

Scientist who saw drowned polar bears reprimanded

September 29 2012, by Becky Bohrer

(AP)—An Alaska scientist whose observations of drowned polar bears helped galvanize the global warming movement has been reprimanded for improper release of government documents.

An [Interior Department](#) official said emails released by Charles Monnett were cited by a [federal appeals court](#) in decisions to vacate approval by the Bureau of [Ocean Energy](#) Management of an oil and gas company's [Arctic exploration](#) plan.

The official, Walter Cruickshank, deputy director of BOEM, said in a memo that an inspector general's investigation contained findings that Monnett had improperly disclosed internal [government documents](#), which he said were later used against the agency in court. He also said the investigation made other findings in regards to Monnett's conduct, but he wasn't taking action on those. He would not specify those findings.

Cruickshank called Monnett's "misconduct very serious," and said any future misconduct may lead to more severe discipline, including removal from federal service.

Monnett was briefly suspended last year during an inspector general's investigation into a polar bear research contract he managed. The inspector general's report, which was released Friday, said its investigation was set off by a complaint from an unidentified Interior Department employee who alleged that Monnett wrongfully released

government records and that he and another scientist, Jeffrey Gleason, intentionally omitted or used false data in an article they wrote on polar bears. During that investigation, authorities also looked into the procurement issue.

Jeff Ruch, executive director of the [advocacy group](#) Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, which has been involved in the matter on Monnett's behalf, said Friday that the issue of the document release did not even come up in investigators' questioning of Monnett.

He called the outcome "completely unexpected," and said Monnett is confused by it.

PEER, in a news release, said the email disclosure had nothing to do with polar bear research but that it embarrassed the agency.

"We think he's owed an apology, but we're not going to hold our breath until he gets one," Ruch said.

Federal investigators had said that Monnett helped a polar bear researcher prepare a proposal even though he was the government official who determined whether the proposal met minimum qualifications. PEER has said that Monnett's handling of the study was proper and that Monnett, instead, was being targeted for a 2006 article on drowned polar bears.

The article was based on observations that Monnett and Gleason made in 2004 while conducting an aerial survey of bowhead whales. They saw four dead polar bears floating in the water after a storm.

In the article, they said they were reporting, to the best of their knowledge, the first observations of the bears floating dead and presumed drowned while apparently swimming long distances. They

wrote that while polar bears are considered strong swimmers, long-distance swims may exact a greater metabolic toll than standing or walking on ice in better weather.

They said their findings suggested that drowning-related deaths of polar bears may increase in the future "if the observed trend of regression of pack ice and/or longer open water periods continues."

The article and related presentations helped to make the polar bear a symbol for the global warming movement.

According to the inspector general's report, investigators found that Monnett and Gleason used an incomplete database as their primary source of information to write the article, made conflicting statements to investigators regarding the writing and editing process and understated data in the manuscript. However, they found that the article had "little or no impact" on a federal decision to extend special protections to [polar bears](#) under the Endangered Species Act, according to the report.

A BOEM spokeswoman, Theresa Eisenman, said the findings in the report do not support a conclusion that the scientists involved engaged in "scientific misconduct."

Monnett's reprimand could be removed from his record in two years or less.

Ruch said Monnett has been told he will return to scientific work.

Copyright 2012 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Scientist who saw drowned polar bears reprimanded (2012, September 29) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-09-scientist-polar-reprimanded.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.