

Shading the Truth Green:

An Inside Report on Bias from the Society of Environmental Journalists Conference

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In September 2001 Bjorn Lomborg, a Danish statistics professor, published a book that rocked the environmental movement. Lomborg had read a 1997 interview in *Wired* magazine with the late Julian Simon, who at the time was the most famous environmental optimist. Simon, an economist, had argued for decades that the well-known prophets of doom such as Paul Ehrlich (author of *The Population Bomb*, published in 1968) were wrong. Perhaps Simon's most controversial claim was that we should welcome population growth because the human ingenuity associated with each new person represented the "ultimate resource" that would overcome any constraints of the physical universe.

Lomborg, a self-proclaimed "old left-wing Greenpeace member," was convinced that Simon was wrong and set out with ten of his best students to prove it. However, a funny thing happened on the way to the apocalypse. The research team concluded that in most respects, Simon was right; things really were getting better for both the natural environment and humanity. Lomborg's 352-page book, *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World*, was the fruit of that labor.

When the book was published, it received widespread media coverage around the globe. A primary reason for the attention was the reaction of mainstream environmentalists. Their response in a word: outrage. Over a 30-year period they had built a lucrative advocacy industry based on the public perception of a permanent environmental crisis, and now this European turncoat was claiming that the crisis was merely a set of challenges that free people could probably solve if they weren't over-regulated by environmental bureaucrats.

After several months of reading news stories on the Internet, I sent an email to an *Oregonian* beat reporter suggesting that this was an important topic that should be covered locally. Her response: "Who's Bjorn Lomborg?" I sent a follow-up message but never heard back.

Not only did the *Oregonian* ignore it, there was a total media blackout of the *Skeptical Environmentalist* controversy in Portland—a void that continues to this day. Between 2001 and December 2003, the number of stories mentioning Bjorn Lomborg in the *Oregonian*, *Willamette Week*, *The Portland Tribune*, *The Portland Business Journal*, and the *Vancouver Columbian* totaled **zero**. Meanwhile, a *Google* search turns up **18,200** references to Lomborg in sources outside of Portland. (Ed. Note: *Brainstorm NW* reviewed *The Skeptical Environmentalist* in the February 2002 issue.)

Why did journalists in one of America's most environmentally-conscious cities decide not to cover the issue? Did they simply miss the news, or are they hostile to the message

of environmental optimism? It's certainly not because they don't follow the international environmental scene. In the last several years the *Oregonian* alone has published 20 stories mentioning Jane Lubchenko, five with Paul Hawken, and three with Paul Ehrlich. The most notable difference between those three and Bjorn Lomborg is that they are noted prophets of environmental doom and Lomborg is an optimist.

SEJ

Environmental journalists have a professional association, the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ). The mission of SEJ is "to advance public understanding of environmental issues by improving the quality, accuracy and visibility of environmental reporting." SEJ has a full-time staff, a quarterly newsletter, and an active website. The organization also puts on a major conference each year.

The 2003 conference was held last September in New Orleans, and I decided to attend in order to see if any patterns of bias emerged in the way journalists discuss environmental issues at their own conference. The event was well attended; more than 400 participants from around the nation and several foreign countries as well partook of the four-day agenda, which included plenary sessions, all-day field trips, informal roundtable discussions, and panels.

The Opening Salvo: Air Quality is Improving... But We're Still Bad

The opening plenary session on Wednesday evening featured two corporate leaders discussing clean air policy. Patricia Woertz, an executive vice president with ChevronTexaco, immediately focused on the contradiction between the measured improvements in air quality throughout the country and the public perception that things are getting worse. She cited an array of statistics showing the virtual disappearance of urban smog. The reason: cleaner automotive fuels and cleaner cars. She cited a recent study at University of California-Riverside showing that ultra-low emitting vehicles now have zero pollution, and in some cases the air coming out of vehicle tailpipes is cleaner than the ambient air outside—suggesting the amusing possibility of cars becoming "rolling air filters" that improve air quality as they move down the highway.

Yet Ms. Woertz also mentioned a Wirthlin poll showing that some 66 percent of Americans agree with the statement: "Air pollution is getting worse." Ms. Woertz challenged people in the room to ask themselves if their own reporting bears some responsibility for this "disconnect" between reality and perception.

This was an excellent way to start the conference, but unfortunately things went downhill from there. She then conceded that even with zero emissions from gasoline-powered vehicles, they would still emit carbon dioxide, a major contributor to global warming. She did not question whether a global climate crisis existed; she simply accepted it as conventional wisdom.

That set the stage for the next speaker, Bob Luft of Entergy Corporation. Mr. Luft made it clear that in his opinion global warming is happening, it's bad, and it's all our fault. He said, "Make no mistake: If today's leaders of government and business don't start understanding the need to take emission reductions seriously, we as a society will leave a grim, grim legacy for our children and grandchildren—a legacy of environmental degradation, economic chaos, human misery—and potentially even worse."

I did not know it then, but virtually every speaker I listened to at the conference for the next four days who mentioned climate change would espouse essentially the same views. This was a skeptic-free assembly.

Cars, CAFÉ and Congestion

A panel on motor vehicles the next morning justified my trip to New Orleans all by itself—it was such a one-sided affair.

The so-called "moderator" of the panel was Jim Motavalli, editor of *E The Environmental Magazine* and author of several books on transportation. Having read much of his work I knew that he was an odd choice for a moderator; he is one of the harshest critics of auto-based transport in the nation.

He did not disappoint. He immediately abandoned the traditional role of moderator and launched into a full-scale tirade against contemporary Western culture. He noted that the U.S. now has more cars than drivers, and that "while these cars are cleaner in terms of emissions, these emissions gains could arguably be said to be lost by the sheer number of cars on the road."

As Patricia Woertz had pointed out in her opening talk, that assertion is wrong. According to the EPA, since 1970 aggregate emissions of the six criteria pollutants regulated by the federal Clean Air Act declined 25 percent, at the same time that the U.S. economy grew 161 percent, auto travel increased by 149 percent, and total U.S. energy consumption (the primary source of air pollution emissions) increased 42 percent. But Mr. Motavalli was not about to let a few facts get in the way of his sermon.

He continued, "It's not surprising that a majority of American people think fuel economy is improving, but thanks to the growing size of vehicles it's actually regressing." In fact, this applies only to new models; when fuel consumption is measured for all vehicles by year, the average miles per gallon (MPG) of passenger cars improved by 63 percent between 1970 and 2000, while the MPG for pickup trucks and SUVs increased by 75 percent.

Now fully worked up, Mr. Motavalli concluded his "introduction" on a high note: "Though emissions may ultimately improve, unfortunately the car will always be the same space-hogging, congestion-causing offender it's always been, and its bulk will cause us to build cities around it to the detriment of human-sized living."

The other three panelists more or less played their expected roles. John DiCicco of Environmental Defense continued the cultural self-flagellation by making fun of consumers and their auto preferences; Dave Hermantz of Toyota mostly tried to make Toyota look better than his competitors; and Sam Kazman of Competitive Enterprise Institute spoke on behalf of individual freedom and against government mandates.

Kazman challenged journalists to focus on both the perceived benefits of government mandates as well as costs. He referenced several studies showing that federal Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFÉ) standards—the federal regulations that mandate fuel economy standards for various classes of automobiles—increase total highway fatalities. In short, he said, “CAFÉ kills. But *USA Today* was the only major media outlet that ever really carried this. Journalists have given CAFÉ a free pass. Costs-versus-benefits is not part of the national debate.”

The first questioner was Curtis Moore, publisher and co-editor of *Clean Air* newsletter, and he essentially served as a fifth panelist. He launched into a long attack on Mr. Kazman for his “characteristically slick” presentation, and then demanded to know the names of donors to CEI. But he already knew that CEI receives funding from auto and oil interests, which he used to lecture his fellow journalists about the dangers of right-wing think tanks doing the bidding of capitalist running dogs.

He concluded with, “That’s my first question.” Before he could start into the second one Mr. Motavalli said, “Well, I don’t think we have time for a second question.” But this was ignored and Mr. Moore went into another left-wing monologue while the “moderator” did nothing. A few more questions were asked and then time ran out.

A Network Lunch and the Flat-Earth Society

Lunch was designed to encourage networking around certain themes. I grabbed a sandwich box and joined a table featuring law professor and author John Charles Kunich, who was promoting his recent book, *Ark of the Broken Covenant: Protecting the World’s Biodiversity Hotspots*. The group included a writer with *Popular Science* magazine, a print journalist from Dallas, and three freelancers.

Kunich led the discussion with a summary of his book, which focuses on the approximately 25 “hotspots,” the 1.44 percent of earth’s landmass that contains (according to the author) all of the remaining habitats of 133,149 identified plant species and 9,645 non-fish vertebrate species. Kunich asserts that we are faced with imminent mass extinction on a scale the world has not seen “since the demise of the dinosaurs.”

For a while I just listened and took notes. Then I suggested that since he and many of his colleagues have conceded that the Endangered Species Act (ESA) isn’t working very well, why didn’t he just call for the repeal of the ESA so we could start over with something much better—such as a program that actually gives private landowners incentives to protect habitat instead of punishing them as the current law does. He looked

at me like I had just landed from Mars and replied, “If I advocated that, I’d have to resign my position as a law professor.”

It was interesting that he didn’t actually defend the ESA as a great environmental law. He simply admitted that he didn’t have the guts to challenge his legal peers who’ve been feeding at the ESA litigation trough for decades.

After this exchange I was clearly marked as the cultural barbarian at the table. When the subject of climate change came up I expressed some reservations about the wisdom of the Kyoto treaty. People rolled their eyes. A freelancer to my right—who also happens to be the former president of the National Audubon Society—remarked in a conspiratorial tone to another freelancer, “We refer to those people [me] as members of the Flat Earth Society, especially on the issue of climate change.”

This evolved into a discussion of journalism “balance” and what that means. The *Popular Science* writer said, “CNN’s idea of a news story is George Bush standing at ground zero and saying how he supports clean air. It’s just greenwashing and he gets away with it.”

A West Coast freelancer followed with, “You’ve got 10,000 scientists over here saying global warming is a problem and Pat Michaels (a prominent climate change skeptic) and a couple of wackos in California over here. Is that balanced? A lot of writers don’t know enough so they call it balanced because they’ve talked with ‘both sides.’”

By “wackos” I presume he meant global warming skeptics such as Richard Lindzen of MIT, Sallie Baliunas and Willie Soon of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, and Robert Balling of Arizona State University, all of whom have published their views in the peer-reviewed science literature.

Bush and the Environment: Excuse me, is this the DNC?

The next day I went to a panel of four journalists talking about reporting on the Bush administration. The moderator was Susan Feeney, a senior editor at National Public Radio. She began by stating, “It seems like we’ve been talking about this [the Bush Administration] at just about every session, but here you get the advice of people who do it very closely tied into Washington or somewhere else, and also they can really tell you the truth without any other grown-ups in the room who might challenge us.” I immediately felt better knowing that there wouldn’t be any dissenting adults to confuse me.

The panelists were Peter Dykstra of *CNN*, Cheryl Hogue of *Chemical and Engineering News*, and Seth Borenstein of Knight Ridder Newspapers. They did not give speeches, but took turns responding to questions that Susan Feeney posed to them, and she consistently put a cynical slant on her questions.

Feeney to Dykstra: “Peter, how do you deal with an administration that’s not that excited about dealing with environmental reporters?”

Feeney to Borenstein: “Can you talk about Bush as a polarizing force?”

Feeney to Hogue: “Do you feel like you are part of the propaganda campaign if in your reporting you use phrases like the Clear Skies Campaign?”

Aside from the orchestrated Bush-bashing, there was also a revealing discussion about the dark side of the news business itself. Peter Dykstra, in a brief soliloquy, said, “I’m sorry to be the perpetual voice of cynicism here, but much of what affects our boss’s priorities is driven by disaster. As Seth said, if there’s an oil spill we’ll be out there. If a heat wave killed 15,000 people in this country as it did in France [last summer] we’d be talking about global warming whether there was a proven link to the heat wave or not; that’s what they’d want to hear. That’s what our audience would want to hear, that’s what we’d be directed to cover, that’s the way it works. Sorry.”

This undoubtedly explains some of the co-dependency that many journalists have with alarmist advocacy groups. They both need environmental disasters (or the perceptions of disaster) to generate public interest in their work.

During the question period the panel caught some serious flak for their bias. Jeff Frischkorn of the *News-Herald* in Cleveland said, “When I came in here and sat through this, quite frankly I kind of thought that I was sitting through a planning session for the DNC on Bush’s vulnerabilities. It hardly seemed like you guys were presenting objectivity. This was one of the most unfair panels I’ve ever heard in any of my years in covering journalism.”

The panelists made a brief attempt at clarifying or defending their comments, and then they moved to the next question. No one else seemed too upset.

SEJ After Hours: Rocking Out at the Pew Hospitality Suite

As with many large conventions, there were hospitality suites on Friday evening hosted by various groups. Ordinarily one would think of these as corporate events, but at SEJ three of the six were hosted by non-profits: Pew Oceans Commission, Vermont Law School and The Wildlands Project. The one sponsor that arguably could have hosted the fanciest hospitality suite—Entergy Corporation—was assigned the worst location at the end of a long hallway, and had a really boring set-up: a fruit tray, drinks, finger food, and chairs around the side of the room. Aside from the Entergy people paid to be there, the room was nearly empty and had all the ambiance of a funeral parlor.

On the other hand, the Pew Oceans Commission had the best location right off the elevators and the place was rocking with music and people. I never made it into the actual room, but I didn’t need to. I could see the obvious party atmosphere from out in the lobby. Joan Jewett of Portland’s office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (and a former *Oregonian* reporter) remarked that this was the most raucous hospitality event

she'd ever seen in ten year's worth of SEJ conferences. If one knows the history of the Pew Charitable Trusts this is significant.

The Trusts consist of seven individual charitable funds established between 1948 and 1979 by two sons and two daughters of Sun Oil Company founder Joseph N. Pew and his wife, Mary Anderson Pew. Though the Trusts are separate legal entities, their grant making activities are managed collectively.

Twenty-five years ago Pew was a minor player in the environmental field. That all changed during the 1980's and today Pew is one of the top funders of environmental advocacy in the country, with 31 grants approved in 2002 for a total of more than \$39 million. All of their environmental grant making is premised on the expectation of environmental catastrophe caused by economic activity. They fund groups who are dedicated to excluding all human presence from vast tracts of the nation's land and water, and explicitly promote the rationing of energy through a government-run carbon cartel.

It's revealing that so many SEJ members were hanging out at this nerve center of left-wing activism.

Exhibitor's Booths: A Full-Court Press From Alarmists

Every SEJ convention has a "trade show" that accompanies it. Anyone is free to rent exhibition space in order to hawk their wares, and here the alarmist advocacy groups clearly trounced the free market organizations in their efforts to win the hearts and minds of SEJ journalists. There were lavish displays by the Wilderness Society, the Wildlands Project, Save Our Wild Salmon, Pew Oceans Commission, World Resources Institute and many others. On the free market side, Competitive Enterprise Institute had a modest booth, and that was about it. There was no sign of Cato Institute, Reason Foundation or Property and Environment Research Center (PERC). The rest of the booth space was allocated to federal agencies and various corporate interests.

The lack of a free-market presence is not necessarily the fault of the conference organizers; they welcome any organization willing to pay the booth fee. But some free-market groups doubt it would be useful. Jerry Taylor, Director of Natural Resources at the Cato Institute, indicated that although he had been invited as a speaker to the New Orleans conference (but had to decline due to conflicts), he had not considered paying for a booth. He said, "Maybe it would be worthwhile...but all the SEJ members are already on our mailing lists, so they get our policy studies and notices of newly published books regardless. Given the severe biases on the part of most of their members, however, I tend to doubt it."

Jane Shaw of PERC—the "Center for Free-Market Environmentalism"—said, "PERC does not typically provide exhibit booths at conferences, but we are eager to speak before such groups and we would attend if we were invited as speakers. I believe that we have attended two SEJ conferences in the past decade or more, when we were invited to be speakers on panels."

Fair and Balanced: Are we Fooling Ourselves?

For the past two years I've been a subscriber to the SEJ newsletter. A recurring topic of conversation (for SEJ's entire history, apparently) has been the subject of "fair and balanced" reporting. The most recent iteration of this discussion surfaced in the Spring 2003 issue of the SEJ newsletter, when excerpts of an e-mail discussion on the SEJ listserv were published. Paul Rogers of the *San Jose Mercury News* probably spoke for the purists when he wrote, "Those of us who work at mainstream media outlets or who freelance for them are not paid to write advocacy pieces for the news columns. [We] are paid to provide all sides of public policy debates as honestly as we can, in a timely manner, along with history and context, so the public can make up its mind. We are not part of any 'movement.' We are not members of environmental groups or environmentalists."

However, other journalists scoffed at these restrictions. Brian J. Back, a former writer for the *Portland Business Journal* and now editor of *Sustainable Industries Journal*, responded to Mr. Rogers with this post: "Why does balanced, so-called 'objective' news coverage typically entail a he-said, she-said scenario that ultimately dilutes otherwise severe issues? In other words, does 'balanced' mean pitting the conclusions of the world's leading scientists about global warming against a well-paid industry spokesperson's conclusion about global warming? Does this industry spokesperson, with rather predictable interests, deserve 50 percent of the podium? One thing I fear is that the 50 percent of the dialogue from a scientist paid by ExxonMobil under the guise of think tank just might help justify someone's decision to go ahead and buy that Chevy Suburban rather than grow concerned about global warming..."

Based on observations from the 2003 SEJ conference, significant numbers of environmental journalists—especially the freelancers and those with specialty publications—tend to agree with Mr. Back's interpretation of "fair and balanced."

Delusions of Objectivity

There is nothing wrong with journalists leaving mainstream news organizations and going to work for advocacy outlets like *Sierra Magazine* or *Clean Air News*. At least then the audience knows their values. The more insidious problem is the biased journalist who actually thinks he's objective. The experience with the automobile emissions panel at the conference is a prime example. When I called Mr. Motavalli in November to ask how he had wound up as the moderator of his panel rather than as a presenter (where his strident views would have been perfectly appropriate), he became aggressively defensive. He said, "I was asked to put a panel together and I did. It was absolutely a balanced panel. I think *you* have a bias and you had your story written before you even called me. But the facts do not support the notion that our panel was biased."

Other mainstream journalists do not share that view. Mark Schleifstein of *The Times-Picayune*, chair of the conference planning committee, told me, "It's interesting you

should ask about that panel. I did not attend but I just finished listening to the tape, and that won't happen again, I can guarantee you.”

Journalism: It's a Big Tent

Despite some excellent panels and an honest attempt by conference organizers to present a balanced agenda, environmental pessimism seemed to be the default mode for many journalists in New Orleans. However, the SEJ conference is just one slice of the environmental reporting world. Different perspectives can be found elsewhere. One journalist who wasn't at the convention is Tom Knudson of the *Sacramento Bee*, who wrote a devastating critique of the environmental movement in a five-part series entitled “Environment, Inc.” that began running on Earth Day of 2001 (www.sacbee.com/news/projects/environment/20010422.html). The series documented how large environmental organizations have become self-perpetuating fundraising machines, whipping up hysteria among the public about real or imagined threats in order to raise money.

When asked why he wasn't at the conference, Mr. Knudson said, “I'm not a joiner. I prefer to observe from the outside, and that includes groups such as SEJ.”

Gregg Easterbrook is another writer who has challenged some of the environmental mythology. Easterbrook, senior editor at *The New Republic* and currently a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, wrote a piece in 2002 entitled “Environmental Doomsday: Bad News Good, Good News Bad” (www.brookings.edu/press/REVIEW/spring2002/easterbrook.htm), covering some of the same ground as Knudson regarding the chronic scare-mongering of environmental groups. Easterbrook also wrote a provocative essay in April 2002 entitled “Everything You Know about the Bush Environmental Record is Wrong.” Such a perspective would have added some much-needed diversity to the discussions in New Orleans.

Steven Hayward and Ryan Stowers, in their report, *2003 Index of Environmental Indicators* (Pacific Research Institute/American Enterprise Institute), identify a number of journalists who have done some hard-hitting reporting. In their “Top Ten” best news features for 2002, they offer kudos to *The Economist* for overall best news coverage of environmental issues; *Washington Post* reporter Michael Grunwald for his four-part feature on the Florida Everglades and the government's proposed restoration plan; Andrew C. Revkin of the *New York Times* for coverage of biodiversity issues; and Kirk Johnson, also of the *New York Times*, for a September 2002 story showing how much cleaner urban air is today compared with the 1950s. The *Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine, *Washington Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* also received mention for balanced coverage.

Of the above-named journalists, only Michael Grunwald attended the SEJ conference.

In the Portland region, doomsday reporting still seems to be the favored approach. Environmental activists issue daily press releases about alleged threats to farmland from

“sprawl,” the evils of highways, or the problems of overpopulation, and local journalists rarely challenge any of the underlying assumptions.

For example, to commemorate the 30th Anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, *The Oregonian* ran a feature by Joe Rojas-Burke on December 10 based entirely on the premise that, “A sixth mass extinction is under way, driven by humankind’s exponential population growth and expanding use of land and sea.” The story contained no attempt to define “mass extinction,” nor did it provide any data to back up the claim. The author simply used some estimates provided by academics that ranged from 3,000 to 30,000 species lost annually. The spread between the numbers is a pretty big clue that no one really knows much about extinction rates.

Mr. Rojas-Burke also seemed unfamiliar with global population trends. The forecasts of “exponential population growth,” often bandied about in the 1970s, have long since proven to be wrong. It is now estimated that world population will likely peak by around 2050, and then decline. At least 88 countries have negative fertility rates, and several—including Italy, Sweden and Scotland—are so concerned that they fear a mass extinction of a different kind: the complete loss of indigenous culture. On November 30, the *New York Times* reported that Scotland is preparing a number of policies to actually encourage population growth and that the small town of Laviano, near Naples, is expected to pay couples more than \$10,000 for each child they bear.

Overpopulation and other eco-myths were thoroughly exposed by Bjorn Lomborg in *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Too bad no one at the *Oregonian* ever read it.