www.lomborg.com, and then people can judge for themselves whether the arguments are good.

FC: The approach taken by many of today's environmental scientists seems to have more to do with religion or public relations than with science. Can the public still rely on them to provide a true picture of the state of the environment?

BL: I don't think it is helpful to call other people's arguments religion. The green organizations are providing us with important inputs to the democratic discussion of how we should act on the future. Like any interest group they are of course stressing one side of the argument (that we should care more about the environment), just like, for example, business organizations. The problem is that while surveys show that most people, perhaps rightly, are skeptical of business organizations, we generally seem to believe green organizations even more than university scientists or environmental ministries. We should listen to green organizations, but not treat them as the sole purveyors of the truth.

FC: In your opinion, what are still some of the most pressing environmental problems faced by the world and how can they be solved?

BL: For the developed world, it is air pollution from particulates. They have come down dramatically, but there is still a way to go. We can solve this by putting expensive filters on diesel cars. For the developing world, there are a lot of other problems like access to clean drinking water, sanitation, education health care and escape from poverty that probably should come before dealing with the, by western standards, admittedly horrendous environmental problems.

FC: Canada, in spite of some localized but manageable environmental problems, has both a high standard of living and good environmental quality. Can we become wealthier and still maintain high environmental quality?

BL: In general yes, the most polluted countries are not – as many people seem to think – the most industrialized countries but rather the poor third world. Basically, only once you get sufficiently rich can you stop worrying about your next meal and start making sure you leave an environmentally sound world to your kids.

FC: Are conferences such as Rio and Johannesburg useful?

BL: Yes, because they are places where the all the nation states of the world come together to try to address the pressing issues of the time. In Johannesburg we did focus on one of the most important problems, namely providing more people with access to clean drinking water and sanitation. But we should be careful that we worry about the right things and realize that there is probably a difference in what rich Westerners see as the most important problems, which will often be environmental, and third world inhabitants see as the most important problems like poverty and lack of access.

FC: There is much debate here about Canada ratifying the Kyoto Accord when our key trading partners like the U.S. have declined to do so and the developing world is exempt from the treaty. What is your view of the Kyoto accord? Will it make a difference?

BL: With global warming our intuition says we should do something about it. While this intuition is laudable it is not necessarily correct - it depends on comparing the cost of action to the cost of inaction and the alternative good we could do with our resources. We should not pay for cures that cost us more than the original ailment.

The Kyoto Protocol will do very little good - it will postpone warming for six years in 2100. The guy in Bangladesh who will have to move because his house gets flooded in 2100 can wait till 2106. Yet, the cost will be \$150-350 billion annually. Since global warming will primarily hurt third world countries, we have to ask if Kyoto is the best way to help them. The answer is no. For the cost of Kyoto in just 2010 we could once-and-for-all solve the single biggest problem on Earth: We could give clean drinking water and sanitation to every single human being on the planet. This would save 2 million lives and avoid half a billion severe illnesses every year. And for every following year we could then do something else equally good.

Of course, if we just kept pumping out CO2 forever, it would get ever warmer and it would eventually get dangerous. But look at the trends. Renewables have been dropping in price about 50% per decade over the past 30 years. Even if they continue at the much lower rate of 30% per decade they will become competitive before mid-century (see fig 151, p344 in my book). This means that it is unlikely that we'll continue to use massive amounts of fossil fuels by the end of this century. Thus, the temperature rise we're likely to see will be somewhere around 2-3 degrees C, which is mainly going to harm the third world.

Then the real issue becomes whether Kyoto which will do very little good is the best way to deal with the problems (it will cost \$150-350 billion a year) or whether we should solve some of the many other more pressing problems on the planet, thereby helping the third world and letting them get better able to handle the problems that will nevertheless ensue from global warming.

Also, right now the US spends about \$200 million on research and development on renewables. Increase that amount 10-fold and it would still be peanuts compared to the cost of Kyoto (some \$100 billion for the U.S. alone) and it would probably do much more good, because it would bring forward the day when we can start switching over to renewables.

The Frontier Centre for Public Policy is an independent public policy think tank whose mission is to explore options for the future by undertaking research and education that supports economic growth and opportunity. You can contact the Centre at: 201-63 Albert Street • Winnipeg, Manitoba CANADA R3B 1G4 • Tel: (204) 957-1567 Fax: (204) 957-1570 • E-mail: newideas@fcpp.org • web: www.fcpp.org