



# The Skeptical Environmentalist Vindicated

## Radical Greens' Attempt to Destroy Bjørn Lomborg Fails

by Myron Ebell

The Danish Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation, on December 17, 2003, overturned a verdict of “scientific dishonesty” against Bjørn Lomborg, author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* and winner of CEI’s 2003 Julian L. Simon Memorial Award. The judgment had been given in February 2003 by the Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty (DCSD)—a government-funded body—and was the culmination of a two-year effort by environmental pressure groups and their academic allies to discredit Lomborg and his acclaimed best-selling book. This is very good news, not only for Lomborg, but for anyone who dares to challenge eco-alarmist dogma in the future.

The Ministry’s 70-page report found the DCSD’s handling of the case “dissatisfactory” and its conclusion of scientific dishonesty “completely void of argumentation.” Actually, it was worse than that. As *The Economist* noted, “The panel’s ruling—objectively speaking—is incompetent and shameful.” That’s because it was based almost entirely on four hatchet jobs published in *Scientific American* by four leading academic environmental alarmists in January 2002.

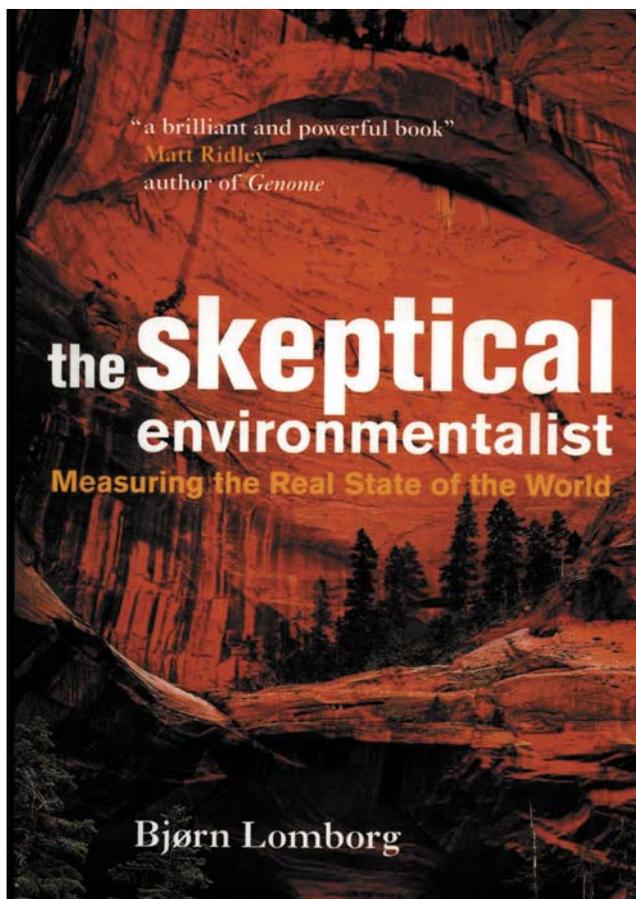
The *Scientific American* critiques of Lomborg alleged many errors, but detailed only a handful of minor mistakes—in a book with 2,930 footnotes—and then descended to accusations of incompetence and bias. In fact, the Committees acknowledged that the hostile articles did not constitute refutations of Lomborg’s work, but were merely the opinions of researchers with whom Lomborg disagreed. Moreover, the articles were published as part of a special section called “Science Defends Itself Against *The Skeptical Environmentalist*”—so there wasn’t even a pretense of balance by *Scientific American*’s editors.<sup>1</sup>

But no matter: The goal was to get Lomborg at any cost. The DCSD—which is part of the Danish Research Agency and

is made up of mostly nonscientists—pressed on and judged *The Skeptical Environmentalist* “objectively dishonest” and “clearly contrary to the standards of good scientific practice.” Even worse, the Committees gave Lomborg no chance to respond before publishing its ruling. Radical green groups like the World Resources Institute and the Union of Concerned Scientists trumpeted the judgment as an indictment of Lomborg.

An associate professor of statistics at the University of Aarhus, in Denmark, Lomborg stumbled into his epic confrontation with the environmental thought police by accident. While waiting for a flight at Los Angeles International Airport in 1997, he bought a copy of *Wired* magazine and read an interview with Julian Simon, the late author of *The Ultimate Resource* (1981), which debunks the alarmist predictions of environmental doomsters like Paul Ehrlich by a thorough analysis of existing scientific data. Lomborg didn’t believe Simon’s claims that environmental quality had been improving across the board for decades. After all, the major media are filled with stories of imminent environmental doom. But, to his credit, Lomborg did not simply dismiss Simon, and decided to analyze the data and see if Simon’s conclusions held up.

The result was *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2001. Lomborg—with the help of his statistics graduate students at Aarhus—produced a magnificent statistical review and analysis of data from the United Nations Environment Program, World Health Organization, World Bank, Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, and other respected bodies. What he found was that, while there are serious global environmental problems, Simon was largely correct: Environmental quality



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has been improving on most fronts around the world for decades.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, such a conclusion was anathema to the enforcers of environmental political correctness. And the book received favorable reviews in *The Washington Post*, *The Economist*, and other major publications. So they launched a massive attack on Lomborg's credibility culminating in the judgment of "scientific dishonesty." The dismissal of this charge is obviously great news for Bjørn Lomborg, but it potentially has much wider significance than the rehabilitation of one scholar's reputation.

Much notice has been taken of the corruption of science by politics, but the Lomborg affair points to what may be a bigger threat—the corruption of politics by the scientific

another tranche of federal funding. And the scientific leaders of environmental false alarms increasingly gain professional and public distinctions.

Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist* has revealed this unseemly disconnect between environmental fact and what the public is led to believe by environmental doomsayers in the scientific community. But this is not new. Stephen Schneider of Stanford University, who wrote one of the articles attacking Lomborg in *Scientific American*, explained the game in 1989: "[W]e are not [only] scientists but human beings as well. And like most people we'd like to see the world a better place, which in this context translates into our working to reduce the risk of potentially disastrous climate change. To do that we need to get some broad-based

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establishment. Because they enjoy an imposing reputation for objectivity with the media, the public, and government officials, scientists are largely accepted as dispensers of disinterested, honest, and accurate advice. We can trust scientists because they know what they're talking about and don't have any special interest axes to grind.

The attack on Lomborg reveals the startling naiveté of this belief. The reason that scientist-activists locked arms with environmental pressure groups to destroy Lomborg is because he threatens their monopoly as the guardians and interpreters of scientific fact. *The Skeptical Environmentalist* does not challenge the data provided by the scientific establishment. In fact, Lomborg emphasizes that his book compiles and analyzes environmental data from the most widely accepted official sources. It's not that Lomborg got anything wrong that bothers Official Science—Canadian economist Ross McKittrick's term for the layer of scientist-activists and academic bureaucrats whom the media, the public, and government officials accept as representing science—Lomborg's crime was to reveal Official Science as a clique of politically motivated charlatans. The environmental facts simply don't support their claims.

The reality is that the high reputation of science in Western civilization is being abused by green bunkum artists and snake oil salesmen to spread false alarm among the public and thereby improperly influence our political decision making. Sadly, the scientific establishment has largely gone along with this, for several reasons. The most obvious reason is that alarmism serves the special interests of many scientists. Each new environmental scare leads to

support, to capture the public's imagination. That, of course, entails getting loads of media coverage. So we have to offer up scary scenarios, make simplified, dramatic statements, and make little mention of any doubts we might have."

For exposing those doubts, alarmists like Schneider tried to destroy Lomborg. Thankfully, they failed, and Lomborg's message has emerged the stronger for it. But in politics there are no permanent victories, and the doomsters will be back to try again.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> CEI has published studies comparing two of the *Scientific American* articles with Lomborg's book. "The Heated Debate" by Robert L. Bradley, Jr. is available at <http://www.cei.org/gencon/025,03539.cfm>; and "The Infection of Science by Public Choice" by Patrick L. Michaels and Tereza Urbanova is available at <http://www.cei.org/gencon/025,03786.cfm>. When Lomborg posted the articles on his website ([www.lomborg.com](http://www.lomborg.com)) together with his detailed responses, *Scientific American* objected that he was violating their copyright and forced him to remove the articles.

<sup>2</sup> These findings have been confirmed in three collections of essays edited by Ronald Bailey and published by CEI: *True State of the Planet* (1995), *Earth Report 2000*, and *Global Warming and Other Eco-Myths* (2002).