

The Green Monster

*Bjorn Lomborg on the biggest environmental problem in the world.
(Hint: It's not climate change.)*

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If I had a dollar for every time Bjorn Lomborg mentions the importance of getting the best “bang for your buck,” I’d be able to do a lot of good in the world. He doesn’t repeat the phrase because he has nothing else to say; he repeats it because it’s fundamental to his work regarding the best ways to deal with the world’s biggest problems.

Lomborg is the founder and president of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, a think tank that comprises economists and Nobel laureates. Created in 2004, its goal is to publicize the best ways for governments and philanthropists to spend their money. Lomborg was initially surprised that with all of the money being spent on solving global issues, an organization such as his didn’t already exist.

“It really grew out of my frustration that no one had done it,” Lomborg says. “I had this idea to do this for about three years, and everyone I spoke to said, ‘Great idea, never gonna happen. There is a reason why we haven’t done it: It’s actually really, really hard.’ It means that you need to get a lot of people from a lot of different disciplines to essentially speak the same language and make analyses that are comparable, which requires a lot of effort and a lot of determination. And you also need to be able to have somebody who’s willing to say, ‘I’m going to look across all these different areas and actually tell you where you get the biggest bang for your buck.’”

With so many causes competing for time, attention, and precious dollars—competition that’s only expected to get tighter—the

Copenhagen Consensus Center has the difficult task of making sure that the issues needing the most attention are discussed in ways that are comparable with one another. If it sounds easy, it isn’t.

“We try to look at, if you spend one dollar on any number of different solutions in the world, how much bang do you get for that dollar,” he explains. “When we talk about issues that we care about, we very often think about them because they have high visibility—there’s the cute animals, the crying babies, the good PR groups, and this is all great, but in some ways we need to have a broader conversation about where we can actually do the most good. And where you do the most good is not necessarily where we have the most focus. Often, you could argue, many of the things where you can do the absolute most good are sort of the hidden, forgotten, unsexy things. And so what I wanted to do with the Copenhagen Consensus was essentially get the idea of ‘bang for the buck’ to be more formalized.”

Lomborg is perhaps best known for his book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, which caused a firestorm of controversy. There were complaints, there was criticism, there were formal rebuttals, there was even an investigation by the Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty—it’s safe to say that the book and its claims got many people up in arms. Add those reactions to the ones of his next book *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist’s Guide to Global Warming*,

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and on the surface you have a guy who might appear to be the poster child for global warming deniers everywhere. But Lomborg isn't saying that global warming doesn't exist. He's not even saying that we don't need to be worried about global warming. He's just saying that it's not the most immediate issue facing humanity.

"Global warming is real. It is a problem. But we also need to recognize that we have tried the current solutions for 20 years. And it's not worked for 20 years. And so in some ways we need to realize that the current solutions are fairly ineffective... We don't burn fossil fuels to annoy Al Gore. We burn fossil fuels because it basically powers almost everything we like about modern civilization," Lomborg says. The solution, he continues, is "finding technologi-

cal solutions that in the long term will allow us to get more access to energy, but at the same time dramatically reduce carbon emissions." He goes on to say that if you take the current approach to tackling global warming and run that in the models, for every dollar spent, about two cents of climate damage will be avoided. "That is doing a little good, but not very much. If you spent that same dollar on research and development into green energy technologies, we estimate you could avoid about \$11 of climate damage instead—so about 500 times more good. And the point is, of course, that ultimately will end up doing much, much more good to tackle global warming. So again, our point is simply to say it's not 'Don't do anything about global warming,' it's 'Do something smart about global warming.'"

This message is often misinterpreted, and while repeatedly clarifying the message would seem to get frustrating after a while, Lomborg sees his talks and subsequent interactions with people as opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions.



"Every time I give a talk, someone will come up afterward and say, 'I thought I'd hate you, but what you say actually makes a lot of sense,'" he says. "We're sort of naturally conditioned to believe that anyone who questions anything we do for the environment must be sort of bad. Naturally, doing something for the environment is good. But what I try to question is not our intentions—I think we really want to do good. I'm simply saying that if there are much smarter ways to do them, shouldn't we do that instead?"

If we can admit that there are other pressing environmental concerns, apart from global warming, the discussions can then include other issues we're facing, including, Lomborg insists, the most dangerous one of all: indoor air pollution. According to the World Health Organization, 4.3 million people a year die from exposure to household air pollution, which is essentially burning poor fuels for heat and cooking indoors.

"One in 12 people who die on this planet die from indoor air pollution. And yet, we talk almost nothing about this much, much larger issue; it's somewhere between 50 and 250 times bigger than global warming right now in terms of just simply measuring it on deaths. And the simple point is not to say that we shouldn't worry about global warming—we're an advanced species, we can walk and chew gum at the same time—but it is to say, we should also have space to talk about some of these other important environmental issues."

The work of the Copenhagen Consensus Center is ongoing, but the task of setting and reevaluating priorities occurs every four years. The top priority from the Copenhagen Consensus 2012 was to provide nutrition to small children. Seems like a no-brainer, right? But when children are well-nourished, their brains develop much better, as well as their bodies, which means the potential exists for them to become much more productive members of society throughout their lifetimes.

Which brings him back to bang and bucks. After all, the process isn't as simple as putting money in a mutual fund, where you hope to get a percentage return on investment. And at some point, doesn't the line get blurry between financial reasoning and moral obligation?

"We're not talking about actual dollars. We're talking about human welfare," Lomborg says. "What we do is make it all comparable because we all subsume this and give it a monetary value. This does not mean that we're obsessed with money, but we're obsessed with making sure we can compare everything."

That's not to say that emotional giving is wrong; on the contrary, many of us give because we have a personal connection with a particular cause. But Lomborg is careful to point out that we need to be aware that the most moral choice may not necessarily be the most "feel-good" choice. He mentions the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, which killed somewhere between 230,000 and 280,000 people. "There was an extraordinary outpouring of support and sympathy and wanting to help. That's beautiful. But again, you have to remember that that's the same number of people who die from easily curable infectious diseases in Southeast Asia in two months. These people don't die in front of TV cameras, they're not quite as exceptional and

spectacular. But their deaths are just as important," he says. "We try to be defenders of all the other, slightly more boring problems that have a harder time getting in the media; we try to count all of those lives at the same level."

Not only does the Copenhagen Consensus Center evaluate problems, but it prioritizes solutions. It has created a list that didn't exist a decade ago. "Essentially, it's a list that you, as philanthropists, can just simply take a look at and say, 'I should probably pick my next project from the top of this list.' Because from the top of the list you will do an amazing amount of good, from the bottom of the list you'll do not very much good."

Lomborg has come a long way since his days as an activist with Greenpeace and his time as a professor. He thought that he'd continue down a path of game theory and computer simulations, but that changed in 1997 after reading an interview in *Wired* with economist Julian Simon. "He said, 'Contrary to what you think, the environment is, in general, getting better, not worse.' My immediate reaction was just, 'Ugh, right-wing American propaganda.' But he also said one thing that bothered me. He said, 'Go check the data yourself.'" Lomborg and his students did just that, thinking that they would go through Simon's book, argument by argument, and prove him wrong. Instead, Lomborg said, much of what Simon claimed was correct. The research opened Lomborg's eyes, so much so that he began studying the field and writing articles of his own; although he always intended on returning to his previous field of study, after several years, he realized that his new one was a full-time occupation. Now a self-proclaimed intellectual entrepreneur, he works mostly outside of academia. While he misses working with students, he does relish opportunities to engage people in public debates about the environment and the best ways to move forward.

"Pretty much all of us want to leave this world a better place," he says. "We have very different views on the things that we can do and some of the things that are important, but...if you then start talking about what's the bang for the buck in different areas, it becomes a lot easier to have everybody talk and actually find a lot of common ground. So what I find is that if you can get away from this 'left wing, right wing' perspective, you can sort of agree: Smart is good." **LM**