

6/22/04 - Controversial Danish researcher who plays down threat of global warming steps down from state environmental agency

COPENHAGEN, Denmark, Jun 22, 2004 (AP WorldStream via COMTEX) -- Bjoern Lomborg, a maverick Danish researcher who made his name playing down the threat of global warming, said Tuesday he's stepping down as head of a government environmental agency and returning to academics.

Lomborg is known for his 2001 best seller, "The Skeptical Environmentalist," which drew widespread criticism for its argument that concerns about melting ice caps, deforestation, acid rain were exaggerated. He argues that the Earth overall is getting cleaner and humankind healthier and richer.

On Tuesday, the 39-year-old statistician said he will step down from his post as director of the Environmental Assessment Institute, which monitors how tax money is used to curb pollution.

"Fundamentally, I'm an academic," Lomborg said in a statement, adding that he would return to his old job as an associate professor at the University of Aarhus.

"What I'm enthusiastic about is research, but scientists are obliged to tell the world about their results (and) to come out of the ivory tower," he said.

Lomborg reiterated his controversial views Monday in an often-testy debate with U.N. Environment Program chief Klaus Toepfer at the University of Mainz in Germany.

Lomborg said the Kyoto Protocol, which requires industrial nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2012 to pre-1990s levels, is not a good investment.

"Implementing the Kyoto agreement on climate change would cost at least US\$150 billion each year, yet would merely postpone global warming for six years," he said. "The family in Bangladesh who will get flooded will have an extra six years to move."

Toepfer countered that "numbers and economics" alone should not determine the need for action to counter climate change, and took issue with Lomborg's argument that it doesn't figure as a priority among people in the developing world.

"I don't want the family in Bangladesh to move six years later. I want to change what is now happening with climate change so that they don't have to move at all," Toepfer added.

Last month, Lomborg's institute organized a conference where an international panel of economists ranked fighting AIDS and malnutrition and making foreign trade easier as far more cost effective ways of improving the world than combatting global warming.

A former member of Greenpeace, Lomborg became the first director of the Environmental Assessment Institute in February 2002. The agency did not immediately name a replacement.

Associated Press reporter Panos Kakaviatos contributed to this report from Mainz, Germany.

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