
In Afrikaans a ‘vegter’ is a ‘fighter’ and this author lives up to his name. Born in Holland, he was raised and educated in South Africa and has become an outspoken writer about economics and the environment for several publications. This is his first book, evocatively dedicated to “my late grandmother, after who I was named, and who survived World War II only to live out her final years in mortal fear that her little house in Holland would be inundated by rising sea levels”.

In a nutshell, Vegter argues that in many cases exaggeration by environmental activists, journalists, and even scientists, about the severity and impact of a wide variety of human activities, results in misinformation that causes unnecessary fear and anxiety in the minds of ordinary people, and results in ill-considered regulation and policymaking by misguided bureaucrats. He backs his arguments with examples from the fracking debate, the Fukushima nuclear incident, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, food additives, agricultural chemicals and global warming. Careful analysis of these issues reveals many examples of deliberate exaggeration and manipulation of facts by numerous self-interested groups and individuals.

Being a fighter, Vegter has drawn his fair share of insults from his critics, including being called ‘A snivelling sycophant’; ‘A rotten little shill’; ‘A typical conservative liberal, with stupid white guy smug’; ‘Arbiter of idiocy’. These smack of messenger-shooting, and my careful reading of this book leads me to conclude that Vegter is a hard-working writer who has read and researched very widely to reach his conclusions. The chapters have comprehensive end notes and there is a long list of useful references. I can understand that many environmental activists will be upset by this book, but I recommend it as the mirror that we should all look into occasionally, to see how others perceive us. I have always argued against overstating one’s case – this applies equally to emotive rhetoric by environmental activists, or corporate puff from their business spin-doctors.