

Fact or Fiction?



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Gloomy Predictions Win The Day

Gloom and doom predictions about the environment are the accepted norm. If you're not in line with this and you speak out you could get in trouble. Environmental activist groups can falsify data and the media can make mistakes and get away with them as long as the gloom and doom picture is emphasized. If you're on the other side watch out!

Here are some examples from both sides. John Stossel, co-anchor of ABC's *20/20* was doing a program on organic food. He made this statement: "And what about pesticides? Our tests surprisingly found no pesticide residue on the conventional samples or the organic." If he had just said, "tests find no significant residue," it would all have been true.¹ It turns out the test was never done. As Michael Fumento reports, "The scientists who conducted the tests reported to the show's producer, not to Stossel. They tested for the presence of both the bacterium *E. coli* and for pesticide residues. But the residue tests were strictly on chicken, not produce. One needn't possess Einstein's brain to see how information from test to producer to reporter could get lost."²

So, was Stossel lying? Hardly. But because of his continual crusade directed at exposing environmental scams he quickly was vilified. Forget the facts that contrary to the belief of many folks that organic means "no pesticide," nothing could be further from the truth. Bugs, fungi, and weeds don't know the difference between crops. Furthermore, all food, "organic" or not, contains a variety of natural pesticides. Many of our foods contain pesticides created naturally by plants for self-protection. As Bruce Ames and his colleagues have reported, we ingest at least 10,000 times more, by weight, of natural pesticides than of synthetic pesticide residues. These natural toxic chemicals vary enormously in chemical structure, appear to be present in all plants, and serve to protect plants

against fungi, insects, and animal predators.³ Forget all of this, or simply ignore it, you're a proponent of organic foods. As Stossel points out, "What bothered the organic food extremists was not a lie, but the truth—the truth revealed in the rest of the report: Organic food costs much more, but it is no better."¹

The opponents wanted Stossel's head on a platter. The Organic Trade Association and environmental activist groups demanded he be fired. The fact that he corrected the record and apologized was not sufficient, he should be taken off the air.

Another Example

By comparison, Ed Bradley did two entire *60 Minutes* shows attacking Alar, a chemical later declared safe by both the World Health Organization and the Food and Agricultural Organization. Subsequent tests by the National Cancer Institute and the EPA failed to show Alar caused cancer, except in doses between 100,000 and 200,000 times the normal amount a child might consume in a day's ration of apples.⁴ Was there an apology from *60 Minutes*? Not a chance.

In 1995, when Shell Oil tried to dump the Brent Spar oil platform in the Atlantic Ocean, Greenpeace launched a vicious and sophisticated \$2 million campaign arguing that the dumping of the Brent Spar could cause unforeseen damage.^{5,6} Frank Furedi notes, "This view was virtually unanimously accepted by the media. Under pressure from public hostility, Shell gave up its plan and abandoned its project. The speed with which the battle lines were drawn and the swift humiliation of Shell indicated the strength of public trust in Greenpeace's science."⁶ A year later, Greenpeace issued a written apology effectively admitting that the entire campaign had been a fraud. Paul Driessen adds, "Of course, the admission got buried in the business pages or

obituaries. Flush from their victory, the Rainbow Warriors went on to shake down other companies and promote bogus claims about chemicals, wood products and genetically modified 'Frankenfood.'"⁷(5)

The Sierra Club gained fame for bold full-page newspaper ads designed to arouse the populace. John McPhee notes, "One such ad called attention to the Kennecott Copper Corporation's ambitions in the glacier Peak Wilderness under the headline AN OPEN PIT BIG ENOUGH TO BE SEEN FROM THE MOON. The fact that this was not true did not slow up the Sierra Club."⁷

Exaggeration is Commonplace

Since the very first Earth Day, scare stories have been exaggerated. Here's what Christopher Burger reports, "Between 1980 and 1989, some 4 billion people, including 65 million Americans, will perish from starvation ... civilization will end within 15 or 30 years, unless immediate action is taken against problems facing mankind. These are actual predictions by environmentalists celebrating the first Earth Day—April 22, 1970. They were wrong. Sixty-five million Americans haven't starved to death. Food production has handily outpaced population growth. And food today is cheaper and more abundant than ever before. Civilization has not ended."⁸

In 1997, David Seidemann and 58 fellow science professors cited the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) for scientific research misconduct. NYPIRG is one of 23 Ralph Nader inspired state organizations operating under the umbrella of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group.⁹

Seidemann states, "NYPIRG earned this censure through its consistent use of dishonest methodology: the group selectively reported or altered data and ignored scientific control, thereby reporting con-

clusions that were arbitrarily chosen rather than analytically derived. The NYPIRG case is particularly compelling: that the group falsified data in one of its studies makes them look more like perpetrators of fraud than mere junk scientists. The news media nonetheless continue to routinely uncritically report the results of NYPIRG's research. Such 'news' stories are likely to lead to unwarranted public fear and unjustified (often expensive) government action. Beyond accepting NYPIRG's research expertise, the newspaper appears to validate NYPIRG's integrity when it characterizes the group as a 'good government organization' and cites its views on ethical questions. The NYPIRG case raises a question about the Nader legacy in general: If one prominent Nader organization is corrupt, how many of the others are?"¹⁰ Seven years later, the PIRG groups haven't changed their spots. See my column, "Good Air- Bad Press," which appeared in the April 2004 issue of this journal.

Only What Suits the Purpose

Here's a great example of selectively picking data to make a point. Bill Moyers did a PBS special on plastics in January 2002. During the program a scientist reported that a sample of Moyers' blood had been analyzed and about 400 chemicals were found that would not have been found in his blood 40 years ago. The inference was that all of this had come from big, bad industry. No mention was made of concentration levels. No mention was made of the fact that 40 years ago we were analyzing in the parts per million range (equivalent to finding 1 second in 12 years), whereas today we routinely report in the parts per trillion range (1 second in 32,000 years). No mention about the 1,000 natural chemicals in coffee, no mention about the 2,000 natural chemicals in chocolate. Bill O'Reilly reports that Moyers has provided substantial funding to Ralph Nader's group. If true, this helps explain Moyers handling of this issue.¹¹

A final comparison has to do with books. In 2001, Bjorn Lomborg published *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, a 515-page look at a variety of environmental issues, including population growth, climate change, pollution, deforestation, and many other issues.¹² The book is extremely well documented with 2,930 endnotes and 70 pages of references. It powerfully challenged the conventional wisdom that the world's environment was going to hell.¹³

Lomborg, himself a former member of Greenpeace, was critical of the way in which many environmental organizations made selective and misleading use of the

scientific evidence. An unbelievably bitter anti-Lomborg campaign quickly developed. Why? He had the gall to report that many of the predictions of the doomsayers are simply not coming true. So the best defense of the doomsayers against a dispassionate analysis of their claims was to smear the analyst.¹⁴

Ron Bailey says this: "The environmental canon is built on doom. In 1962 Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* predicted that modern synthetic chemicals, especially pesticides, would cause epidemics of cancer and kill off massive quantities of wildlife. Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich's infamous *The Population Bomb* confidently asserted in 1968 that "the battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash program embarked upon now." *The Limits to Growth*, A club of Rome report published in 1972, coupled the dogma that natural resources were running out with concerns about growing population and rising pollution. Each of these books was a bestseller. Each, along with the many similar works they inspired, were calls to action: to ban synthetic chemicals, coercively limit births, slash economic growth. The writers justified these goals by claiming that indisputable scientific findings demanded that they be adopted. If their science is wrong, so are their policies."¹⁴

One claim of Lomborg's detractors was that his book cited evidence that had not undergone scientific peer review. If this were enough to sink a book it would more quickly sink those just discussed. *The Population Bomb* contained only 49 endnotes, only five of which were from peer reviewed scientific journals. *Limits to Growth* had 55 endnotes, only three from peer reviewed journals.

The Message

John McPhee reports, "In the war strategy of the conservation movement, exaggeration is a standard weapon and is used consciously on broad fronts."⁷ I would add that in many cases it isn't just exaggeration that is used, but outright lying and falsification of data. However, given society's worship of caution, such 'mistakes' (or lies) are unlikely to diminish the public's trust of those who warn of the danger of tampering with nature. So, if you are talking or writing about environmental issues as long as you support the doom and gloom theory about everything going to hell in a handbasket, you will be on the safe side, even if you have to massage the data to make your point. On the other hand, if you

don't believe things are as bad as the activists and media claim, and you speak out about your views, watch out! You could get in serious trouble. *P&SF*

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