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'The Skeptical Environmentalist' : Politics and science mix badly

By Roger Pielke Jr.

BOULDER, Colorado— The book "The Skeptical Environmentalist" by Bjorn Lomborg, which argued that the health of the environment is nowhere near as dire as described by some environmental groups, has been hailed as a tonic to the Chicken Little pronouncements of environmental extremists. And it has been condemned as misleading and advancing the cause of those seeking profits at the expense of the environment.

The debate was renewed this month when a Danish panel of scientists concluded that Lomborg displayed "scientific dishonesty" in his book, although it cited no examples and said it had found no evidence that he deliberately tried to mislead readers.

Both the debate on "The Skeptical Environmentalist" and the decision of the Danish panel to investigate it reveal a disturbing trend in the scientific community toward attacking someone's science on the basis of politics, both on the left and on the right.

It was wrong for the panel even to take up the investigation, because the book, published in 2001, is not a scientific treatise but a polemic — as some members of the panel put it, "a topical debate-generating book."

The book advances a not-so-novel view popularized by the late economist Julian Simon that some combination of business as usual and incremental change will be enough for children born today to "get more food, a better education, a higher standard of living, more leisure time and far more possibilities — without the global environment being destroyed."

After using the book in several graduate seminars on environmental science and policy, I am convinced that reaction to "The Skeptical Environmentalist" has much more to do with one's views on what constitutes a better world than with one's opinions on the information selected by Lomborg to support his particular perspective.

For most environmental advocates, the book must seem like a declaration of war on the entire movement. A campaign by environmental groups to discredit the book should thus come as no surprise. What is surprising is that a number of respected scientists have entered the fray, mostly on the side of environmental advocates.

That scientists are political is neither new nor problematic. What is troubling is that these scientists have chosen to use science itself as their weapon in political battle.

For example, Peter H. Raven, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, joined a number of colleagues to lobby Cambridge University Press, the book's publisher, to cease its publication. Raven has argued that one reason to attack the book is that Lomborg's argument allows corporations and governments "to bury their heads in the sand and pretend that nothing is going on."

The approach by the scientists opposed to Lomborg has not been to quibble with his policy recommendations, nor to point out how his book may have been misused by others in political debate, nor to claim that he has mistakenly placed economic and human values above ecological values. Rather, they say he has his science wrong, and consequently the politics of those who accept his views must also be wrong.

In trying to equate scientific truth with political righteousness, scientists opposed to Lomborg share some undesirable characteristics with those in the administration of President George W. Bush who would equate political righteousness with scientific truth.

Last October, a number of scientists expressed concern that Bush appeared to be stacking health advisory panels with members chosen more for their political views than for their scientific credentials. The choices made by the Bush administration were distressing because policy-making related to science and values can benefit from open debate.

The same holds true in Lomborg's case. Politics should not determine science, and science cannot determine policy. Politicization of science is a risky thing, whether used by the White House or by defenders of the environment.

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