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# REVIEW

PEOPLE, BOOKS, THEATRE,  
FILMS, EVENTS & FICTION

## The resilient environmentalist

Bjørn Lomborg can still be an antagonistic provocateur. But current events are proving him right and his old enemies are being won over. By Keith Kloor

AT THIS point in his life, Bjørn Lomborg is resigned to being the skunk at the party. He knows he is scorned in left-leaning circles because of his persistent criticism of environmentalism. He knows he has become a lightning rod in the contentious debate over climate change. "I'm a name you use to polarise with," Lomborg says to me. He's right. The discourse that involves him has a Thunderdome feel. His many detractors don't just want to refute him; they want to shred him.

Yet there are signs that the times might have caught up with Lomborg's utilitarian approach to the world's thorniest sustainability challenges. For example, Europeans are finding it hard to swallow the economic reality of the renewable energy dream. According to a May report by the European Commission, gas prices for industry rose 35% in Europe but fell by 66% in America between 2005 and 2012.

And because of subsidies, this year German consumers will be paying 20 billion euros for electricity from solar, wind and biogas plants, whose market price is just over three billion euros.

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# PROFILE

+ BJØRN LOMBORG  
AUTHOR & ACADEMIC

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As Lomborg wrote in a recent blog post, "Current green energy policies are failing for a simple reason: renewables are far too expensive. The solution is to innovate the price of renewables downward."

Meanwhile, he tells me, "Let's make sure we focus on things where for every dollar you spend, you do tens of dollars of good and not do so many things where you spend a dollar and do only a few cents of good." It's a message reprised in a soon-to-be published book he has edited: *How Much Have Global Problems Cost the World?* In the introduction Lomborg sets the stage by asking, "Where can we do the most good first?" This seems a reasonable question to consider in a world with competing priorities.

So why would anyone want to shred Lomborg?

It's been that way for more than a decade, since Lomborg shot to fame in 2001 with his first book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, a broad critique of the environmental movement that infuriated many ecologists and greens. The notoriety transformed the little-known Danish statistician into a globe-trotting public intellectual.

He solidified his bad-boy status in 2007 with a book called *Cool It* (spawning a documentary with the same title), which argued that global warming concerns were legitimate but often dramatically overstated, and that government policies to rein in carbon emissions were ineffective and far too costly.

Since then, Lomborg has not shied from combat. Last January in

**Lomborg sees his mission as to challenge conventional wisdom.**

the *Wall Street Journal* he accused US president Barack Obama of "fear-mongering" about global warming. In pointed barbs on Twitter and Facebook, he has frequently chastised greens for exaggerating the climate threat and ecological problems. Recently, after the mysterious honeybee die-off triggered another round of anguished handwringing, he wrote an opinion piece that concluded, "Panic is rarely the way to confront problems, so let's get real. We have a bee-problem, but not a beepocalypse."

Given his high profile, it's worth asking at this stage in his career if Lomborg is a voice of reason, a professional pot stirrer, or a trollish ankle-biter. The answer probably depends on where you sit in these debates. His combative style, he insists, is a necessary consequence of challenging conventional wisdom.

For instance, the prevailing assumption in green circles is that renewable energy can soon power the world if given the chance. But that's a pipe dream, Lomborg asserts: "A lot of people are saying, 'We need to put up more solar panels and wind turbines'. We need to have someone say, 'Sorry that's not going to work. That's not the solution. At best, it's just a tiny, tiny part of it. If you're going to get global warming fixed, you need to get much, much cheaper energy and that's about innovation.' And I think, fundamentally, there's no nice way you can say that."

Perhaps, but what Lomborg sees as unvarnished truth-telling others view as contributing to the climate debate's rancor and partisan divide, which is especially pronounced in Australia and the United States.

If there is a fine line between making people uncomfortable and alienating them, Lomborg hasn't

straddled it well. At one juncture in our conversation, when I tell him that he seems unable to shake his reputation as a divisive provocateur, he agrees, saying this has been the case especially in his home country: "In many places in Denmark, I know families have this sort of agreement that they won't mention my name at the dinner table, because it makes for uncomfortable conversation."

If Danish families won't mention his name, it's likely that they aren't talking about his ideas. Which begs another question: what if the way Lomborg gets his points across turns people off from even considering them, despite their merits?

There is a poignant scene in the 2010 *Cool It* documentary, when Lomborg visits his ailing mother in a home for the elderly. In a voice-over he references the shellacking he took after the 2001 publication of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, which made a worldwide splash. (From a marketing standpoint it helped that the upbeat, congenial author portrayed himself as a nature-loving former Greenpeace member.) In the book, Lomborg argued that the state of the environment was improving overall and that an array of global problems, from the rate of species extinctions to climate change, were not nearly as bad as they had been made out to be by greens. The blowback was punishing. Eminent environmental scientists denounced the text as deeply flawed, charging that he made his case with selective and out-of-context evidence. In 2002, *Scientific American* published a detailed rebuttal by four scientists entitled "Misleading Math about the Earth". An academic committee under the auspices of the Danish government accused him of "scientific dishonesty". In the film, Lomborg says that during this turbulent period he found

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NICKY BONNE/REDUX/HEADPRESS

# PROFILE

safe harbour in the company of his unconditionally loving mother.

A movie critic might find this scene gratuitous, but it did humanise him. The same could be said for other scenes in *Cool It*, of Lomborg feeding impoverished children in Africa or riding his bike through the streets of Copenhagen.

Aside from these attempts to make him a more sympathetic figure, the film aimed to be a pragmatic counter to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, the mid-2000s best-selling book and Oscar-winning documentary inspired by it, which depicted climate change as an urgent threat to humanity.

Lomborg, by contrast, argued that some activists and an enabling media trafficked in global warming hysteria. His larger argument – the crux of *Cool It* – was that manmade climate change was real but posed a relatively distant and unclear threat and was thus not nearly as urgent as the dire problems affecting human welfare today, such as the rampant diseases, crushing poverty and lack of clean water in the developing world.

I know what you're thinking. Why can't we tackle malaria and global warming at the same time? This is a rejoinder that Lomborg hears often, that humans can walk and chew gum at the same time. His response to me: "I'm not saying we can't do more things; I'm saying we can't do everything. We have a tendency to focus on things that look scary on TV, that have great PR groups, that have cute animals, and that's not necessarily the best way to prioritise our efforts."

That's also not necessarily a line of thinking that communicates well to the average person who, as science tells us, is governed much more by emotion than reason. For instance, why is it that pictures of polar bears stranded on pieces of



Lomborg in the film *Cool It* which portrayed his warm and fuzzy side.

floating ice have become iconic totems in the climate debate? True, the polar bear is not a basis for climate policy, but it serves as a potent (albeit over-used) symbol of an extraordinarily complex issue. It activates the part of our brain that makes us think and possibly care about climate change.

Of course, translating that concern into meaningful action has proven next to impossible. This is because people are focused on the wrong kinds of actions, Lomborg says, like buying a Prius or, at the national level in some countries, swearing off nuclear power and building more solar panels and wind turbines. The latter is a noble effort, but as Germany has recently discovered, trying to meet all its energy needs with sunshine and wind has led to greater reliance on coal-powered electricity. That can't be good for the climate or polar bears.

Why, then, has Germany's grand experiment with renewable energy been much admired in the global green community? The answer,

perhaps, lies in a point Lomborg stresses several times in our conversation, such as in this zinger: "The global warming conversation is filled with people who literally believe we just need a few more solar panels and we're good to go."

Fortunately for Lomborg, who is pro-nuclear, pro-natural gas and pro-biotechnology, he is no longer the only prominent skunk at the party. The respected climate scientist James Hansen has come out strongly for nuclear power; he has also ridiculed the notion that green energy can help the world kick its carbon habit any time soon. In a widely distributed essay several years ago, Hansen wrote: "Suggesting that renewables will let us phase rapidly off fossil fuels in the United States, China, India, or the world as a whole is almost the equivalent of believing in the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy." The recent documentary *Pandora's Promise* features a roster of environmentalists making the case for nuclear power.

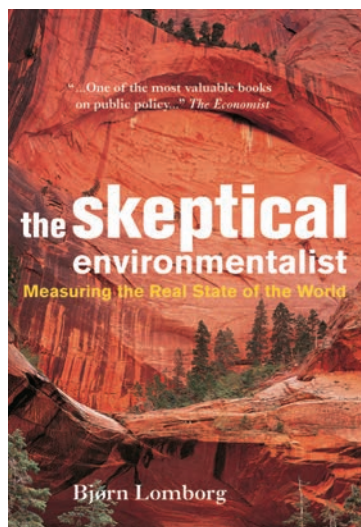
Another band of green writers

'I'M NOT SAYING WE CAN'T DO MORE THINGS. I'M SAYING WE CAN'T DO EVERYTHING.'

and thinkers has started to champion economic growth and genetically modified crops as good for the environment and humanity. One of the most forceful and articulate of this group is Mark Lynas, the British environmentalist and author of several books, including an award-winning book on the dangers of climate change.

Also notable about Lynas is that he once threw a pie in Lomborg's face. It was in 2001, shortly after publication of *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Lomborg was at a bookstore in Oxford, England, getting ready to talk about his new controversial text when Lynas stepped up to the podium and creamed him, yelling "Pies for lies!".





**Lomborg with Denmark's then-Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the opening of the Copenhagen Consensus conference in 2004 and, left, the book that angered many environmentalists.**

recent work (with his Copenhagen Consensus Institute, a policy think tank) as “valuable and interesting” and observed: “I think his general effort hasn’t so much been about science as about economics – in particular an insistence that cost-benefit analysis can be a valuable tool in deciding where to prioritise resources.”

These nuanced attitudes on technology and economic policy seem to herald a new kind of environmentalism in the making, what some have called eco-pragmatism. If they take root, it’s easy to imagine Lomborg’s arguments gaining a more receptive audience. He would at least be in tune with the zeitgeist.

For his part, Lomborg says he thinks the times have finally caught up with him. “The three main messages” of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* “have actually gotten through pretty well,” he contends. These are, one, overall things are getting better, not worse; two, we need to prioritise our problems; and three, we need to

focus on the things where we can do the most good. Lomborg says that he has “talked to lots of people who were initially very against” what he said in the book but who “have slowly come around” to agreeing.

That may be, but there’s no denying the lasting fallout to his image from the beating the book took in the environmentalist and scientific communities, where he is still regarded, at best, suspiciously and, at worst, as an enemy. Lomborg chalks this up to the “you’re either with us or against us” mentality that has poisoned the climate and environmental debates. Case in point: because Lomborg has been an outspoken critic of what he calls “global warming hysteria,” he has for years been tagged as a “climate denier”. He chafes at the charge and passionately defends himself against it.

Indeed, despite being named by Time magazine (in 2008) as one of the world’s 100 most influential people, to a great extent Lomborg has not been able to shake the popular impressions of him that formed in response to *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. The book has cast a long shadow he can’t escape, something he acknowledges: “You say Bjørn Lomborg and with that you mean everything bad in the world. It’s shorthand for that. If you never read anything I wrote or heard me speak, you’d think I must be this wild-eyed person that wants to kill everything and pave over nature.”

He’s telling me this via Skype from the kitchen of his 80 m<sup>2</sup> flat in Prague, where he moved last year “after I was disowned by the Danish government”. The story, according to Lomborg, is this: in 2011, the new centre-left government came into office promising to defund his Copenhagen Consensus Institute, which focuses on how to solve the world’s biggest challenges in a cost-

efficient manner. Lomborg says he was the intended target. After the government pulled the institute’s funding, Denmark’s foreign minister reportedly bragged in a speech that, “we have closed Bjørn Lomborg’s institute”.

I ask Lomborg why that would prompt him to leave his homeland. “I’m not going to stay in a country that doesn’t want me,” he says indignantly.

This latest episode in the ongoing chronicles of Lomborg vs. The World underscores the kind of baggage he can’t shed.

If all these battles have taken their toll, Lomborg hides it well. At 48, he retains his boyish blond visage and still bounds around in his trademark black T-shirt and sneakers. Despite all the blows he’s taken, there have been no knockout punches. After moving to Prague, he reconstituted the Copenhagen Consensus Institute into a US-based non-profit organisation. He maintains a busy schedule, churning out a steady stream of op-ed pieces and travelling 150-200 days a year, giving speeches and attending academic functions.

When asked if he thinks he could have done anything differently over a decade ago – perhaps toned down his scorching criticism – Lomborg hesitates for a few seconds. “No,” he says, then adds, “Of course with 12 years hindsight, I’m sure I could have hit it better.”

Can Lomborg ever win over his adversaries? Given that some greens are now coming around to his way of thinking – embracing pragmatic solutions for the world’s daunting energy and environmental problems – he may have a second chance. Whether he makes the most of it might depend on the lessons he’s learned since becoming the world’s most famous sceptical environmentalist. ■

Grainy footage of the incident can be seen on YouTube and is featured in *Cool It* as an illustration of the furious reaction to *The Skeptical Environmentalist*.

Lynas has since left his radical-activist self in the past and apologised to Lomborg. The two have had respectful exchanges on environmental issues. When I recently contacted Lynas, via email, he said he still thought *The Skeptical Environmentalist* “was highly selective in its citations and pretty biased overall”, which echoes what many critics have said of the book. But he also praised Lomborg’s