

By rolling out four advocates of environmental pessimism to attack Bjorn Lomborg's brave book you have greatly increased my respect for that book. Not only does your reaction implicitly honour the book as a landmark, but by the end of the four articles I was astonished to find that none of the critics had laid a glove on Lomborg. They confirmed many of Lomborg's statistics, and found only a few trivial misquotations and ellipses -- mostly by distorting the point Lomborg was making.

For instance, Tom Lovejoy complains that Lomborg does not know the difference between extinction facts and extinction estimates. But that is precisely Lomborg's point: that the estimates are based on a circular argument behind which are few or no data.

Lomborg describes how Norman Myers's immensely influential estimate of 40,000 extinctions a year migrated through the literature from assumption to `fact' without any contact with data on the way. Lovejoy confirms this by admitting that `Myers did not specify the method of arriving at his estimate.'

In the accompanying editorial, Jonathan Rennie accuses Lomborg of not seeing the forest for the trees. Any reader of the book will see that the exact opposite is true. Lomborg puts the claims of environmental pessimists in context, in many cases simply by graphing a longer run of data than that chosen by the pessimist. I challenge you to show Figure 2 from page 9 of Lomborg's book to illustrate my point.

Rennie pretends that the articles he has commissioned are defending science. They appear more like defending a faith -- a narrow but lucrative industry of environmental fund-raising that has a vested interest in claims of alarmism. Lomborg is as green as anybody else. But he recognises that claims of universal environmental deterioration have not only been proved wrong often, but are a counsel of despair that distracts us from the many ways in which economic progress can produce environmental improvement as well.

Matt Ridley