

# Cool-headed

A thoughtful Danish author says the Gore stress on global warming is not the way to help poor people

by Mark Bergin, *WORLD Magazine*, April 21, 2007

As the 38th annual Earth Day approaches on April 22, many who care about both the poor and the environment are listening to calls for radical measures. The fear is that flooding in coastal regions could displace millions, mostly the poor; heat waves could kill many who are elderly or diseased; and decreased crop yields could lead to starvation in developing nations.

So does compassion require the federal government to require immediate and drastic cuts in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions? Enter Bjørn Lomborg, a Danish academic, author, and founder of the Copenhagen Consensus, a group devoted to economic analysis of policy proposals to solve the world's toughest problems. Lomborg's congressional testimony last month systematically deconstructed the much-hyped testimony by former vice president Al Gore.



Lomborg argued that the high economic costs of emissions-cutting proposals would deliver meager global benefits compared to what such funds could accomplish elsewhere. He cited his organization's global priority list (see table on Page 3), a ranking of the world's most cost-effective opportunities to improve the human situation. A panel of top-tier economists, including four Nobel Laureates, constructed the table in 2004 based on their analysis of areas where the most good could result from the least economic harm.

The panel ranked various measures to control the spread of disease and alleviate food and water shortages as top priorities. Climate-change solutions, such as carbon taxes or the Kyoto Protocol, scored at the very bottom, delivering minimal gains relative to their costs.

Lomborg elaborated to Congress: "To put it very bluntly, the Kyoto Protocol would likely cost at least \$180 billion a year and do little good. UNICEF estimates that just \$70-80 billion a year could give all Third World inhabitants access to the basics like health, education, water, and sanitation. More important still is the fact that if we could muster such a massive investment in the present-day developing countries, this would also give them a much better future position in terms of resources and infrastructure from which to manage a future global warming. What would we rather do first?"

That question, and the approach it underscores, debunks stereotypes of global warming skeptics and moderates. Lomborg is not some heartless free-market conservative in the pocket of "big oil." He readily affirms that climate change is occurring and that human industry is contributing to it – but he explains that addressing other global issues first will prevent more deaths and improve more lives.

Nevertheless, his decision to break rank from global-warming orthodoxy has garnered him considerable scorn. Lomborg's first book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), provoked accusations of scientific dishonesty. His forthcoming work, *Cool It* (Knopf Publishing Group), will likely draw similar charges when it debuts early next year.

In an interview with *WORLD*, the controversial author said he is neither surprised nor upset by such attacks: "I've had people call me a species traitor, which I don't even know quite what that means. But I'm sure it's bad."

Lomborg has made conciliatory efforts, opening his congressional testimony with praise for Gore's accomplishment of "making global warming cool again." Though unconvinced that climate change represents a planetary crisis, Lomborg considers it a serious concern worthy of attention and public discussion. His appeals against CO<sub>2</sub> restrictions stem from the same heart of compassion that those who advocate emissions cuts claim. The difference: math.

Lomborg calculates that Gore's call for a Kyoto-like tax on greenhouse-gas emissions would cost the U.S. economy about \$160 billion per year and would reduce national emissions by half. That may seem a reasonable investment, but the real-world impact on global temperatures proves otherwise. Such drastic cuts in U.S. emissions would foster a reduction in warming of only one-tenth of a degree Celsius over the next 90 years. (One Celsius, or centigrade, degree equals 1.8 Fahrenheit degrees.)

That miniscule temperature difference is irrelevant and cannot justify the accompanying economic burden. Similarly, the Kyoto Protocol, even with the United States and Australia joining its ranks, would decrease temperature rise by just 1 degree Celsius at annual costs of \$180 billion if extended out to the end of the century. The European Union's latest promise to cut emissions to 20 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 fares no better when extended out 90 years, costing \$90 billion per year for a difference of less than one-tenth of a degree Celsius.

Such numbers result from projections that developing countries like China and India will soon pass the West as the world's greatest emitters of carbon dioxide. Gore argues that the United States must set an example for those emerging economies, no matter how costly or impotent the U.S. carbon-cutting actions may be in controlling actual temperature rise.

But Douglass C. North, a Nobel Prize-winning economist and advisor to Lomborg's Copenhagen Consensus, explains that "while China is growing at an enormous rate, it's also still very poor. The Chinese say, 'Well, our priority is still economic growth and not worrying too much about the environment.'"

Whether China and India choose to change their attitudes presents a far greater determinant of future warming than any emissions-cutting policies in Europe or the United States ever could. North told WORLD that such uncertainties push global problems other than climate change to the top of the priority list. Furthermore, he explained, unfettered economic growth around the world may do more to ease the consequences of global warming than actually lessening the rise in temperature: "Most of the serious effects of climate change are going to be well off in the future, 50 or 60 years from now. At that time, all of the world is going to be so much richer than it is today that it won't be nearly as serious a problem as it would be if it happened overnight."

The latest summary report from the UN-sponsored Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) argues that much of the predicted sting from a warming planet will fall on people too poor to adapt – and Lomborg responds, "If poor people are going to suffer the most, that should indicate to everyone that maybe we should try to make them not poor. That means focusing on things like cutting agricultural subsidies and allowing for free trade in general, which would undoubtedly make the world amazingly richer."

Greater wealth in Third World nations would also contribute to fighting problems more pressing than climate change – namely, the spread of disease, malnutrition, and clean water shortages. Unlike the projected consequences of global warming, these issues claim lives now and could be greatly alleviated at a comparatively low price.

Take malaria, a topic featured in Gore's Academy Award-winning documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. The film argues that rising temperatures will drive mosquitoes into new cities and spread the disease among new populations. Lomborg agrees but contends that the mosquito surge will increase the number of people at risk by only 3.2 percent – and that attacking the malaria issue with climate-change policy is highly inefficient.

Instead, Lomborg proposes offering assistance to developing economies and building health infrastructures in nations with a high incidence of malaria, measures that would require about \$3 billion per year – 2 percent the cost of Kyoto. For that low price, studies indicate that malaria infections could decrease 50 percent by 2015. "If we really care about malaria victims, we should focus first on much more efficient policies and strategies that actually help deal with malaria," Lomborg said.

But if global warming truly threatens the earth's habitability, as Gore claims, then even 100 percent malaria relief is of no consequence. Such a scenario would require the unmitigated abandonment of all other concerns and complete focus of all planetary resources on stopping climate change.

The IPCC predicts no such scenario. In fact, the projected harms of its latest summary report stem from a hypothetical analysis that assumes no change in human behavior – an unlikely outcome that inflates impacts from their likely real-world levels.

Still, Lomborg does not advocate that nations ignore the problem of global warming. He wants smarter solutions, those that deliver significant bang for the buck – and he wants to see those develop, instead of settling for inferior choices. Research and development into new technologies offer far greater promise for a comprehensive and effective long-term strategy.

# Global priority list

CHALLENGE	OPPORTUNITY
<i>Very good opportunities</i>	
1 Diseases	Control of HIV/AIDS
2 Malnutrition	Providing micronutrients
3 Subsidies and trade	Trade liberalization
4 Diseases	Control of malaria
<i>Good opportunities</i>	
5 Malnutrition	Development of new agricultural technologies
6 Sanitation and water	Small-scale water technology for livelihoods
7 Sanitation and water	Community-managed water supply and sanitation
8 Sanitation and water	Research on water productivity in food production
9 Government	Lowering the cost of starting a new business
<i>Fair opportunities</i>	
10 Migration	Lowering barriers to migration for skilled workers
11 Malnutrition	Improving infant and child nutrition
12 Malnutrition	Reducing the prevalence of low birth weight
13 Diseases	Scaled-up basic health services
<i>Bad opportunities</i>	
14 Migration	Guest-worker programs for the unskilled
15 Climate	Optimal carbon tax (\$25-\$300)
16 Climate	The Kyoto Protocol
17 Climate	Value-at-risk carbon tax (\$100-\$450)



AIDS in Uganda

SOURCE: Copenhagen Consensus, 2004

Supporters of immediate and drastic emissions-cutting policies such as a cap-and-trade program believe governmental controls will force rapid innovation. Technologies will spring up, they say, because the costs of buying the right to emit CO<sub>2</sub> will demand it.

But such high hopes have not materialized in Europe, where companies have turned to short-term tricks and tactics to avoid the oppressive restraints of Kyoto. The high costs of innovation have become a luxury that few strapped energy or manufacturing plants can afford.

The Washington Post recently reported on several European factories in dire financial straits due to emissions restrictions. A silicon carbide manufacturer in the Netherlands uses the latest pollution-reducing equipment but has had to lay off 40 of 130 employees and must shut down for hours each day to manage the ballooning cost of electricity. Other companies are losing clients to foreign providers that have no emissions restrictions to drive up their price points.

Such problems create an environment of emissions outsourcing and can push businesses to relocate abroad. Lomborg believes that government-funded research and development presents a vastly superior alternative. He proposes that nations cease the bureaucratic morass of reducing emissions and start investing in whatever low-carbon-emitting technologies or techniques they consider prudent – conservation, renewable energies, fusion, fission, carbon capture, or some novel idea yet unknown.

The current cost of cutting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is about \$20 per ton, a significant burden for wealthy nations but an impossible hurdle for poorer countries like China and India. New technology and ideas could change that. "If we could cut carbon-cutting costs to say \$2 per ton instead of \$20, then the chance is much better of getting more countries on board," Lomborg explained.

Whether such arguments resonated with Congress enough to trump the political muscle behind Gore's vision will play out in the coming months as legislators consider bills to restrict greenhouse gases. Between the IPCC's projection of harms and a recent Supreme Court decision giving the EPA power to set CO<sub>2</sub> standards for automakers, many environmentalists believe the momentum toward a self-imposed American-style Kyoto is unstoppable.

Ben Lieberman, a senior environmental policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, disagrees: "This still is more of a fashionable cause than a populist cause. There is some momentum in the direction of action, but the specter of politically unacceptable high costs is always going to be there until we develop more greenhouse-friendly technology – and that takes time."

Gore and his disciples contend that time is running out, that we are just 10 years away from a disastrous tipping point and the unrelenting disdain of our children and grandchildren. Lomborg, too, fears such future contempt – though for entirely different reasons: "Everyone in this debate wants to be able to look squarely into the eyes of the next generation and say, 'We did the best we could.' To go off on one particular concern and invest everything we can there, when most of the evidence tells us that will be a poor investment, is unlikely to impress future generations."

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