The interview—about the Bush administration’s record on protecting endangered species—was over, and Daniel Stone, who works in our Washington bureau, was about to leave. Kempthorne’s office when Kempthorne asked Stone to step out on the office balcony, which has, Dan says, “the kind of view you can really only get in Washington by political appointment. Trees blanket the entire city, with breaks in the foliage for the Capitol, the Washington Monument and, far to the west, the house of Robert E. Lee.” Kempthorne pointed to the balcony’s railing. “Every morning a small bird comes here and sings the most beautiful songs,” he told Dan. Then he turned to face the vista of trees. “This, Daniel, is what we’re talking about,” Kempthorne said. “This is what’s at stake.”

Trees and songbirds are indeed at stake in the great conservation battle that began, really, with one of the noble figures of Kempthorne’s party, Theodore Roosevelt. But as with so much else in life, things are rather more complicated than the secretary’s remarks might suggest. Though environmentalism was once largely about conservation—of land and wildlife—it is now linked to the struggle over climate change. The struggle over climate change, in turn, is often linked to possibly wrenching cultural and economic choices. And the struggle over wrenching cultural and economic choices is linked to politics.

Which is where the polar bears like the one on our cover come in. As Jerry Adler writes this week, the fate of such bears—cute but deadly creatures, especially if you are a seal—is now part of the larger fight over global warming. It is a clear strategy on the part of environmental activists: the Endangered Species Act, passed in 1973, requires the government to protect the “critical habitat” of endangered species. If polar bears make the list, Jerry writes, and if global warming is threatening the polar bears’ habitat—the melting Arctic ice—then, as Jerry puts it, “the government could be forced to crack down on greenhouse-gas emissions, a step that environmentalists consider vital to the survival even of species that live in houses and would never dream of biting the head off a walrus.”

Kempthorne has recently listed the polar bear as “threatened,” an intermediate step toward the endangered-species list, but Kempthorne has promised not to allow the Endangered Species Act to be “abused” by environmentalists to affect global-warming policy. “This listing,” he says, “will not stop global climate change or prevent any sea ice from melting.” Species protection is complicated, but the numbers are straightforward: George W. Bush has protected 60 species, compared with Bill Clinton’s 522 and George H.W. Bush’s 231—which means the senior President Bush protected four times as many species in half the time.

Jerry should have the last word: “To the Bush administration and to its allies in the business community, it’s self-evident that the act was meant to cover the kind of threat a steamroller poses to a Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, not that which an SUV in Atlanta poses to a polar bear by way of the atmosphere.”