

The Lomborg Deception

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Bjorn Lomborg is a Danish author who for many years has described himself as an environmentalist, though a skeptical one. He has written books and appears often as a commentator in the media on environmental issues. US author Howard Friel has read Lomborg's books and thoroughly checked hundreds of Lomborg's sources and references. Howard Friel has concerns regarding claims in Lomborg's *Cool It* and these appear in Friel's book, *The Lomborg Deception*.

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Transcript

Robyn Williams: In this rather disconcerting 21st century with all its turbulence, noise and virtually unlimited communication systems, there are some areas where facts are disputed and reputations in doubt. Like Bjorn Lomborg on *The Science Show* a couple of weeks ago talking about climate. Now Howard Friel in America has written a book attempting to shred the young Dane's credibility. This is how it came to be.

Howard Friel: Well, I had written...prior to this book, *The Lomborg Deception*, I had written two books about *The New York Times* and those books were about how *The Times* covered US foreign policy, major foreign policy issues, mostly about issues of war and peace, from the perspective of international law. Once those two books were done, my intention was to publish a third book on how *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* covered global warming, and as part of that preparation I read a stack of books, one of which was Lomborg's *Cool It*. And apart from the other books that I had read, most of which were quite good to excellent, my reading of Lomborg's *Cool It* was surprising because of the positive reviews it had received pretty much across the board, and also because the book, in accordance with my own reading, did not stand up to those reviews. I thought it was actually a bad book.

I had no intention of writing about Lomborg or about that book until, just out of curiosity, I began to look up some of his more substantive claims which seemed to be at odds with the scientific consensus about global warming, and found that in the footnote that I looked up it didn't support his claim and, to make a long story short I guess, I looked up a second and a third footnote with the same result and just kept going, and eventually I amassed quite a bit of material, and at that point decided to write a book about it.

Robyn Williams: We're talking about Bjorn Lomborg who is cited by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people on the planet, aren't we.

Howard Friel: Yes. That designation, among others, including *The Guardian* who listed him, I believe, in 2004 as one of 50 people who could save the planet, *Esquire* magazine in the United States said something similar, *Foreign Policy* magazine ranked him number 15 or something as the most important public intellectual in the world, all of this prompted me to look seriously into what I had found and to write a book about what I view as extremely problematic scholarship, to put it politely, with respect to Lomborg's work and his claims about global arming.

Robyn Williams: Let me ask you a question about that because on the flyleaf of your book it says: 'A compelling expose of the highly problematic scholarship of Bjorn Lomborg, the world's leading global warming sceptic.' He says that he agrees that there is a problem, that there is global warming and we've got to do something about it and it is caused by human beings. So in what way is he a global warming sceptic?

Howard Friel: A helpful way to view this would be to say there's the global arming consensus which is that man-made global warming is causing the warming and that it's a serious problem. On the other end you have the climate deniers who say that global warming is a hoax, and then in the middle you have Lomborg who says, well, global warming is real, it is not a hoax, but it is not the catastrophe that the scientists and other commentators have said it is. That positioning by Lomborg somewhere in the middle has actually helped him gain the prominence that he now has because there is a tendency in the news media to favour so-called centrists as opposed to people who take a position more firmly on one side or the other.

So Lomborg was very clever to present himself as a centrist, but when you get into the details of his book he's hardly a centrist. I think he would be fairly classified as a climate denier. He takes almost every climate related issue from polar bears to melting glaciers to rising sea levels, and in my view very problematically downplays the significance of the impact of global warming on these areas. So people would classify him as a sceptic that is one notch above a denier, but I would not do that, I think he's close to being a climate denier based on his actual work.

Robyn Williams: What about the two books, first *The Sceptical Environmentalist*, which we know of, and *Cool It*, which came after. I think *The Sceptical Environmentalist* had something like 3,000 endnotes, an immense Everest of references. And the publisher, Cambridge University Press, you would expect to have a rigorous analysis of the integrity of such references. How did Cambridge publish a book that you suggest was having 'a near total absence of methodological integrity'?

Howard Friel: Yes, my book was almost exclusively about *Cool It* which was published in 2007 and was exclusively about global warming. Lomborg's book *The Sceptical Environmentalist* was published in 2001 by Cambridge University Press and it was about a range of environmental issues which included global warming, but nevertheless that is the book, the 2001 book *The Sceptical Environmentalist*, which gave him his prominence and it did include nearly 3,000 endnotes and that was a key feature of the book.

Let me just note very briefly that in 2001 and 2002, Lomborg's book was met pretty much across the board by legitimate scientists as being extremely problematic in his scholarship. There were three very important reviews, the most important of which was published in *Scientific American* in January of 2002 where you had very prominent scientists very upset about this book, including John Holdren who's currently President Barack Obama's Chief Science Advisor; Stephen Schneider, probably one of the top two or three most prominent climate scientists in the US; Tom Lovejoy, a prominent conservation biologist, and so forth.

So people had been upset with Lomborg for quite some time, beginning with *The Sceptical Environmentalist*, but I myself was still not prepared for what I found when I reviewed virtually every footnote in Lomborg's *Cool It* which is a much smaller book than *The Sceptical Environmentalist*. What I found was that in terms of any one of his major claims, his footnotes did not support the substantive assertion made in the text, and as part of my

book I did go over the first 1% of Lomborg's footnotes in *The Sceptical Environmentalist* to demonstrate that there should have at least been a spot-check by Cambridge University Press before they published his book.

Robyn Williams: You seem to imply in your book that it was in fact because it went over two areas that normally are narrowly controlled in publishing; one is science and the other social sciences, and because they kind of bridged both they slipped through the system.

Howard Friel: Yes, apparently it was published by the social science and not the hard science section of Cambridge University Press, and a number of people have said that that was probably the problem. I haven't spoken to anyone who has been on the inside on this, but given that Lomborg bore the burden of disproving what the scientific consensus was about key environmental issues across the board, that some over-sight of his footnotes should have been in order at Cambridge, especially since Lomborg himself had never published a peer reviewed scientific paper in any scientific journal, to this day, by the way, but certainly as of 2001 when he was making these extraordinary claims about scientific and environmentalist exaggerations about a whole range of environmental issues.

Robyn Williams: Let's take an example; polar bears. That's fairly famous because there's been argument about it in the press and on television. Is it one or two polar bears that are having a hard time while thousands of others elsewhere are in fact flourishing?

Howard Friel: I have an entire chapter on Lomborg and polar bears. Much of the persuasiveness of the argument is in the details, but in essence what Lomborg did is he severed the connection between the existence of polar bears as a species with the ultimate fate of Arctic sea ice which is rapidly melting. In other words, the Arctic sea ice is the essential habitat of polar bears, without Arctic sea ice there will be no polar bears. So the way Lomborg finessed this connection was to make other claims while almost completely ignoring the Arctic sea ice issue. That was one way.

Another way is he quoted from the polar bear specialists group of the IUCN key report they issued in 2001, he quoted from the 'Arctic Climate Impact Assessment', a very important scientific study of the impact of global warming on the Arctic region. Both of those studies made clear links between the current reproductive status of polar bears within the context of global warming. The IUCN said that the polar bear population was declining in regions which were experiencing warming in the Arctic. The ACIA, the 'Arctic Climate Impact Assessment', said that it saw no way that the polar bears could survive as a species if the Arctic sea ice disappeared.

So while Lomborg cited these two important studies to provide an appearance or a façade of scholarship, he simply did not mention the key parts of each study which clearly indicated that without Arctic sea ice the polar bears as a species would be threatened.

Robyn Williams: So what's the evidence now in 2010? The Canadians are studying polar bears and any number of biologists and other scientists are doing so. So what's the current state of the polar bear population?

Howard Friel: The condition of the bears has been declining in the regions of the Arctic that have most experienced global warming, and that's still the status of the bears and of the scientific studies, to my knowledge. So the overwhelming body of scientific evidence,

including by Ian Stirling, probably the most important polar bear scientist over the last 30 years who read my book and who has endorsed it, clearly demonstrates that the polar bears are threatened as a species in the Arctic due to global warming.

Robyn Williams: Let's take another example and that is human health. One suggestion is of course that rather like in 2003 when the heatwave went through Europe, lots of people will die. However, in Bjorn Lomborg's version this is balanced by the fact that not so many people will die of cold and overall warming will be a benefit. How do you tackle that one?

Howard Friel: This is a very interesting claim by Lomborg. It is true that probably fewer people will die due to the direct effects of cold weather due to global warming, but the 2007 IPCC assessment report, in addition to other key studies, have shown that the direct and indirect net impact of global warming will be to increase human mortality and not to decrease human mortality.

What Lomborg argues is that...he cites studies which showed that mortality will probably be lower due to the direct impact of global warming, but what he doesn't do, he doesn't broaden his focus to include other studies which have focused on the impact of global warming on human mortality which have showed that, across the board pretty much, human mortality will increase and not decrease.

So Lomborg takes a very slender sliver of evidence with respect to cold weather and inappropriately extrapolates that piece of evidence to make a claim, which is not supported, that global warming will result in lower mortality.

Robyn Williams: So you haven't found any epidemiologists who are forecasting that agree with the Lomborg analysis?

Howard Friel: The interesting thing about the sources that Lomborg himself cites that he claims support his case do not support his case, and one of the things that they argue is that what needs to be done in order to make a more definitive projection of the impact of global warming on human mortality will be to develop the scientific and epidemiological models that would be able to provide some clear answers. So those models, to my knowledge, don't yet exist. But the evidence to date that has been published, including as assessed by the IPCC, is that mortality will increase not decrease as Lomborg claims.

Robyn Williams: You mentioned just now the 2007 IPCC report. In fact one reference that you give in your book about glaciers seems to have been borne out when Lomborg was suggesting that glaciers would not be melting quite so fast in the Himalayas as suggested. Of course the 2035 figure for that year when glaciers are supposedly going to disappear from the Himalayas has been shown to be false and to be an exaggeration. So in that regard, in that one instance he seems to be right.

Howard Friel: I don't think so, I don't think he's right about that even. I mean, he obviously has cited the fact that I cited the 2035 figure, as did the IPCC, but if you look at the larger picture, Lomborg claims that the glaciers are melting because the Earth is coming out of a little ice age as of about 300 years ago, when the scientists have argued that this is clearly not the case. Lomborg makes this argument to show that the current warming is not largely due to CO₂ or manmade emissions but instead is due to the natural fluctuation of warming and

cooling. So Lomborg's overall analysis is completely wrong about the cause of the melting glaciers.

Let me make one other point; one of the clearest indications of global warming is the fact that the Earth's cryosphere which is its frozen components, that is the ice and permafrost on the Earth, is melting on a global scale. Lomborg says the glaciers are melting because of our emergence from the little ice age, but the little ice age was probably a North Atlantic phenomenon and not a global phenomenon, and today we have the global phenomenon of the Earth's cryosphere melting. The way Lomborg, again, finesses that, is that he simply doesn't address the concept of the Earth's cryosphere and ignores it and instead focuses on his claim that, well, the glaciers are melting of course because we're coming out of the little ice age.

Robyn Williams: Howard Friel, author of *The Lomborg Deception*, published by Yale University Press.

Bjorn, I want to ask you about this book that's come out, presumably you've seen it, it's called *The Lomborg Deception*. Have you ever met Howard Friel?

Bjorn Lomborg: No, I haven't. I read an interview where he made a point out of he didn't try to contact me or anything before he wrote the book.

Robyn Williams: Have you read the book?

Bjorn Lomborg: Yes.

Robyn Williams: What do you think of it?

Bjorn Lomborg: Well, the short version is really he claims that I misrepresent the science and that I don't do my due diligence, and unfortunately I have to say it seems like that's exactly the description of his book. In many ways it seems like a hit job, it seems almost insistent on not understanding what I'm saying. There's one example where I talk about heat and cold deaths and I point out that if you're talking about the impact of temperature you can't just look at increased heat deaths, you also have to look at decreased cold deaths, and I point out three studies that didn't look at the decreasing cold deaths and criticised them. Actually one study very explicitly said they left out all studies that looked at cold deaths, and I criticised them, and then I showed that there were two other studies that put in both and actually indicate that cold deaths will probably outweigh extra heat deaths.

And then he says in the book: 'Bjorn has five references, three of which do not support his point.' Clearly he's making the point that I'm not being honest about it, but of course the three studies that I quoted were exactly the three studies that I actually used half a page in my book to criticise, for exactly not doing what I think is necessary. Now, there's no doubt that there are other people out there and there are other points that make the opposite argument of what I said, but to not read and understand my argument and saying I'm criticising these studies but I'm showing that there are other studies that try to take into account both of them and actually indicate that this gives a very different picture seems more intent on simply misunderstanding what I'm saying.

Robyn Williams: Yes. Is this more than academics arguing about references and sources and all the rest of it? Is it more of a political thing, as you read it?

Bjorn Lomborg: I don't know. I've got to say that there are some things which I don't quite understand, that he didn't at least look at others. He has a whole chapter where he goes on and on about the fact that my sources say ten billion but I say four billion, and I actually write in the endnote that it's ten billion a year for ten years which, discount it into indefinite future, is four billion, which is just a standard sort of recalculation method for economists, and had he asked anyone he would have gotten that. But not understanding that and actually going on for more than two pages like this is a major error in some ways seemed more like he was just intent on finding fault anywhere, even if there is no fault to be found. I'm not sure why he's doing this. I haven't talked to him, I haven't met him, so I can't tell you whether it's political or not.

Robyn Williams: He's got some very good reviews of his book, hasn't he.

Bjorn Lomborg: I've seen a few of the reviews. I know of one, how that was carried through. He also just got one very bad in *Barron's*, but fundamentally the one in *Newsweek* I had the somewhat problematic experience of seeing first-hand it was written by Begley who was very, very critical when my book first came out, and I wrote her a long response on the different points that she wanted to focus on, and I quite frankly felt that she was not at all trying to make a balanced piece, she was not at all trying to understand this, but she simply felt, hey, finally somebody who understands that Bjorn has written a crappy book.

Robyn Williams: Sharon Begley in the *Newsweek*, as you said, but also in *The Sunday Times* in London was fairly unforgiving. But what they're trying to say...Howard Friel in his book...for instance, about *The Sceptical Environmentalist*, the first book that you brought out through Cambridge, is that it was not edited properly because it landed halfway between the social sciences and the scientific publications of Cambridge and so they didn't really give it the thorough once-over that they might do an academic book and somehow it slipped through without being properly vetted. How do you answer that?

Bjorn Lomborg: Cambridge has actually answered that several times. It's published by the social sciences and it is mainly a social science book arguing about the impact of all the different problems from global warming and other environmental problems. I think this is exactly the kind of book that we need to have a conversation about and, again, making the point that he feels that it should have been a different book, that's fair and that's entirely up to Friel or anyone else to write. But, again, if you look at the actual things he goes through, I believe it's the first four pages of my 300-page book and criticises how it doesn't prove its points, which I think simply doesn't stand up. As you may also know, I've written a lengthy description where I go through some of the main problems of his argument and show how it's simply misrepresented.

Robyn Williams: Yes, we've seen it online.

Bjorn Lomborg: Yes, it's online, it's on my website, lomborg.com. So, again, I just have to say it strikes me as he would very much like this not to be true, he would very much like to say that I'm wrong but, again, it strikes me that there's very little substance to that argument.

Robyn Williams: A final question, Bjorn Lomborg; what about the current state of the debate on climate? We seem to be stymied. There's a fair chance, as you've said yourself, that we have a really urgent problem on our hands. How do you feel we're going at the moment?

Bjorn Lomborg: I think there's some hope for the climate change debate in the sense that because of the failure in Copenhagen the doors have been blown wide open to start thinking about other ways to fix climate. Clearly the current approach, to commit to drastic carbon cuts right here, right now for developed countries, is just not working, it has not been working for the last 18 years since Rio in 1992. And starting to realise we need a different approach is a very positive step forward. Had we just had another treaty in Copenhagen, had we just have everyone say 'yay, we love this and we're going to promise to cut in 2020 or 2040' then of course we would all have gone on, just like we did with Kyoto, and done nothing. So in that sense it's positive.

Now what we need is instead of just coming back to the situation where nobody cares about global warming, which certainly seems to be the place right now that we're heading...we've seen dramatic declines in people's worry around the world on global warming in the last year-and-a-half...it seems important to recognise that global warming is real, it's manmade, it is an important problem, but we need to fix it right.

So I'm hoping that we can start having a conversation about what are the smart approaches. And as the Copenhagen consensus on climate has shown, some of the very smart approaches are drastically increasing investment in research and development into green energy, essentially making green energy so cheap that in the next 20 to 40 years everyone will want to buy it, also China and India, and also at the same time research into geo-engineering so that we actually have potential policy in our back hands if things get ugly.

Robyn Williams: Bjorn, thank you so much.

Bjorn Lomborg: Thank you.

Robyn Williams: Bjorn Lomborg in Denmark.

Howard Friel, since you published your book he has of course replied to many of your points and he's done so in an extensive publication on his website. What do you think of his response?

Howard Friel: I was surprised to see the response so early given that he posted his response before my book was even published. The final bound copies of my book had not even been distributed to reviewers, I don't know how he got a hold of my manuscript to read it and publish such a lengthy response, so that's a question which maybe I would like to have some answers about.

Robyn Williams: He's a very deft user of the media, isn't he.

Howard Friel: Yes, he is. In fact he did the same thing in January 2002 or December 2001, somehow he got a hold of the text of what *Scientific American* was going to publish which included, as did his response to my book, extended copyrighted excerpts from my book and from the *Scientific American* magazine, except in this case *Scientific American* threatened to sue Lomborg unless he took down his response, including the copyrighted material from his website, which he did. We did not do that, we let him post his response to my book. I simply wrote a response which I think was effective two days later which we posted at the Yale University Press website.

I think what the news media needs to keep in mind, and I've looked into this very recently, is that almost nothing that he claims when he goes on these news media venues on TV or writes op-ed pieces and commentary in newspapers and magazines, there's no substantive basis to his claims. And I think just as Cambridge University Press should have exercised some oversight over Lomborg's claims, I think it's time that the news media do the same thing.

Lomborg continues, to this day, to publish op-ed pieces from the *Guardian* to *The Wall Street Journal* making completely unsubstantiated claims, except in the news media we don't even have the benefit of looking at his footnotes. So you can imagine what he does when he has an opportunity to make claims where he's not required to footnote.

Robyn Williams: One thing you don't say in your book is that he's in any way linked to a pressure group, a lobby group or anything like that, and that's the sort of thing that one would want to know, because suddenly this young man comes from nowhere, from Denmark, an economist, talking about environmental science. What's behind the Lomborg phenomenon?

Howard Friel: That's a very good question. I chose not to address it, as you say. Let me say this about that though, I find it very interesting that Lomborg's main plank which he repeats over and over again which has been completely consistent over the course of almost a decade now, that he is opposed to cuts in CO₂ emissions. If you look at who that benefits that would be the coal and oil industries. I have no evidence that he's being paid by the coal and oil industries, I don't know one way or the other, but I do know that based on my research that his argument that it would be better for the Earth to forgo cuts in CO₂ are ridiculous and absurd and reckless, and one would have to wonder why he is making this claim, especially since over and over again he cannot support the particulars of his claim with his own scholarship, even with his own footnoted sources.

So you raise a very important question, it's one that I'm not really prepared to answer at this point, but I do find it interesting that his one consistent plank...because he's sort of reinvented himself over the years, including now he's somehow this specialist on geo-engineering when he's not a scientist or an engineer, but all of this is designed to protect his claim that we should not cut CO₂. For example, now he's claiming that we should engage in these geo-engineering projects instead of cutting CO₂. Even assuming that some of these geo-engineering projects would work, and it's not clear that they would at all, that doesn't address the underlying problem, and the underlying problem is the CO₂. And his position is that we should absolutely not cut CO₂, and that's completely consistent with the interests of the oil and coal industries.