

In WSJ op-ed, Bjorn Lomborg urges delay with misleading stats

Bjorn Lomborg's latest op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* displays a brand of doublethink that has become his trademark. He switches between recognizing climate change and its risks, to rejecting the need for meaningful action in the near term. While he makes several sensible recommendations in this op-ed, he also incorporates misleading and discredited scientific information to justify dangerous delays in climate action.

The context:

- The *Wall Street Journal* has a [long history](#) of reporting on the impacts of climate and environmental threats in their news pages, but minimizing and discrediting the same threats in their editorial pages.
- In 2003, a Danish government committee found Lomborg [guilty](#) of scientific dishonesty. He was later [cleared](#) by a separate investigation, but he has been a controversial figure since.

The facts:

Lomborg's statements on wildfires, drought, hurricanes, and economics are all extremely misleading.

- On wildfires, Lomborg references only the number of global fires. Length of active wildfire season and total area burned are considered much more accurate metrics, and [both have increased significantly](#) along with global warming.
- On drought, Lomborg is right that some areas across the globe have become more severely droughted, while some have become less so. This is consistent with climate predictions: [dry areas get drier](#) while [wet areas get wetter](#). Lomborg implies that these changes simply cancel each other out, and can thus be ignored. In fact they are often devastating due to crop losses in the droughted areas and flooding in the wetter areas.
- On hurricanes, Lomborg references Accumulated Cyclone Energy, which is still under debate as a way to measure overall hurricane activity. He also references a [projected](#) decline in damages as a percentage of GDP without stating that damages are increasing, just more slowly than GDP.
- On economics, Lomborg implies in his op-ed that the climate problem can be solved solely through investment in research and technology. While economists are divided on the role of subsidies, nearly all agree that a price on carbon is necessary to drive innovation and change ([including Lomborg himself](#)).

The claim:

Lomborg makes many statements that almost all climate scientists would agree with. These include:

- Investments in hurricane resilience should be increased due to projected increases in storm intensity.
- In the long run, the world needs to cut carbon dioxide emissions.
- Investments in renewable energy technology R&D should be dramatically increased.

However, Lomborg ends these common-sense recommendations with the conclusion that *current* investments in climate mitigation, including renewable energy subsidies, are wasteful. He uses a series of distracting and misleading statements about trends in extreme weather to minimize the risks we face and delay action.

Straight from the scientists:

“Lomborg loves to play the nit-picky ‘I’m the honest statistician’ role and then use this stance to imply that doing much of anything except R&D is a waste, ignoring the huge body of evidence that pricing GHG emissions can have large net benefits. We need to be putting a substantial price on our GHG emissions either with a cap and trade program or with a tax. AND we should be investing heavily in R&D on reducing the carbon and energy intensity of the economy. I’m quite sure that most economists, Republican and Democrat, would agree with these statements.”

-- **William Shobe**, Director of the Center for Economic and Policy Studies and a Professor of Public Policy at the University of Virginia

“Using number of global fires as a metric of climate-induced wildfire dynamics is wrong, in that most fires globally are human-caused for agricultural clearing. The better metrics are length of active wildfire season, which has increased by about 2 months in the western US in the last 40 years, and area burned, which has also doubled ... Future projections indicate a dramatic increase in area burned.”

-- **Steven Running**, Regents Professor, Forest Ecology, College of Forestry & Conservation at the University of Montana, and Director of the Numerical Terradynamics Simulation Group

“The area of drought worldwide is not really very relevant when it is particular areas being impacted with greater and greater intensity ... When those regions are particularly important to society, such as major grain-growing regions, the impacts can be very severe.”

-- **Mike MacCracken**, Chief Scientist for Climate Change Programs with the Climate Institute, former senior global change scientist to the U.S. Global Change Research Program, former President of the International Association of Meteorology and Atmospheric Sciences

“Lomborg's allusions to hurricane response to climate change are misleading in a number of respects. While it is true that one published report indicates decreasing global accumulated cyclone energy (ACE), that report was based on a hurricane data set known to have strong biases outside the North Atlantic region. [Independent analyses based solely on satellite data](#) show that the proportion of high intensity hurricanes has been increasing in most places. As to the projected decline in hurricane damage as a fraction of GDP, an even casual reading of [the relevant paper](#) shows that while actual damage is predicted to increase in most places, GDP is forecast to go up even faster, so that the ratio declines. That paper's projection of increased hurricane damage is consistent with numerous scientific studies that project increasing numbers of the most destructive hurricanes.”

-- **Kerry Emanuel**, Professor of Atmospheric Science in the Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Science at MIT

“The President did not refer specifically to hurricanes, but he did refer to extreme precipitation events. The Northeast region of the country has experienced a 75% increase in these events. This means that routine nor'easters, especially when they follow storms like Sandy (that eliminate much of the capacity of natural protection from dunes and marshes) create much more damage ... [NYC] has invested billions over the past few years in adaptation investments. Some have worked well, but some have been overwhelmed by recent events. Only slowing the pace of climate change will allow adaptation investments ... to keep pace...”

-- **Gary Yohe**, Huffington Foundation Professor of Economics and Environmental Studies at Wesleyan University