

LEMMINGS AND LIFEGUARDS

Keeping humankind from crashing on the rocks

We are standing at the edge of a cliff. Behind us is a considerable crowd, 6.7 billion people and counting, and below is a beckoning pool. Some people say that you can jump into that pool without risk. They say that humans have been doing so for ages without any problems. But others say that waves have been eating away at the foot of the cliff, causing big rocks to fall into the water. They say that the risk of jumping grows more frightening by the day. Whom do you trust?

That's a tricky question because here, on the climate change cliff, some of the lifeguards are just not that qualified, some have forgotten entirely whose interests they are supposed to protect, and some seem quite willing to sacrifice the odd swimmer (or the whole swim team) if they think there is a good profit to be made in the process. That's what this book is about: lousy lifeguards—people whose lack of training, conflicts of interest, or general disregard have put us all at risk of storming off the cliff like so many apocryphal lemmings.

I'm not saying that all of the lousy lifeguards are evil or ill-intentioned, although some may shake your faith in humanity. Rather, the whole lifeguarding institution seems to be failing, and not necessarily by accident. In the past two decades, and particularly on the issue of climate change, there has been an attack on public trust and a corresponding collapse in the integrity of the public conversation. The great institutions of science and government seem to have lost their credibility, and the watchdogs in media have lost their focus. Here we are, standing on the most dangerous environmental precipice that the human race has ever encountered, and we suddenly have to take a fresh and frightening look at the lifeguards in our midst.

The view is not reassuring. Take, for example, the case of Freeman Dyson. Dyson is an incredibly impressive character, a physicist who many people believe should have been given a Nobel Prize for his early work in quantum field theory. Later in his career he also distinguished himself as a good writer with a talent for simplifying and popularizing science. His 1984 antinuclear analysis, *Weapons and Hope*, won a National Book Critics Circle Award. Dyson was always a contrarian, but at age eighty-five (he was born on December 15, 1923), he has become fully argumentative. He is, for example, an outspoken skeptic of many aspects of modern climate science, and he has become a popular expert among those who would like to ignore or deny the risks of global warming.

That's all well and good. It makes sense that skeptics would seek out other skeptics to try to bolster their—perhaps delusional but perhaps sincere—opinions about climate change. It's also entirely reasonable that Dyson should want to keep up his profile and keep commenting on issues of scientific interest. But it doesn't explain why, on March 25, 2009, the *New York Times Magazine* would have presented an eight-thousand-word cover story on Dyson, lauding him as “the Civil Heretic.” Neither does

it explain why the *Times*, certainly one of the most respected sources of journalistic information on the continent, sent a sportswriter (Nicholas Dawidoff) to write the story. No criticism of Dawidoff: he's a wonderful writer, the author of some particularly excellent baseball books. But it's reasonable to ask why the *Times* would choose someone with no expertise, no education, and no background in climate science to interview a man apparently dedicated to undermining public confidence in the majority view about the risks of global warming.

As a lifeguard, the last time Freeman Dyson went down to the bottom of the cliff to check on the rock pile was, well, never. He too has no background in climate science, having done no research whatever—ever—on atmospheric physics or on climate modelling. Even in theoretical physics, his area of expertise, his greatest contributions date to the late 1940s and early 1950s. So again, in a free society Dyson has every right to stand at the top of the cliff and shout, "Jump!" But it's reasonable to wonder why the *New York Times Magazine* would give him the soapbox, especially when most of the time the magazine pays relatively little attention to this, the most urgent environmental issue humankind has ever faced.

Here's another fairly current example: the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's answer to the *New York Times* and arguably the most influential newspaper north of the 49th parallel, carried an opinion piece on April 16, 2009, by Bjørn Lomborg, the famously self-described *Skeptical Environmentalist* (per the title of his best-selling 2001 book). Under the headline "Forget the Scary Eco-Crunch: This Earth is Enough," the article sets out to dismiss the concern that humans are currently consuming global resources at a pace that cannot be sustained.

Lomborg begins by criticizing the concept of an ecological footprint, in which scientists try to estimate actual human impact on the environment rather than counting only the land

we cover with roads and houses. As Lomborg says, scientists working on behalf of the World Wildlife Foundation have calculated that when you add up all the land affected by human consumption habits—the land where we live, the land used to grow our food, the land that is destroyed by mining or polluted by industries that produce our consumables—“each American uses 9.4 hectares of the globe, each European 4.7 hectares, and those in low-income countries one hectare. Adding it all up, we collectively use 17.5 billion hectares. Unfortunately, there are only 13.4 billion hectares available. So, according to the WWF, we’re already living beyond Earth’s means, using around 30 percent too much.”

Complaining that these calculations oversimplify the situation and don’t factor in potential future changes, Lomborg goes on to say, “. . . it is clear that areas we use for roads cannot be used for growing food, and that using areas to build our houses takes away from forests. This part of the ecological footprint is a convenient measure of our literal footprint on Earth. Here, we live far inside the available area, using some 60 percent of the world’s available space, and this proportion is likely to drop because the rate at which the Earth’s population is increasing is now slowing, while technological progress continues. So no ecological collapse.”

This logic is impenetrable. Lomborg implies, first of all, that we can disregard the ecological aspect of our footprint because it’s tricky to tally with absolute certainty. Then he says our literal footprint is actually going to get smaller because the population is rising, but at a slightly reduced rate. (Lomborg alone understands how more humans will take up less space.) Then, the skeptical environmentalist reassures us with this: “Due to technology, the individual demand on the planet has already dropped 35 percent over the past half-decade, and the collective requirement will reach its upper limit before 2020 without any overdraft.”

That's wonderful, or it would be if it could be proven. But if Lomborg has some secret source of information for this contention, he is not sharing it with readers. Instead, he throws these assertions out without attribution or substantiation. He runs to the cliff, grabs the *Globe and Mail* megaphone, and shouts, "Jump!"

Again, that is his right. But why is Canada's leading newspaper promoting this as a reliable viewpoint? Lomborg is not a scientist (his Ph.D., in *political* science, concentrated on game theory), and his previous work has been widely and publicly criticized for its inaccuracy. (See Chapter 10 for more on Lomborg's checkered track record.) Why, even under the guise of "opinion," would a serious newspaper present this unsourced and inexpert argument as worthy of public attention?

It's not as though the true state of the world's environment is a mystery—or that it is left unstudied by leading and highly qualified scientists. For example, a collection of 1,360 such experts completed the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2005. Those scientists, all leaders in their fields, concluded that, "over the past 50 years, humans have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any comparable period of time in human history, largely to meet rapidly growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber and fuel. This has resulted in a substantial and largely irreversible loss in the diversity of life on Earth."

"Substantial and largely irreversible." That sounds more dramatic than Lomborg's reassuring promise of "no ecological collapse." The whole Millennium Ecosystem Assessment report suggests very specifically that humankind is destroying the environment at a frightening pace. We are burning down forests, trashing the ocean, and changing global climate in a way that is making it extremely difficult for other species to survive—substantial and irreversible. In a way, we have to hope that Lomborg is right: we have to hope that this Earth is

enough—and it may be, especially if humans pay attention to the warning signs and start behaving differently. But Lomborg is mounting a transparently fatuous argument to convince us that we don't have to pay attention to our ecological footprint. While more than thirteen hundred of the world's leading scientists try in good faith to back us away from the cliff, Lomborg grabs a soiled lifeguard T-shirt from a bin at the nearest thrift shop and tells us to keep jumping, ignore the risks. And the *Globe and Mail* cheers him on.

A third story broke in the early spring of 2009 that cast light on the weakness of modern lifeguard recruitment. On April 23, 2009, the *New York Times's* excellent science writer Andrew Revkin reported on a now-defunct organization called the Global Climate Coalition, primarily a group of companies whose operations or products are heavy producers of greenhouse gases. For more than a decade, ending in 2002, the coalition spent millions of dollars on advertising and lobbying campaigns aimed at convincing public officials specifically and the public generally that climate change was not proven and that mitigating action was unnecessary. Yet, as Revkin reported, recently released court documents show that the Global Climate Coalition's own scientists had said in their 1995 report *Predicting Future Climate Change*, "The scientific basis for the Greenhouse Effect and the potential impact of human emissions of greenhouse gases such as CO₂ on climate is well established and cannot be denied."

It seems clear from the record that the Global Climate Coalition wasn't really interested in the science of climate change. Revkin reports that someone within the organization deleted the above reference and, even then, never distributed the report. And the group didn't actually invest in any climate change research. Instead it spent a fortune (the 1997 budget alone amounted to US\$1.68 million) sowing confusion and lobbying

against climate change policies, a gesture that, coincidentally or not, would serve the financial interests of the coalition's major funders: ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, British Petroleum (now BP), Texaco, General Motors, Ford, DaimlerChrysler, the Aluminum Association, the National Association of Manufacturers, the American Petroleum Institute, and others.

To take the crowded-cliff analogy one step further, it was as if some of the lifeguards had been charging thrill-seekers money to jump into the water, and they didn't want to give up the income. Not only did they pass up the opportunity to check the rocky bottom themselves, but when they hired someone to check, and that someone (in this case, a Mobil Corporation chemical engineer and climate expert named Leonard S. Bernstein) came back and said there was trouble below, they buried the report—and kept selling tickets.

You will in the coming pages meet a cast of lifeguards that in some instances may shake your faith in humanity. You will read about industry associations (the Western Fuels Association, the American Petroleum Institute) that commissioned strategy documents aimed at confusing people about climate science. You will see specific efforts to deny the gathering consensus that humans are endangering the planet—and you'll see how a group of think tanks and political operatives helped to implement the strategy, polluting the public conversation in North America and, increasingly, in Europe as well. You will read about "scientists" who strayed casually outside their field of expertise and then collected guest-speaker fees for also denying the advanced state of climate science understanding. You'll see a matter of well-established science skillfully recast as a subject for debate, as something that was primarily and hotly political and—until the intervention of admirable Republican leaders like John McCain and Arnold Schwarzenegger—destructively partisan. You will read about lobbyists like Steven "The

Junkman” Milloy, who took money from companies like Philip Morris, Monsanto, and ExxonMobil and then promoted himself as an expert commentator. Perhaps worst of all, you will see the great (and sometimes not-so-great) journalistic bastions of free speech employ or feature Milloy and others like him without ever telling the audience about the strained credentials or the conflicts of interest that might have affected the credibility of these wannabe lifeguards.

You may conclude from all this that reputable newspapers and magazines are today acting in a confused and confusing manner because a great number of people have worked very hard and spent a great deal of money in an effort to establish and spread that confusion. You will also see that their efforts have been disastrously successful. We have lost two decades—two critical decades—during which we could have taken action on climate change but didn’t, because we were relying on bad advice. We were listening to lifeguards whose primary agenda had nothing to do with protecting our safety.

It’s possible that when you see the full extent of the sometimes strategic, sometimes accidental campaign of confusion, you will drift into irritation, even into anger. You may want to blame the bad advisors—the freelance lifeguards whose real goal was often something other than swimmer safety. You may, especially, lose faith in mainstream media as a reliable source of credible information. After all, we rely on them for their judgment as well as for the accuracy of what they present in their newspapers and broadcasts, and on so many occasions they have let us down.

Finally, you might begin to lose hope. You might come to question our ability to have a credible public conversation about science and to arrive at a reasonable set of policies to address climate change. You might be tempted to throw up your hands in despair.

That would be the worst possible result. Just by picking up this book, you have made the first, critical step toward being part of the solution. The information that follows will at least help to inoculate you against the public relations spin, the confusion and misinformation that has led us through two decades of inaction. At best, it will inspire you to learn more about climate change and more about the practical, affordable, and essential things that we all need to do to conquer the problem.

Our species has proved itself capable of great stupidity and palpable evil. Human history is too full of pogroms and holocausts, of wars, genocides, and societal collapses. Equally, however, we have proved ourselves intelligent and adaptable. When we stepped back from the brink of global nuclear annihilation, we showed that when the conversation is open and accurate, we can make good, even altruistic decisions. It's time for such a decision now. It's time for good people to inform themselves, to help lead and guide their families, their friends, and their neighbors back from a path that threatens the habitability of planet Earth to one that will be sensible and sustainable. We don't have to jump off the cliff, and if someone tells you that we do, the message of this book is this: check his credentials. You may be surprised (and disappointed) by what you find.