



Written by [Rebecca Terrell](#) on October 18, 2012

“Save the Polar Bears” Scientist Guilty or Not Guilty?

The scientist who galvanized the international polar bear conservation movement with reports of drowned bears is back in his old job with the Department of the Interior (DOI) after a two-year investigation into charges of data falsification. Arctic wildlife biologist Charles Monnett made waves in the environmental movement when he and fellow DOI employee Jeffrey Gleason published a [2006 paper](#) in the journal *Polar Biology*. It stated that alarming numbers of polar bears are drowning due to melting sea ice caused by global warming.



Al Gore reported Monnett’s research in his 2006 documentary [An Inconvenient Truth](#). During the film computer animation shows a polar bear struggling to climb onto a small, solitary ice floe that breaks under its weight. Gore bemoans, “A new scientific study shows that for the first time they’re finding polar bears that have actually drowned swimming long distances — up to sixty miles — to find the ice.” (Incidentally, the [U.S. Geological Survey](#) reports these hardy creatures are capable of swimming extremely long distances, some in excess of 200 miles. It says the data suggest “they do not stop to rest during their journey.”)

In 2010, an anonymous co-worker charged Monnett with several counts of wrongdoing, including intentional omission or use of false data in his polar bear research. The complainant said Monnett intended to fraudulently influence the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (FWS) decision to list the polar bear under the Endangered Species Act. He also accused Monnett of illegally releasing confidential government e-mails to anti-oil activists.

These allegations launched a two-year DOI investigation, during which time Monnett’s employing agency, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), suspended him with pay for six weeks and then reassigned him to an analyst position. Last month, DOI published its [findings](#).

We found that Monnett made unauthorized disclosures of Government emails to a non-Government entity. Regarding the falsification of data allegations, we found that Monnett and Gleason used an incomplete database as their primary source of information to write their manuscript, made conflicting statements to investigators regarding the writing and editing of their manuscript, and engaged in questionable extrapolation of data by “deliberately” (using Monnett’s word) understating data in the manuscript.

DOI also found the research was used as a reference in FWS’s 2008 decision to add polar bears to the list of endangered species. The department reported its evidence to Alaska’s U.S. District Attorney as well as to BOEM. The DA declined criminal prosecution, and BOEM’s deputy director [reprimanded](#) Monnett for “improper release of Government documents.” As for scientific integrity, the deputy director had only this to say: “While there were other findings made by the [Office of Inspector General] in its report regarding your conduct, I have decided not to take action regarding those findings.” BOEM



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then reinstated Monnett in his former position. The bureau did not address Gleason's role in the case because he now works for another government agency.

Such a mild wrist-slap in the face of DOI's severe criticism has major media outlets announcing Monnett's exoneration. "Inquiry Finds No Proof That Federal Biologist Falsified Data," reads a [New York Times](#) blog. The journal [Nature](#) headlined Monnett as "Cleared of Misconduct."

Yet official [investigation transcripts](#) show Monnett declared his own research "sloppy." Indeed, he admits how he and Gleason, on a 2004 survey of bowhead whales, observed four drowned polar bears after a harsh Arctic storm, leading to their speculation that the deaths resulted from global warming.

Ironically, recent reports reveal polar bear populations are defying doomsday predictions. In the [Hudson Bay](#) area, where numbers were predicted to decline to about 650 by 2011, the population is holding steady at around 1,000 bears. In [Davis Strait](#), estimates have swelled from 850 in the mid-1980s to 2,100 in 2007. World Wildlife Fund spokesman Tom Arnbom admits to two growing populations of polar bears, including one in [Norway's Arctic islands](#). And last year, notwithstanding the polar bear's endangered status, Russia lifted a [ban on hunting](#) the species for the first time since 1957 — a ban that came about not because of global warming but due to overhunting.

Canada is the only country in the world that allows commercial trade of polar bear products. The [Los Angeles Times](#) reports the bears' endangered status is setting records in pelt prices, to the delight of native hunters. But they are wary of the effect on their economy and culture of ever-encroaching international restrictions. "The Inuit have always hunted the polar bear. It's in our best interest to ensure the population is healthy," Terry Audla, a representative of the indigenous tribes, told the *Times*. "But people have to have faith in us and work with us — to base things on facts, and not listen to these animal rights activists who are bending the truth."



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