



Misused Words Polarize Bear Facts

Many column-years ago I remember quoting American columnist Norman Cousins that 'words are just a way to move an idea from one point to another'. Implicit in this notion is the lack of discrimination: words can convey bad ideas and wrong information every bit as well as they convey the good and the true. I have been mindful of this recently while reading Bjorn Lomborg's *Cool It: The Skeptical Environmentalist's Guide to Global Warming*.

Lomborg is a Danish academic, trained originally in political science, and now the director of the Copenhagen Consensus Centre, a think-tank addressing economic solutions to global issues. His best-selling 2001 book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* made him famous or infamous depending on your perspective. He is one of the world's leading commentators on global warming and climate change and is loathed by the environmental movement.

I found Lomborg's book a rational and studied investigation of this very complex and controversial subject, with a clear and insightful analysis of the many issues. It was, however, his comments on polar bears that fascinated me, given how much publicity about their imminent demise has followed Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* and claims that the bears were drowning on shrinking ice floes.

In past weeks I have heard three times that the polar bears are declining in number and that those who want to see these wonderful animals must go in the next few years before they are lost forever. Two of the speakers were PESA persons. So, courtesy of Mr Lomborg, let me offer a few words to the contrary...¹

The Polar Bear Specialist Group of the World Conservation Union (WCU) published in 2001 the results of an extensive research project on 20 bear populations involving about 25,000 bears in total. They did report that two groups were clearly declining in number, but they

also noted that two groups were growing and the rest were relatively stable. They also gave perspective by pointing out that the bear population had increased nearly five-fold from about 5,000 total in the 1960s, largely because of more regulated hunting.

Ironically, given Gore's claims, the two bear populations that were decreasing were from the Baffin Bay area which has become measurably colder, not warmer, over the past 50 years. Conversely, the two groups that were increasing in number were living on the Beaufort Sea coast, an area where temperatures have been rising.

The best-studied bear population in the Arctic is on the west coast of Hudson Bay. A decline in the population here from 1200 in 1987 to fewer than 950 in 2004 is frequently cited as clear evidence of polar bear population decline. These figures are correct and, understandably, they alarm people genuinely concerned about the bears. However, the figures are taken out

of context. Earlier reports document that the bear population was only 500 in 1981. The population swelled to 1,200 in six years, an increase of over 13% per year. The subsequent decline to 950 over 17 years is a rate of about 0.1% per annum and relatively insignificant when put in that context. When presented out of context, as seems common by some environmental spokesman, it is misleading to say the least.

In Canada, where polar bear populations are closely observed, there are 13 populations which are regularly monitored. The Canadian Government announced in 2006 that 11 of the groups are stable or increasing in numbers, adding that 'it is just silly to predict the demise of the polar bears in 25 years based on media-assisted hysteria'.

So why do we read regularly of the impending extinction of the polar bears, and their survival only in world zoos. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), for instance, announced in 2006 that the polar bears are so threatened they might (my emphasis) stop reproducing by 2012 and thus become functionally extinct in less than a decade'.

Al Gore ran a picture of a polar bear on a small ice floe, seemingly looking for the next floe to jump to. Time had used a similar photo on a cover in 2006 and reported that 'bears are starting to turn up drowned'. Gore claimed in the film and book that 'a new scientific study shows that, for the first time, polar bears have been drowning in significant numbers'.

These images had world-wide impact because of the extensive publicity. Unfortunately not nearly as much publicity was given the ruling by the High Court in England, after considering the available scientific evidence, that 'significant numbers of drowning polar bears' was one of nine errors of fact in Gore's film, and the Court forbade the film being shown in schools unless students were advised of the errors.

The High Court did note that there had been a documented incident where four bears were found drowned in the Beaufort Sea in 2005. However, the investigators attributed this unfortunate event to 'an abrupt windstorm' the day before, presumably blowing the ice floes away from each other.



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It is an exaggeration, to say the least, to extrapolate this into the rapidly advancing demise of the polar bears, especially since the incident occurred among a Beaufort Sea bear population that was increasing in number and so had no discernible impact on the local population.

It is this presentation of facts out of context that is the concern. In the late 1990s, for instance, female polar bears in the Hudson Bay area were found to be losing weight. The researcher initially suggested it might be dietary or linked to pollutants or development projects in the area but later concluded that only a '60-80%' curbing of carbon dioxide emissions could save the bears from fading away. WWF publicised the latter conclusion widely, predicting the extinction of the polar bear unless climate change was halted.

It would be charitable to accept these as honest mistakes but they sometimes look like deliberate misrepresentations. For instance, WWF continues to publicise the declining numbers of polar bears despite their own report 'Polar Bears at Risk' citing the WCU statistics that 19 of 21 bear populations are stable or increasing. So why do the WWF and their

fellow travellers chose to only publicise the two populations that are decreasing?

Or focus all the attention on the Antarctic Peninsula and the melting of the Larsdan B ice shelf, and not mention that most of Antarctica is getting colder? Or claim that cyclones like Katrina showing the growing destructiveness bred of global warming, and not mention a) that this was only a category 3 storm and b) that rising damage bills owe more to larger and more affluent populations living in harm's way (in Katrina's case, with diabolically neglected damage control systems).

I understand that the psychologist's polite term for this is 'noble cause corruption'; the perceived nobility of the cause leads people in the environmental industry and the media to rationalise the misuse or distortion of evidence.

The polar bears are not dying out. They are doing just fine. I read recently that recent studies have shown increases of 20-25% in bear populations in Canada. The article claimed that the bears had become so plentiful in some areas that the local Inuit people (the ones so beloved of environmentalists because they have over 100 different words for 'snow') have reportedly increased the numbers available for hunting.

It all reminds me of my favourite anecdote about the publicity given to the four otters found dead during the UK Shetland Islands oil-spill in 1993. Though their deaths were much publicised and lamented, autopsies showed that one had died of old age, two had died of gastric ulcers and one was run over by a Norwegian television truck.

Care for the future of polar bears is important, as it is for all life and nature. But that care must be based on the facts, and we need to be able to rely on those who communicate with us not to edit those facts, for whatever their reasons. Otherwise public and political action will be based on fantasy, not fact, and that may almost certainly do more harm than good.

Peter Purcell

¹ For the record, references are available for all the points presented here.