

Objective:

Assess Lomborg's claims that 1) environmental organizations and popular media focus on the ways that things are getting worse rather than better, and 2) these organizations commit logical and factual errors in defending this claim.

Activities:

The class will be divided into groups of 4-5 students. Each group will choose a claim made by an environmental organization or the popular media, and assess this claim in relation to Lomborg's charges. The group work will consist of three components:

1. *Research:* The group will conduct the research (for a list of possible sources see below) necessary to assess their chosen claim for bias and for logical and factual errors (see below for a list of possible errors).
2. *Presentation:* The group will give a 5 minute presentation, reporting the findings of their research. The group will decide the organization and style of this presentation.
3. *Report:* The group will write a summary of their objectives, methods and results of their research.

Evaluation:

A mark out of 10 will be given for each the presentation and the written report, an average will be taken from these two numbers to provide an overall mark out of 10.

Presentation: Your presentation will be assessed in terms of 1) the clarity with which you present the material and 2) the extent to which you engage your audience.

Report: Your report will be evaluated in relation to 1) the clarity of your presentation, 2) the depth of your research, and 3) a demonstration of your ability to relate your research to the assignment's objective.

In addition, students will be asked to complete an evaluation of 1) their group, 2) their own participation in the project, and 3) the assignment as a whole.

Sources:

Environmental Organizations: WWF; David Suzuki Foundation; Greenpeace; WorldWatch Institute.

Journals and Research Organizations: Science; Nature; Bioscience; United Nations (FAO, WHO, UNDP, UNEP); World Bank; IMF; World Resources Institute; Worldwatch Institute.

Errors:

Here is a partial list of the fallacious arguments identified by Lomborg. I have assigned them names to make them easier to remember:

1. **Missing comparison class.** This fallacy occurs when some assessment of the world is presented in absolute terms. For example, “the amount of pollution in lake Ontario is bad”. Or, “everyone knows that the integrity of tropical rainforests is deteriorating.” Lomborg’s objection is that these sorts of assessment only make sense in comparative terms. One must explain, bad or deteriorated compared to what?
2. **Myopic focus on harms.** This fallacy involves inferring from the fact that something causes some amount of harm to the conclusion that it should be banned. For example, we should ban artificial hormones because they cause cancer”. One problem with this inference is that it ignores the potential benefits of the substance or technology in question. Perhaps those hormones have a *net* benefit on society and the environment. Another problem occurs when the magnitude of the harm fullness of x is unstated. How much cancer is caused by these hormones and in whom is it caused?
3. **Cherry-picking the evidence.** Select examples are cited that suggest things are getting worse. Meanwhile examples that suggest overall improvement are ignored.
4. **Inductive Zeal.** Sometimes environmentalists infer a general trend from only a limited number of data points. For example, “The last three summers were the warmest on record”. This inference is fallacious when sample sizes are too small to suggest a trend.
5. **Ignoring general trends.** According to Lomborg, environmentalists tend to ignore general trends when they are in conflict with The Litany. For example, Lomborg cites an example where the data claims that in fact pollution rates have decreased
6. **Irrelevant evidence.** Sometimes evidence from one region will be used as an indicator of what could happen in another region. For example, the lack of regulation in crab fishing in the Pacific Northwest had a negative impact on this species, therefore similar fishing practices will have an identical effect on octopus fishery in Tasmania. Such comparisons might be informative, or not. It is often difficult to know for sure. The fallacy arises when the complexity of these questions are ignored and comparisons are presented at face value.
7. **The treadmill of gloom.** This involves viewing each environmental solution as the

beginning of another problem. For example, “problem x generated solution y, but solution y leads to problem z. Therefore, we are really no better off.” The fallacy here is that all problems are treated on par.

8. **Blatant errors.** Lomborg identifies several instances where factual claims used to support some call to action are simply false. E.g. “Despite the ongoing use of pesticides, they have done little to enhance the productivity of crops”.

9. **Causal misattribution.** This involves identifying some factor as the cause of an environmental harm, where that causal attribution is (a) oversimplified, (b) mistaken, or (c) based on meager evidence. An example of all three, “the rise of a global economy has increased the rate of HIV transmission in Africa”.

10. **Threshold alarmism.** Sometimes an ecological threshold will be identified as a reason for some action or policy. For example, “there is a point at which populations will no longer be able to feed themselves”. The fallacy arises when one fails to explain where the threshold is and how close we are to it. For instance, Lomborg suggests that humans could sustain themselves on a relatively small plot of hydroponically grown plants.

Schedule:

Week 2

- Distribute assignment
- Form groups
- Discuss objectives and method
- Assign group roles, re: research

Week 3

- Discuss findings
- Organize presentation
- Assign group roles, re: presentation and writing

Week 4

- Present findings (group presentations) in tutorial
- Submit group project