

Bjørn Lomborg: Truth is the First Casualty of Global Warming

The truth about climate change is nuanced: it is real, and in the long term it will be a problem, but its impact is less than we might believe. And yet we are too eager to believe the problem is far worse than science shows, and – conversely – that our solutions are far easier than reality dictates, **writes Bjørn Lomborg**



Bjørn Lomborg

Source: Photo by Karl Vilhjalmsson

Climate change and critical thinking

The latest global climate summit in Poland has generated familiar predictions of doom and disaster from environmental activists. Climate change seems to freeze our capacity for critical thinking: we are too eager to believe the problem is far worse than science shows, and – conversely – that our solutions are far easier than reality dictates.

Consider weather events: it is second nature now to link these to climate change. Whenever a flood hits, the media blames global warming and warns that floods are increasing. But the most authoritative conclusion by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is that it is not even clear whether floods have increased or decreased globally over the past

century.

Both European forest fires and US hurricanes are blamed on global warming. But, despite getting more news attention than normal, forest fires in Europe 2018 have affected less than half the average area burned; in Europe's southern countries, which contain 90% of the affected forest, the burned area has halved over 35 years. On hurricanes, IPCC scientists say there have been "no significant observed trends" globally over the past century. The frequency of all US land-falling hurricanes has actually been declining since 1900, as has that of major US hurricanes.

'The impact of climate change is less than we might believe'

The truth about climate change is nuanced: it is real, and in the long term it will be a problem, but its impact is less than we might believe. According to the IPCC's last major report, unrestrained climate change would result in an average reduction in income of about 0.2-2% by the 2070s. That is equivalent to the impact of a single economic recession over the next half-century. Yet, in a race to the bottom with climate-change deniers, green activists have become hyperbolic. Influential campaigner George Monbiot says "climate change" isn't alarming enough, so should be replaced with "climate breakdown." Climate is not breaking down. In fact, it used to break us down. A century ago, climate disasters killed an average of 500,000 people worldwide every year. Today, despite many more people living in harm's way, the toll has dropped by more than 95%.

The truth about climate change is nuanced

Just as activists and the media engender fear by associating every fire, flood, and hurricane with climate change, they generate a false belief that there are simple solutions to the problem, if only politicians and the public would embrace them. Take the new argument that becoming vegetarian could fix climate change. The reality is that a Westerner abandoning all meat will cut her greenhouse-gas emissions by only a few percentage points. Or consider the strange suggestion by UN chief António Guterres that climate policies will bring "at least \$26 trillion in economic benefits." Tellingly, his claims are based on nothing more than a glossy report, while the actual (presumably heroic) calculations have never been released. The claim totally contradicts established climate economics. Replacing fossil fuels with inefficient alternatives slows growth. That's why the 2015 Paris climate agreement, if fully implemented, will actually cost the planet around \$1-2 trillion annually.

Finding the right balance

Another common refrain is that solar and wind are ready to outcompete fossil fuels. But alternative energy remains reliant on subsidies to the tune of \$160 billion annually. When these are withdrawn, investments in solar and wind typically plummet. While there are cases where alternative energies are cheaper than fossil fuels, the reverse is more often true – and solar and wind are infinitely more expensive when the sun is not shining and the wind is not blowing.

Globally, solar and wind satisfy less than 1% of our energy needs. The International Energy Agency (IEA) estimates that by 2040, even if the Paris agreement holds together, this will increase to just above 4%.

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If we are to address climate change successfully, we need to listen to William Nordhaus, the first climate economist to win the Nobel prize, who shows that tackling global warming – like everything else – is a question of finding the right balance. With a climate-economic model refined over decades, Nordhaus demonstrates that a globally coordinated, moderate, and rising carbon tax could reduce temperatures modestly. It would cost about \$20 trillion to avoid some climate damages, ensuring a net benefit of \$30 trillion over coming centuries. But without global coordination, the policy costs would escalate. And aiming to reduce temperatures more drastically, to within 2.5°C of pre-industrial levels, would drive the cost beyond \$130 trillion, leaving us \$50 trillion worse off.

A smarter focus on finding solutions

Contrast Nordhaus's careful work showing that a 2.5°C cap is near impossible, with the excitement being whipped up about keeping the rise in global temperature below the much harder 1.5°C threshold. At current emissions levels, this would require us to end fossil-fuel use in ten years – an idea that flies in the face of historical evidence. The world has increased emissions constantly over a century, lifting billions out of poverty in the process. We are even told that within a few decades, we need to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere on an unprecedented scale, with totally untested technology. That's just wishful thinking. The IEA expects that fossil fuels will still meet three-quarters of global energy demand by 2040.

The technology deficit can be solved only by drastically increasing our spending on research and development of alternative energy. Careful analysis shows that climate change is a problem. But it is not the end of the world. To solve it, we need a smart focus on green-tech innovation, not scare stories and hyperbole.

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