



HOW TO SAVE THE PLANET (REALLY)

BY KARINA ROLLINS

Pollution; ozone depletion; starvation; malnutrition; disease; poverty; illiteracy; wars; corruption; nuclear war.... The list of disasters looming on humanity's horizon will always be long. Sometimes true catastrophes threaten, other hazards are more routine—part of the innate tragedy and variability of life on a dynamic planet.

Individuals, associations, and entire governments have tried to ward off what they perceive as the greatest risks to civilization. Probably the most loudly proclaimed danger today is global warming. In 1998 and 1999, 84 countries signed the Kyoto Protocol designed to limit the global emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Super-smart eggheads are busily working to perfect cars that run on batteries, and ways to lock carbon dioxide away under ground. Large subsidies are being directed to solar and wind energies.

Yet more pedestrian calamities inflict today's harshest toll on humanity. AIDS kills millions every year, and harsh debates rage over how to stop it—abstinence? condoms? subsidized drugs? Millions live in poverty. What is the best way to battle material deprivation—lift trade barriers? impose trade barriers? give more aid? give less aid?

Despite huge initiatives and lavish spending vast stretches of Asia and Africa continue to be afflicted by the scourges of hunger and disease. Starvation has not disappeared. Malaria and tuberculosis are making comebacks. Simple lack of sanitation still kills millions. Genocidal wars and derelict dictators continue to take their ugly toll. While air and water have gotten much cleaner in industrialized nations, many Third and Second World countries are badly fouling their own environments.

Amid this cross-current of demands, and the reality of limited problem-solving resources, how can the planet best be

improved? Bjorn Lomborg, a university professor from Denmark and ecologist turned "skeptical environmentalist," has argued that methodical reason, not emotion, must govern our decisions. (See "Land War: An Ecological Optimist and His Critics," *TAE*, March 2002) Deal with the most dire threats first, he counsels, worry about the others later. Lomborg's prioritization strategy might sound obvious, but it is not the way problems are addressed today, and if implemented would bring radical changes to the way we think and operate. Among other things, it would mean ignoring—for now—the centerpiece of environment-establishment panic: climate change.

Two years ago, a group headed by Lomborg, former director of the Danish Environmental Assessment Institute, began a journey toward global well-being by tracking down "the world's greatest economists" and hosting a meeting where they were asked to apply their analytical skills to assess the most urgent challenges facing the planet. One year ago, the Copenhagen Consensus, as the group now called itself, employed two research groups, one consisting of the economists, the other of social scientists and journalists, to rank a list of global threats. Their discussions resulted in a published roster of 32 challenges to global well-being. The "Copenhagen Consensus 2004" then picked eight experts from the economist group—the "dream team"—who boiled down the 32 problems to a list of ten top priorities.

Why would anyone put economists in charge of saving the world? "Because," says Lomborg, "they deal in prioritization of scarce resources, and they have broad and general expertise." And they're probably also the only people who could prioritize the top ten challenges while keeping to a reasonable spending

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limit of \$50 billion over four years. (That amount corresponds to 20 percent of today's total annual world development aid, and was picked as a sensible target which donor countries might actually be convinced to cough up.)

Though being frugal is necessary, the goal of the Copenhagen Consensus "is not to save money, but to save lives," as Jon Entine, a prolific writer on environmental management, points out. A professor at Ohio's Miami University, Entine explains that the Consensus project is not a pointy-headed exercise in number crunching, but a focused, results-oriented, real-life plan to relieve devastating humanitarian crises. "There is no greater challenge for the world than to alleviate suffering," he says passionately. "And we can't fix everything at once, so we need to approximate what we can do now. For years we have poured billions of dollars down the economic sinkhole without helping anybody. It's time to get into the real world and make some tough decisions." Enter the economists, whose very modus operandi mandates positive results.

So, just what did the dream team determine was the No. 1 way to help the world? Controlling AIDS. Followed by correcting malnutrition, then getting rid of subsidies and trade barriers (take that, anti-free-trade do-gooders), and then fighting malaria. The worst ways to make the planet more hospitable for their grandchildren, dream team members concluded, are today's favorite methods of combating global warming, like the Kyoto Protocol. (Take that, know-it-all environmentalists.)

It should be noted that the Copenhagen Consensus is not a group with any particular political coloration. Its proposed solutions are utterly pragmatic. The Consensus concluded, for instance, that the best way to avert 28 million new cases of AIDS by 2010 is to distribute condoms as well as information.

The dream team's other solutions are simple too. Stopping millions of deaths from malnutrition is as easy as adding iron, Vitamin A, iodine, and zinc to food. Killing subsidies and trade barriers, says Lomborg, "has very low costs and extremely high benefits...and will benefit poor and rich countries."

Malaria, largely unmentioned by Western humanitarians today, is an ugly disease that torments millions and could be eradicated almost overnight by use of mosquito nets and spraying homes with DDT—a bogeyman of the Green movement. Roger Bate, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute who has lived in South Africa and studies malaria and other communicable diseases for a living, says "indoor spraying works, and it is safe for people and animals as well." Misplaced hysteria by environmentalists against DDT (which can indeed interfere with bird reproduction and so forth if applied in large volumes outdoors) has led to a virtual blacklist against the compound's use anywhere. That is irrational, and cruel.

Too often, organizations allegedly dedicated to helping

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impoverished people end up endorsing measures that will hurt them. The World Health Organization and the Global Fund, Bate notes, have poured money into "two obsolete malaria medicines (chloroquine and SP) that fail to help up to 80 percent of patients who take them." Politics, bad science, and simple inertia too frequently prevent good decision making. The University of Maryland's Thomas Schelling points out how tragically unnecessary this is: "In Singapore, no one has malaria, except when

returning from Malaysia—1 kilometer away. Malaysia has dreadful malaria. Singapore used to have it, but in 40 years [has completely eradicated it]."

Other unflashy recommendations by the Copenhagen Consensus to improve and save lives include development of new agricultural and water technologies, community management of water supplies and sanitation, and lowering the cost of starting a new business.

But what about the big issue at the forefront of most "save the world" debates—global warming? Isn't our climate going to change? Yes it is. In the future. Maybe even the near future. But no one is certain what the real causes are, and whether they are ameliorable. And few people are dying from global warming today. Yet billions are suffering and dying from problems that are well understood.

Shouldn't we be concerned about possible future traumas as well as today's problems? Yes, of course—but not at the expense of humans hurting right now, according to the Copenhagen Consensus. As Entine points out, "The costs of fighting future climate change are front-loaded heavily on our present population—yet we're not sure if that money would be wisely or effectively spent. We need real value: Don't spend money on projects we don't know will work, hoping to help people decades or hundreds of years into the future. Spend today's money on what we know will save lives today. Fight grinding poverty and horrendous diseases."

Is Copenhagen Consensus-style triage the answer to environmental and health tragedies? "It's not perfect; it's not meant to be. It's a work in progress. Which is why this whole effort will be repeated in four years, and then again," Entine points out. At present, the Copenhagen Consensus offers the only strategy that ranks problems rationally. "Many other projects simply ignore that people are dying around us every day. This is not abstract. We are talking about lives here."

Lomborg provides some specifics: "800 million people are starving; 1 billion lack clean water; 2 billion lack clean sanitation; 940 million adults are illiterate." Should we focus on those we can save today and let tomorrow's problem-solvers (who are almost certain to be both richer and more technologically equipped than today's humans) fix the challenges of their day? Jon Entine believes: "It's unconscionable not to."

