

'The Skeptical Environmentalist' documents world's improving state

Golf industry could learn from alternative perspective

By JOHN STRAWN

Inspired in part by a plan to refute the optimistic environmental views of the late American economist Julian Simon, a young Danish political scientist named Bjørn Lomborg set out in 1997 to assess the scientific basis for the more familiar gloomy scenario. He expected to prove that the environmentalists' "litany" predicting a future dominated by overpopulation, resource depletion, accelerating rates of species extinction, deforestation, air pollution and mass starvation—catastrophes that, taken together, had inspired an overwhelming popular sense of impending cataclysm—was based on scientifically reliable data.

What Lomborg discovered instead, he reports at length in "The Skeptical Environmentalist," is a world which sustains more and more people in longer, healthier, better lives, especially those of us living in the developed world. In Lomborg's view, we're not rushing pell-mell toward the apocalypse, but instead are learning to deal with the effects of the pressures we've placed on the environment, in part by public policy, in part by the use of new technologies. The green revolution in agriculture—which has had major



Bjørn Lomborg

transfer effects in the turfgrass industry—has produced enormous increases in crop yields. Despite its growing population, for example, India is now a net exporter of grain. Better crop breeding combined with inexpensive fertilizers has dramatically increased yields, which in turn reduces pressure on marginal land.

Most episodes of mass starvation in the modern world are the result of political crises, not shortages of food.

Lomborg's data, gleaned mainly from official documents of national governments and United Nations agencies, show that the total calories available per capita have grown rather than diminished even as the total world population has increased.

In short, the "litany," while pointing toward real problems, does not fairly or accurately summarize the state of the world. Chapter by chapter, subject by subject—energy depletion, food production, global warming, toxic pollution, water use—Lomborg presents a summary of the state of the environment that is far less pessimistic than the standard view. And this is from someone who describes himself as an "old leftwing Greenpeace member"—not an ideologue from

a conservative think tank.

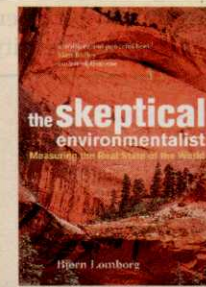
Lomborg's analysis is not easy to summarize, especially given how thoroughly most people believe the premise of the litany. He is not claiming that there are no environmental problems, but rather that the way we perceive short-term trends effects our political judgements and the solutions we will seek. Anyone working on land development in the United States knows that public policy based on the litany can stop even the most environmentally appropriate project in its tracks. In the phrase of a previous writer on these topics, Greg Easterbrook, it is as if the only solution to continued deterioration of the global environment is to stop the world at "a moment in time," despite the fact that the natural world is in a constant state of flux.

Lomborg's views have been ferociously attacked by both the environmental movement and scientists who specialize in problems such as global warming and biodiversity, whose work Lomborg had the audacity to evaluate and question. *Scientific American* magazine, for example, recruited four specialists to refute Lomborg. Stephen Schneider, a Stanford University professor whose expertise is global warming, expressed his fear that "laypeople and policymakers ... could well be tricked" by Lomborg's scholarly apparatus into thinking that he's right and the specialists are wrong. But Schneider also acknowledges that "we could be lucky and see a mild effect or unlucky and get the catastrophic outcomes" of global warming, so his crystal ball isn't quite so clear either, and arguing from authority—"I know more than you...."—isn't the same as refuting the facts. Schneider's argument instead smacks of self-serving elitism.

In the golf industry, despite the

efforts of groups such as the Golf Course Superintendents Association of America and Audubon International, we face both the bureaucratic version of the litany during permitting processes, and the popular version in general. A

have not come to pass, yet somehow retains his credibility. In 1974, for example, Ehrlich predicted widespread scarcities due to excess consumption by 1985. Instead, every raw material Ehrlich predicted would be in



Bjørn Lomborg, "The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World." ISBN 0 521 01068 3. 515 pages. Originally published in Danish in 1998. Revised English edition published by Cambridge University Press, 2001.

recent *Sports Illustrated* article on golf development in the Carolina low country quotes an opponent of development who says that the coastline is heavily polluted and that "golf courses and their chemicals are the biggest culprits," without attempting to assess the truth of that claim. Everyone "knows" that golf courses pollute. The anti-golf version of the litany says that golf courses make excessive use of pesticides and herbicides, that they pollute groundwater and stream runoff, that they use too much water, and so on. The facts don't sustain this view, either, but when, as representatives of the golf industry, we make these claims, we're regarded too often as self-serving.

Lomborg has, I believe, supplied a plausible alternative point of view to the litany. He does not deny that serious problems exist, but rather asserts that we are better equipped to cope with them than the environmental movement will acknowledge. What's most compelling about Lomborg's analysis is its caution and its refutation of some famous predictions of impending doom. Paul Ehrlich, author of "The Population Bomb," has consistently prophesized disasters that

short supply is readily available and cheaper than it was in 1974.

Lomborg, on the other hand, by suggesting that the world is actually improving in many respects, such as air quality and the efficient use of resources, is denounced as a shameless partisan. This is unfortunate, since my reading of Lomborg convinces me that he is neither partisan nor attempting to speak for a special interest or a political constituency. I believe that he was convinced against his own instincts by what his analysis revealed. I also think Lomborg's hopeful views can help guide us toward a realistic future, which in turn can accommodate development that is sustainable, responsible and environmentally appropriate—that his views can help us shape a future that most people in the golf business clearly desire, as they have shown by their willingness to adopt best practices in resource use and preservation. We just need to learn from him how best to frame a story that is hopeful rather than a prelude to global disaster.

John Strawn is the author of "Driving the Green" and a member of the golf course design firm Robert Trent Jones II in Palo Alto, Calif.

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PGA Village

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means," said Enrique Valdivia, a spokesman for the Smart Growth Coalition. "We've been assuming we need to have that threshold number at that time."

However, the groups could have as much as 65 days, or until June 7, to come up with the total number, provided some signatures are submitted by May 13. At press time, Valdivia said he was optimistic that the issue would be put to referendum.

"It's going to be tough, but I think it can be done," he said. "It's not impossible."

The groups' opposition is two-fold. Because the proposed site sits atop the aquifer recharge zone, which is where additional water from sources like rain and runoff

re-enters the aquifer, there is concern that chemicals from the golf course could find their way into the city's drinking water.

However, that hasn't been the main sticking point, Valdivia said. What has rankled a lot of people is the city's creation of a special tax district for the property. According to Valdivia, that makes public funds available to Lumbermen's for the project, to the tune of more than \$50 million.

"That area of San Antonio is booming and has seen a lot of development over the last 20 years," Valdivia said. "The notion that you need to offer someone an incentive to build there is pretty counter-intuitive."

On the tax issue, the city's hands may be tied. Under state law, the city had to approve the special tax district that will allow

Lumbermen's to recoup money for roads, water, sewer and other improvements to the land.

While some have argued that San Antonio doesn't have the demand to support another golf course (see story on page 14), Valdivia said his group doesn't think that argument is relevant.

"The PGA would be the crème de la crème of golf courses nationally," he said. "Before we reached this point, a number of us felt that we don't want to be put in a position to say we don't want the PGA. It's really a concern that we don't want the PGA over our recharge zone."

The planned resort will include three golf courses, two luxury hotels and more than 3,000 residential sites. A spokesperson for Lumbermen's was not available for comment. ■