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A bright green

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David Pearce welcomes a heretic's view of global warming

The Skeptical Environmentalist by Bjørn Lomborg, Cambridge, £17.95, ISBN 0521010683

HALF-BAKED, ill-researched and designed to capture the moral high ground rather than to advance the cause of knowledge, says Bjørn Lomborg. He's been scrutinising environmental statistics. He should know: he's a statistics professor at Aarhus University in Denmark.

The Skeptical Environmentalist came out in Danish three years ago. Its translation into English has caused a sensation. Lomborg looks at a huge range of statistics on environmental change, globally and locally. He says things are getting better, refuting the doomsday environmentalists.

Part of the problem is that doing a bit better doesn't set things right. Concern about the state of the environment does have a lot to do with adverse trends, such as the rapid loss of bird populations in Britain—an indicator not mentioned by Lomborg. But it also has something to do with the widening gap between the state of the environment and the state that many people want, their aspirations fed by better education and rising incomes. So Lomborg's chapter on global extinctions comes as scant reassurance to, say, salmon anglers who not only lament the decline of the salmon but demand more fishing as we get richer. Arguing that total forest cover in the world is increasing (it is) is less than reassuring if expanding temperate forests do not compensate for declining tropical forests.

But the greatest ire is going to be reserved for Lomborg's chapter on global warming. The science is clear; it is not rational policy to proceed as if the probability of induced warming is zero. Lomborg asks an economist's question: do the benefits of controlling warming outweigh the costs? He agrees that global warming will damage the world, but says that human misery would be greatly reduced if the huge cost of dealing with global warming went to solve the immediate problems of the poor.

Those who take a moral view about intergenerational equity will want to challenge this cost-benefit thinking, but Lomborg has identified a basic truth of economics moralists often ignore: you can't spend money twice. Money is not just money, it is hospitals and schools, water and clean air. Just as compelling is the fact that the Kyoto Protocol, even if the US had signed up, will postpone reaching the predicted warming levels for 2100 by only 6 years if we spend the estimated \$5 trillion now. Lomborg's view is that it's far better to invest in adaptation than pretend we can hold back warming.

I doubt if his conclusion needs to be so extreme. Targeting carbon should accelerate the switch to renewable fuels, rather than market forces as Lomborg advocates. This brings lots of dividends—reduced congestion and lower pollution from non-CO2 gases. Perhaps the

mistake in the debate has been to get too hung up about warming itself, rather than focusing on the need to get technology moving.

If readers can't quite square Lomborg's optimism with what they see around them, this is no surprise. Even 178 graphs and 3000 footnotes can't cover all the issues that people worry about. If he has debunked some doomsters, good. The only risk is that people will confuse the "things are getting better" message with a Panglossian "things are as good as they can be" message. But all scientists have a duty to tell it as it is.

David Pearce

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