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What, me worry?

By H. Sterling Burnett

Cable TV satirist Stephen Colbert coined a term, "truthiness," which the online encyclopedia Wikipedia explains is "to claim to 'know' something ... 'from the gut' without regard to evidence, logic ... or actual facts."

Truthiness, thus, is an emotional appeal meant to short-circuit intellectual examination of the claims being made. A prime example of the effectiveness of truthiness came in late December when environmental lobbyists persuaded the Bush administration to recommend that the polar bear be listed as threatened because of global warming.

In lieu of evidence, environmentalists offered mostly anecdotes that polar bears are at risk: isolated reports of a few polar bears drowning in Arctic waters normally containing sea ice as well as a few instances of cannibalism among polar bears.

Then they took a long leap of logic to posit that human-caused global warming will melt most of the ice at the North Pole within 50 years and

that without the ice, polar bears will be unable to hunt seals, their preferred prey.

Fortunately, both for policy and the polar bears, the plight of this one population does not reflect the population trend as a whole. Indeed, since the 1970s, while the world was warming, polar bear numbers increased dramatically -- from around 5,000 to as many as 25,000 today. That's higher than at any time in 20th century.

And historically, polar bears have thrived in temperatures even warmer than currently -- during the Medieval warm period 1,000 years ago and during the Holocene Climate Optimum between 5,000 and 9,000 years ago.

Polar bears have thrived during warmer climates because they are omnivores just like their cousins the brown and black bears. Though polar bears currently eat seals more than anything else, they also will feast on fish, kelp, caribou, ducks, sea birds, the occasional beluga whale, musk ox and scavenged whale and walrus carcasses.

In addition, Dr. Mitchell Taylor, a biologist with Nunavut Territorial government in Canada, pointed out in testimony to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that modest warming may be beneficial to bears since it creates better habitat for seals and would dramatically increase production of blueberries, which bears gorge themselves on when available.

Alaska's polar bear population is stable, and Taylor's research shows that the Canadian polar bear population has increased 25 percent from 12,000 to 15,000 during the past decade with 11 of Canada's 13 polar bear populations stable or increasing in number.

Where polar bear weight and numbers are declining, Taylor thinks too many bears competing for food, rather than Arctic warming, is the cause.

That's right: The problem confronting polar bears may be overpopulation, not extinction.

The World Wildlife Fund, while arguing that polar bears are at risk from global

warming, presented data that actually undermine its fear.

According to the WWF there are 22,000 polar bears in about 20 distinct populations worldwide. Only two bear populations -- accounting for 16.4 percent of the total number of bears -- are decreasing. And they are in areas where air temperatures have actually fallen, such as the Baffin Bay region.

By contrast, another two populations -- 13.6 percent of the total number -- are growing,

and they live in areas where air temperatures have risen, near the Bering Strait and the Chukchi Sea.

As for the rest, 10 populations -- constituting 45.4 percent of the total number of bears -- are stable; the status of the remaining six populations is unknown.

For now, the government will be taking public comments on the proposal. Let's hope some science -- facts and accuracy -- make an appearance before this goes too far. The rush to place

polar bears on the endangered species list smacks of "truthiness" rather than truthfulness.

Many Americans may view this polar bear gambit as just another backdoor attempt by dedicated greens to restrict energy use in the United States. They might well be right.

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