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COOL IT:

THE SKEPTICAL ENVIRONMENTALIST'S GUIDE TO GLOBAL WARMING

by Bjørn Lomborg

Reviewed by Mary J. Bortscheller*

Bjørn Lomborg, a professor at the Copenhagen Business School, is a self-described “skeptical environmentalist.”¹ *The Skeptical Environmentalist* is also the title of his 2001 book, a controversial volume proposing that, far from deteriorating, the state of the environment is actually improving. The book set off a wave of criticism in Lomborg’s native Denmark, including allegations that his arguments were “scientifically dishonest.”² These allegations were later proved false by the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation.³ The firestorm surrounding *The Skeptical Environmentalist* has not deterred the writer from continuing his pursuit of provocative arguments in the environmental debate in his latest book, *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming*.

Lomborg sets an ambitious agenda from the start of *Cool It*, which seeks to reframe the international debate about the challenges and solutions presented by climate change. In a volume dedicated “to future generations,” Lomborg acknowledges the existence of global warming and its significant impact on humanity. Simultaneously, however, he asserts that the current societal debate is getting it all wrong by designing costly and inefficient solutions to a problem that is overblown.

In recent years, the causes and effects of global warming have received increasing attention in the media. Most predictions have been dire. Lomborg attempts to persuade his readers that the media and many, if not most, environmental activists focus on data that is wrong or taken out of context. His central example for this point is the emphasis on rising global temperatures and the deaths that will be caused by extreme heat waves similar to what Europe experienced in the summer of 2003. Lomborg maintains that while a warmer Earth will provoke more deathly

heat waves, it will also prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by extremely cold temperatures.

He returns to this point several times to illustrate what he emphasizes is the mistaken focus of the environmental debate. The comparative reduction in overall deaths caused by weather is a central factor in Lomborg’s overall cost-benefit analysis of global warming solutions. Under his analysis, most of the proposed solutions to global warming that involve carbon-emission reduction are, economically-speaking, a “bad deal,” producing benefits that are not worth the effort.

Lomborg is particularly critical of the Kyoto Protocol and similar international efforts calling for high taxes on carbon emissions. He stresses that the Protocol is too costly for the benefits it would confer. According to Lomborg’s assessment, if implemented to the fullness of its provisions, the Kyoto Protocol would only yield a global temperature reduction of 0.3 degrees Fahrenheit by 2100. In Lomborg’s view, the billions of dollars spent implementing the Kyoto Protocol could be better spent elsewhere, combating disease, malnutrition and other global maladies. Lomborg also defends the United States’ reluctance to ratify the Protocol, because the United States would get the worst deal by spending the most money on implementation for the least return or benefit.

Rather than follow a Kyoto Protocol-style model, Lomborg advocates a global carbon tax model that balances the cost of the tax with the tangible environmental benefits derived from the carbon emission cuts. A model of this type would avoid a


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situation illustrated by the law of diminishing returns, where the more carbon emissions are cut, the fewer the “social benefits” to humans. Lomborg quotes economists who believe “going much beyond the small optimal initiative is economically unjustified.”

Lomborg urges the international community to consider the range of issues facing the world today, from epidemic diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria to malnutrition and trade barriers. As a founding member of the Copenhagen Consensus, a conference of economists whose stated goal is to “provoke international debate about prioritization,” Lomborg tries to steer the focus away from global warming to problems that have more feasible solutions. While recognizing that climate change and its attendant consequences are real, Lomborg and the members of the Copenhagen Consensus rank it low on the list of international priorities. In a list of seventeen of the “world’s greatest challenges,” climate change comes in dead last behind solutions to problems such as disease, malnutrition, migration, and corruption.⁴

A prominent figure in *Cool It* is former Vice President Al Gore, whom Lomborg repeatedly cites as having misled the debate over global warming. Responding to the popular acclaim for the 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, Lomborg wonders how the film and Mr. Gore, by showing the chain reaction of global warming, melting ice caps and rising sea levels, “can say something so dramatically removed from the best science.” Lomborg cites Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change data to refute the documentary’s images of coastal cities inundated

by rising sea levels. According to Lomborg, the IPCC’s data indicates that as the Earth’s temperature increases, “Antarctica will not noticeably start melting” but there will be more precipitation and “Antarctica will actually...[accumulate] ice, *reducing* sea levels by two inches.”

Whether Bjørn Lomborg’s *Cool It* will succeed in changing the tenor and framework of the climate change debate remains to be seen. What is not in doubt, however, is that Lomborg’s ideas are provocative and his goals ambitious. *Cool It* is a challenging and interesting read for anyone concerned with global warming, whatever your reading of the current crisis may be. 

Endnotes: Cool It

- ¹ Lomborg.com, About Bjørn Lomborg, <http://www.lomborg.com/about/> (last visited Jan. 20, 2008).
- ² Lomborg.com, FAQ, <http://www.lomborg.com/faq/?PHPSESSID=0a2156529d1b075acd9d3d738131c6e7> (last visited Jan. 20, 2008).
- ³ Lomborg.com, *id.*
- ⁴ CopenhagenConsensus.com, May 29, 2004 Press Release: *HIV/AIDS, Hunger, Free Trade and Malaria Top Experts’ List*, <http://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/Default.aspx?ID=167> (last visited Jan. 18, 2008).



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