

THE SKEPTICAL ENVIRONMENTALIST
Measuring the Real State of the World

Bjørn Lomborg

REVIEW

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Lomborg challenges the usual conception of the collapse of ecosystems, contradicting the pessimist view of the Worldwatch Institute, which has been publishing every year since 1984 the book *The State of the World*; it is considered one of the most important publications about environmental policy, but it always promotes a litany about the ever deteriorating environment, a fatalist view of the ecology.

According to *The Economist*¹, there are four main "environmental" fears:

- Natural resources are running out.
- The population is ever growing, leaving less and less to eat.
- Species are becoming extinct in vast numbers: forests are disappearing and fish stocks are collapsing.
- The planet's air and water are becoming ever more polluted.

The author asserts that mankind has actually *improved* in every measurable indicator for the last hundred of years, even those related with environment. But this doesn't mean that these indicators are good; indeed, they need to improve even more; therefore, there is plenty of room for more efforts towards improving the environment.

To conceive more strategies, it is important to be aware of the real situation of the world, in order to better focus our actions. In the author's own words:

"This book attempts to measure the real state of the world.[...]I wish to gauge the most important characteristics of our state of the world-the *fundamentals*. And these should be assessed not on myths but on the best available facts². [...] With this assessment of the state of the world I wish to leave to the individual reader the political judgment as to where we should focus our efforts³."

The main approach to understand how things are getting better is to understand the long-run trends of the

¹ The economist, August 2nd 2001.

² Lomborg, B. "The Skeptical Environmentalist" Page 3.

³ Ibid, Page 6.

different indicators, beyond the short-run deviations from the trend. The latter method is the one most commonly used by the environmental organizations; based on short-term trends, researchers often estimate very pessimistic future scenarios.

For example, Lester Brown (from the Worldwatch Institute) was worried about the 3-year-decline in world wide grain yields; he believed that it might have happened because we had reached the physiological limits of the plants, which meant the beginning of starvation. Lomborg examines Brown's figures and found that even if he is right about the 3-year-decline, the whole trend of the series tells a different story, one of sustained growth in grain yields.

The Litany published by Brown supports the second fear we mentioned above. The truth is that this extension of the Malthusian theory is not real: in fact, *there has been a steady growth in the amount of food available for each member of the population*⁴: the calorie intake has increased 24 percent, even if the population has more than doubled since 1961⁵.

Besides the wrong use of statistics by the most important environmental organizations, the author criticizes the usage of false (and often non verifiable) data and the misinterpretation of the figures according to the gloomy point of view of these institutions. For instance, Claude Martin, president of the World Wide Fund (WWF) claims that "deforestation has been accelerating in the last 30 years⁶". Using official databases from the FAO Production Yearbooks (from the UN), Lomborg finds that the area covered by forests has not changed much since 1950 (from 1961 it has fallen 0.44 percentage points). Even if the UN's estimates predict a reduction of this area, the most pessimistic figures show a 20% decline. So, forests are not disappearing.

In consequence, Bjørn Lomborg tries to provide verifiable, official and easy-to-find statistics, in order to challenge the reader to make his own judgment; in fact, the book has 2930 notes that fully document the author's assertions.

One of the main innovations about Lomborg's environmental analysis is that he evaluates both the costs and the benefits of a certain fact or policy. For example, talking about forests, he declares:

"If a considered political decision is to be made about how much

⁴ Page 60.

⁵ Page 61.

⁶ Page 110

forest we want to have in the world, it is crucial for us to have a comprehensive view of the arguments for and against exploitation of the forests⁷"

In general, Lomborg tries to integrate to the environmental analysis an economic one, considering different trade-offs of a certain policy.

Considering the problem of the supposed scarcity our natural resources, Lomborg affirms that we are not overexploiting our renewable resources (food, forests, water). Concerning our non-renewable resources, such as energy and raw materials, sophisticated discovery methods have provided us with increasing supply, even in a context of growing consumption:

"While non-renewable resources are in principle exhaustible, more than 60 percent of our consumption consists of resources with reserves of 200 years or more⁸"

Regarding pollution, the last of the main environmental fears, Lomborg shows that the concentrations of the major air pollutants have diminished in the Western world; even if in the developing world air pollution has got worse, the author also believes that in the long run, these countries would also bring down its air contamination, following the more developed world's lead.

The achievement of feeding the growing population in less area represents a trade-off: the increasing use of fertilizers has allowed us to preserve forests from agricultural use, but it has also contaminated some parts of marine water because of the nutrients that those fertilizers have. On average, however, coastal waters have improved their quality.

The book is divided in six parts, the first acts as an introduction in order to help us understand the main objectives and approach of the book, and how it differs from the methods of the most important environmental organizations. Part II and part III are very economically-oriented, because they consider several demographic issues. Part IV and Part V are more environmentally-oriented and part VI is a general conclusion of the book.

⁷ Page 115.

⁸ Page 159