



A Cooler Head Prevails

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by [Michael Antman](#)

Fear, it would appear, abhors a vacuum. After a fleeting moment of optimism following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fading of the very real threat of nuclear holocaust, the Western world now has two dreadful new fates to contemplate, hypothetical horrors that have little in common except for the manner in which they have been politicized and hyperbolized.

A humane and practical corrective to an argument that has grown far too overheated, Cool It is a breath of fresh air that needs to be read by everyone who fears for the future of our world.

One fear, that of terrorism, appears to be experienced mostly by those on the conservative end of the political spectrum, while the other, that of global warming, has until recently been a phenomenon largely of the Left. This, of course, makes little sense: If some among us are destined to be blown apart by bombs, those bombs will not discriminate on the basis of political orientation, and if we are to be roasted by rising temperatures, we will all roast as one.

But the odds are good that few of us will suffer either fate. Last year saw the publication of a helpful and authoritative volume called *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them*, by John Mueller, which made the reasonable case that the threat of domestic terrorism has been grossly exaggerated by the "terrorism industry", and that the likelihood of any one of us in the Western world becoming the victim of a terrorist attack is infinitesimally small.

Compared to the massive wall of books claiming that the Bush administration's actions are placing us at substantial risk for another 9/11, and the almost-as-large shelf claiming that the substantial risk of another 9/11 requires the Bush administration to take those very actions, *Overblown* has been greatly overshadowed, but is well worth reading for, if nothing else, its calming effect.

Now comes environmentalist Bjorn Lomborg's new book, *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming*, which will serve the same anodyne purpose for those among us who lay awake at night worried that they will be, as one environmentalist has put it, members of Earth's "last generation".

Lomborg, the founder of the Copenhagen Consensus of economists, which convenes to prioritize solutions to the globe's greatest challenges, is not really a global-warming skeptic. At the very beginning of *Cool It*, he asserts straightforwardly that "(g)lobal warming is real and man-made." In this sense – and this sense alone – he is in the mainstream of current scientific thinking about global warming (though, it should be noted, there are other legitimate scientists who still doubt that Earth is in a long-term warming phase, much less that this warming is caused primarily by man's activities.)

What makes Lomborg exceptionally controversial, however, is his persistent skepticism about the degree to which global warming is a catastrophe, rather than a manageable problem, and his tendency to see much of the evidence offered in favor of the disaster scenario as a kind of global

hypochondria, anecdotal evidence that has either been exaggerated, taken out of context, or based on data that was inaccurate to begin with.

Have you seen those heart-rending photographs of polar bears stranded on melting ice floes, peering balefully over the edge as they brood over their permanent immersion? Furry nonsense, according to Lomborg. "(O)ver the past forty years," he writes, "the (polar bear) population has increased dramatically and the populations are now stable." Photographs, Lomborg suggests, don't merely fail to tell the whole story; they tell the *wrong* story.

Further, in Canada, where two-thirds of the world's polar bears reside, 11 of the 13 populations are *currently* increasing. So, at least, claims a polar-bear biologist from the Canadian government, who is quoted in *Cool It* as saying, "It is just silly to predict the demise of polar bears in 25 years based on media-assisted hysteria."

Speaking of hysteria, here is an alarming quote from the famed environmentalist and formulator of the Gaia Hypothesis, James Lovelock: "Before this century is over billions of us will die and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable."

The few breeding pairs of people that survive? Lomborg, who is anything but a hysteric, responds mildly enough to this remarkable statement by noting, "(t)his is far beyond the pale of our understanding of climate change," and reserves for a footnote the sensible observation that billions of us now living will indeed die by the end of this century, though in most cases from natural causes.

How about the thousands of deaths likely to occur from heat waves? Actually, Lomborg posits, the number of weather-related deaths is likely to substantially *decrease* in a warming world, because of a sharp decline in the number of deaths caused by the cold; he points out that "(i)n Europe as a whole, about two hundred thousand people die from excess heat each year. However, about 1.5 million Europeans die annually from excess cold." Presumably, this latter number would substantially decline as the number of cold snaps also decreases.

Is this just heartless ratiocination? Lomborg notes, "(i)n the U.S. 2005 Climate Change and Human Health Impacts report, heat is mentioned fifty-four times and cold just once. It might seem callous to weigh lives saved versus those lost, but if our goal is to improve the lot of humanity, then it's important to know just how many more heat deaths we can expect compared to how many fewer cold deaths."

What about hurricanes? The jury is still out on the question of whether a warming globe causes more and stronger hurricanes, and there is no denying the suffering caused by hurricanes such as Katrina (including, it should be noted, the less-symbolic, less-photogenic, and little-noted suffering that occurred in small towns far outside of New Orleans) but one thing is evident to nearly all interested observers: the huge and indisputable increase in damage caused by hurricanes in recent years is in large part the result of "rising concentrations of population and infrastructure in coastal regions."

In other words, it's a relatively manageable problem to the extent that people are willing to forego having it all – both the breathtaking ocean views and the absolute assurance of safety from storms.

Rising sea levels? Lomborg calmly considers the case for this doomsday, Statue-of-Liberty-up-to-its-eyeballs scenario. The most likely occurrence, he says, is that sea levels will rise by about five inches by the year 2050, "no more than the change we have experienced since 1940." Lomborg writes, "(a)sk a very old person about the most important events that took place in the twentieth century. She will likely mention the two world wars, the cold war, and perhaps the IT revolution. But it is very unlikely that she will add, 'Oh, and sea levels rose.'"

Climatology and oceanography are immensely complex disciplines, and making predictions about

where sea levels will be in 50 years is an inherently risky endeavor. But that applies not only to Lomborg (who, interestingly, cites the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore, in support of some of his reassuring sea-level estimates), but to the more-extreme prognosticators as well.

Gore, for example, in his now-famous documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, predicts a sea change that is nothing short of startling. As Lomborg describes the relevant section, "...we see large parts of Florida, including all of Miami, will be inundated by twenty feet of water. We see equally strong clips of San Francisco Bay being flooded, the Netherlands being wiped off the map, Beijing and then Shanghai being submerged, Bangladesh being made uninhabitable for sixty million people, and the deluging of even New York City..."

But in Gore's own words, this near-apocalypse will happen only "(i)f Greenland melted or broke up and slipped into the sea – or if half of Greenland and half of Antarctica melted or broke up and slipped into the sea." But Antarctica's massive, thirty-five-million-year-old ice sheet is actually in a long-term cooling trend, and Lomborg notes that "(e)ven with the most extreme estimates of Greenland melting over a couple of years, a sea-level rise of twenty feet would take one thousand years."

But Lomborg's most important and likely most controversial point is that the rush to ratify and implement the Kyoto Protocol is, in his eyes, a fool's errand. Countries sign on for purely symbolic or political reasons, but then inevitably fail to meet their carbon-cutting goals anyway because, Lomborg claims, those goals are completely unrealistic and unreachable.

Further, he says, cutting carbon emissions is a roundabout, wildly expensive, and minimally effective means of improving our world. To begin with, even if all countries ratified and implemented the treaty, "(t)he temperature by 2050 would be an immeasurable 0.1 Fahrenheit lower and even by 2100 only 0.3 Fahrenheit lower", according to a scientist cited by Lomborg who advanced this conclusion in the publication *Geophysical Research Letters*.

Our farmlands are being plowed under for industrial development, and our oceans are being depleted of life at a sickening rate by factory trawlers and fertilizer runoff, none of which would be ameliorated in the slightest by cooling the globe a little bit or a lot. Indeed, a warmer globe might mean longer growing seasons in North America, which in turn could mean less fertilizer runoff into the oceans.

And yet, judging by the preponderance of public discourse, reducing global temperatures by a small degree somehow has become the only path to salvation.

Meanwhile, Lomborg says, cheaper, more practical, and more immediately beneficial environmental goals – such as improving access to fresh drinking water in the third world, controlling malaria where it's endemic with mosquito nets, and painting city roofs and roads white to ameliorate the "urban heat sink" effect – are shuffled to the back of the deck.

Does painting roofs white in order to reflect rather than absorb heat seem silly in the face of impending global catastrophe? Even if you believe catastrophe is imminent, consider that, as Lomborg puts it, "(f)or the full Kyoto Protocol with the United States participating, the total cost over the coming century turns out to be more than \$5 trillion" for, again, a minuscule drop in global temperatures of 0.3 degrees Fahrenheit. However, according to a study by the Greater London Authority on that city cited by Lomborg, "increas(ing) the general reflectivity and natural shading from buildings...could lower heat (locally) by 18 degrees Fahrenheit."

As far as those malaria nets, Lomborg makes the straightforward point that malaria is less a disease of heat than one of poverty, and can be largely ameliorated by public-health measures and inexpensive preventatives. Thus, he says, even though a warming globe will increase the spread of unwelcome insects and parasites, there are many other factors that determine whether those insects

and parasites will actually cause disease. According to Lomborg, no matter how warm the world may get, malaria is not coming to Vermont any time soon.

Further, to the extent that fossil-fuel-based industrialization vastly enriches nations (as it is indisputably doing in, for example, China, which is not required by Kyoto to cut its emissions) poor countries will be substantially *less* poor and experience far *less* malaria in a world in which the priority is something other than the radical emissions reductions posited by Kyoto, simply because those countries will be better able to afford those preventatives.

Regarding even more radical cuts than those proposed by Kyoto, Lomborg says, "(f)or both the developed and the developing world, a world without fossil fuels in the short or medium term is a lot like a world gone medieval." That, needless to say, would result in far more disease and human suffering, from not only malaria but from cholera and yellow fever and a hundred other thankfully forgotten contagions, than would even a radically warmer globe.

Trust Lomborg's optimism or not, there is no denying that he makes a humane and thoughtful argument when he asserts that the money spent on highly complex, theoretical and wildly expensive reductions in fossil-fuel emissions called for by the Kyoto Protocol would be better spent on practical enhancements such as stronger seawalls and levees, restored wetlands, and research and development for cleaner energy alternatives.

As Lomborg states, "climate change is not an imminent planetary emergency that will bring down civilization. It is one, but only one, of many problems that we will have to deal with over this century and beyond." And, in Lomborg's account, a very manageable one.

It is entirely possible, of course, that Lomborg's science is mistaken or his conclusions Pollyannishly misguided. Because *Cool Itis* not an even-handed and comprehensive evaluation of all of the arguments and counter-arguments in the global warming debate (if anything, it's a sort of low-key, even-tempered polemic, if such a thing is possible), it's hard sometimes for a non-scientist to know how to evaluate some of his reassurances. Though Lomborg cites a great many researchers in his notes (which take up a full 34 pages of this small-format, 272-page book), it's a chore sometimes to match all of the claims with the scientists who support them, or to know for certain if some of them were taken out of context or misinterpreted by Lomborg.

Further, in attacking the over-reliance by the environmental movement on cutting carbon emissions, Lomborg doesn't spend much time talking about the corollary benefits of cutting carbon emissions – for example, the reduction in air pollution that would result from switching to cleaner sources of energy, not to mention the evident geopolitical benefits.

Nor does he place enough emphasis on creative, market-based ways of controlling greenhouse gases such as the trading of carbon credits, nor the practical and effective methodologies that have already been developed to control livestock emissions. Further, his critique of Kyoto and other greenhouse-gas-cutting proposals is based on an assumption that doesn't (understandably, it should be said) take into account the possible development of revolutionary new fossil-fuel alternatives in the future that neither he nor anyone else can envision today.

But oversimplifying things is at times better than overcomplicating them. In addition, there is something about his calm tone, as, for example, when he drily notes, "group wisdom can occasionally be wrong", and the out-of-control rhetoric and blatant intellectual intimidation practiced by a handful of his more-vocal opponents, that lends a degree of believability to his arguments and those of the scientists he draws upon.

This modest and modestly sized book hardly represents the end of the debate over global warming, any more than does Gore's share of the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to educate the world about the risks of global warming. But it is an important book nonetheless, at the very least a temperate pause and breath of fresh air in perhaps the most important policy debate of our age.

Environmental threats are no more likely than terrorist threats to dissipate with the morning sun. But they also are no reason for anyone to crawl back into bed in panic and pull the covers over his head. A practical and, literally, civilized corrective to an argument that has grown not merely overheated but occasionally absurd, *Cool It* needs to be read by everyone who fears for the future of our world.

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