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Drowning Polar Bears And the Return Of Ursus Bogus

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Last year, the American Association for the Advancement of Science got into a bit of a pinch when its flagship magazine, *Science*, was caught in the photoshop with a faked image of a lone polar bear on a tiny ice floe. Tim Blair, in the Australian *Daily Telegraph* coined it “Ursus bogus”.

Ursus bogus may be back, but with a very odd twist. This time, the Obama administration appears to be after a prominent Interior Department scientist who moved the policy world with news of drowning polar bears. AP reports:

A federal wildlife biologist whose observation in 2004 of presumably drowned polar bears in the Arctic helped to galvanize the global warming movement has been placed on administrative leave and is being investigated for scientific misconduct, possibly over the veracity of that article.

The scientist in question is Charles Monnett, who works with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (think the nation could survive without this office?) in Anchorage. Somehow Al Gore is involved, as AP reports that his co-author Jeffrey Gleason was questioned by Interior Department investigators last January about Gore's mention of polar bears in the SciFi hit *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Maybe the problem is that enough polar bears aren't drowning. Populations are booming, especially in the Canadian arctic.

It's a fact that people just can't get enough of polar bears. If they are drowning in droves, where are the pictures? Where is the evidence for dramatic population declines?

Monnett and Gleason saw four—count 'em—four drowned bears in their 2004 aerial survey of bowhead whales. They hypothesized that shrunken arctic sea ice at the end of summer meant that they had to swim over increasing distances to get to land, and, in a storm, they died of exertion. Further, they suggested that this would increase as arctic ice decreased. They also dressed the story in bathos and political correctness, arguing that female moms and cubs would be preferentially at risk. Monnett became the rage and probably stopped flying in coach.

It does seem logical that greatly increasing the swimming distance for bears would cause some problems, but is it important? Then why are their numbers increasing as the ice shrinks?

There is a very recent non-peer-reviewed report involving radio-tracked bears, which speculated that five of eleven had lost cubs (the cubs don't have trackers) on a long swim. It's highly doubtful that anything with such a small sample size will make it into a major journal, and this certainly sheds no light on the overall population increase. There is evidence that more polar bears are building dens on land, which means more of the ursine's favorite delicacy: human garbage.

After the (only) images of dead bears appeared in 2004, Arctic ice continued to decline. NASA has satellite imagery of arctic ice (which they also photoshopped, but that's another story) back to 1979. One thing that is obvious is that at the end of summer, the edge of the ice—where the bears are—is pretty far from Alaska's north coast, and that sea ice conditions there weren't particularly unusual in 2004. Yet there were no images of drowned bears for years afterward.

Why the IG's office at Interior is involved is as mysterious as the drowning bear hypothesis itself. There's a mountain of data indicating that Arctic ice was reduced far beyond its current limits for millennia after the end of the ice age. In fact, the Arctic Ocean may have been virtually ice-free in September. The evidence is from trees buried in the Eurasian tundra where it is too cold for them to grow today. They carbon-date back to millennia after the end of the ice age, about 9-10 thousand years ago. Summer temperatures in the high arctic would have to have been as much as 12 degrees warmer

than they were in our pre-global warming world in order to support a forest there. *And the polar bear survived. And human habitation of the Arctic expanded.*

But is a questionable hypothesis sufficient cause for a federal investigation of a federal scientist? That seems unlikely. And if the problem is inappropriate political activity, why would the Obama Administration go all the way to Alaska when NASA's James Hansen is so much closer? And why has Monnett enlisted the services of "Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility" (PEER), which is demanding that Interior apologize to Monnett and drop its investigation? (Also, please return his confiscated hard drive and notes.)

PEER's mission statement concerns the sanctioning of political activity by public employees: "PEER allows public servants to work as 'anonymous activists' so that agencies must confront the message, rather than the messenger."

All of this is extremely curious. Why is the Obama Administration investigating an iconic environmental scientist? And why is that scientist seeking protection from being prosecuted for political activity? And were the drowned bears *Ursus bogus*?