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Bush's Polar-Bear Problem

The administration tells scientists attending international meetings not to discuss polar bears, climate change, or sea ice.
By David Ewing Duncan

Polar bears can't get a break these days. First we saw them in Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* desperately swimming about in the Arctic in search of ice floes that seem to have disappeared due to global warming. Now we hear that experts working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service can't talk about these giant white-furred beasts in overseas scientific meetings about climate change.

The order to squelch talk about polar bears came in a "new requirement" listing to government scientists traveling abroad. Henceforth, if they are participating in a meeting "involving or potentially involving climate change, sea ice, and/or polar bears," they need to report this and have a spokesperson assigned to articulate the administration's policies. Fish and Wildlife officials want to be sure that "the one responding to questions on these issues, particularly polar bears," understands the administration's position on these topics.

Fish and Wildlife director H. Dale Hale said this was not an attempt to censor scientists, though the travel memos specifically require that the traveler "understands the administration's position on climate change, polar bears, and sea ice and will not be speaking on or responding to these issues." The memos were discovered and released by two environmental groups, the Natural Resources Defense Council and [the Center for Biological Diversity](#).

This comes as the Bush administration decides whether or not to list these mountains of fangs and white fur as "threatened" because of the shrinking ice floes--which would be an acknowledgement of the severity of global warming that this presidency has been reluctant to admit, and has done little to counter.

This reminds me of working last year with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on a story for *National Geographic* about toxic chemicals in the environment. Regional EPA experts, most of them old hands who have worked for several administrations, were willing to talk to me, but mostly off the record. They insisted on this out of fear that they might get in trouble with their bosses in Washington. Senior officials were reluctant to talk at all.

I was looking for comments about the science from experts for use in an article that was carefully *not* political. I was able to get most of what I needed, but there were many hurdles and long conversations about why the EPA was even relevant to my story--a story on pollutants in the environment. "If not the EPA, then whom?" I asked repeatedly. I eventually got what I needed from the scientists about flame retardants and DDT and the rest, but I never got an on-the-record comment from senior EPA officials in Washington.

It's not news that members of the current administration put politics above science when it suits them, though their persistence in denying facts and in staunching the routine and vital flow of scientific discourse never fails to astonish. The decision about polar bears' status is expected in January 2008. Designation as a "threatened" species means that the government can't take any actions that might jeopardize these animals--a finding that might force a wider debate about global warming that the president has been trying to avoid.

Come next January, the Bush administration will, in its final year, hopefully show more respect for the behemoths of the north--and for scientists trying to do their jobs.

More information is on the *Scientific American* [website](#).

Also, see an [article](#) in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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