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Global environmental challenges

Bjorn Lomborg: skeptic or too much an optimist?

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Bjorn Lomborg, author of “The Skeptical Environmentalist,” used to argue that concern about climate change was overblown because there were better causes to spend money on such as curing AIDS or malaria.

The Danish political scientist now says in a book coming out later this month called “Smart Solutions to Climate Change: Comparing Costs and Benefits,” that global warming is one of the top challenges facing the world and we should spend money on trying to fix it – \$100 billion a year.

But true to his contrarian nature, he thinks the way the world is fighting climate change is all wrong. First, he thinks that global [environment and climate negotiators](#) are trying to put money into the wrong places. Many of them want \$100 billion a year by 2020 to go to developing countries to pay for adapting to the worst effects of climate change, like flooding and droughts, and to help them move into alternative energies like solar power.

“Of course if adaptation money is well spent it can be pretty good money,” Lomborg told me in an interview. “But if you want a solution, the real and only long term solution will be to make green energy much, much cheaper.”

Instead, the money should be spent on research and development of solar panels and other alternative energies, he argues, because the technologies today are more expensive than coal, natural gas and oil.

Some companies say solar panels are approaching parity to fossil fuels, especially when they are put up in the sunny U.S. Southwest. But Lomborg says many countries without stellar sunshine, especially Germany, have moved too quickly into subsidies for expensive alternative energy. “It underscores much of the problem with current climate policy that you want to put up new technology because it looks good and it gives politicians a photo opportunity, but at the end of the day it will do virtually nothing to deal with climate change.”

He compares the current alternative energy situation to where we were with computers in the 1950s or 1960s. “Computers only got more efficient because we spent large sums of money mainly through the space race on making computers much better,” he said. “But we did not force everyone to buy a huge, inefficient computer in the 1950s and say everyone must have one in their cellar,” referring to mandates some countries and states have passed for minimal amounts of renewable energy. Still, the space race had in many ways much clearer targets than slowing the world from warming up without hurting economic growth. Many experts say that alternative energies need to be deployed now to work out kinks and prepare for changes to the power grid.

And if he’s wrong, and the world experiences rapid catastrophic warming before alternative energies are perfected, he believes there’s an insurance that could be rapidly deployed – geoengineering. For just \$6 billion specially placed ships in the mid-Pacific could generate steam that would [whiten marine clouds](#). He believes that would bounce much of the sun’s rays back into the atmosphere and help keep the world cool.

But few climate experts would consider geoengineering an insurance policy because little is known about how cloud whitening, or other techniques, would change weather systems in the future. “We should be wary of any problems with it, but we should investigate so if we need it we have it in our arsenal of options,” he said.

Whatever label you put on Lomborg – skeptic or overly optimistic believer, or something else altogether – it’s hard to say he doesn’t have ideas.

Photo: Tony Gentile/REUTERS