

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Big oil vs the bear scientist

You couldn't make it up. A drama worthy of a James Bond movie – involving an Arctic scientist, Kafkaesque government agencies, unscrupulous oil giants, climate-change sceptics and polar bears – is currently unfolding in the United States.

Charles Monnett is the government biologist who first raised the alarm about the impact of global warming on polar bears. His groundbreaking work was quoted by Al Gore in *An Inconvenient Truth*, and used to push George Bush to act on climate change.

But Monnett has just been suspended – for “integrity issues” relating to a project studying how the bears are adapting to receding ice conditions – and placed under a gagging order pending an official investigation.

The timing is intriguing. Oil giants demanding an expansion of oil exploration in Alaska have been complaining of delays caused by environmental sensitivities. In August, the president issued an order to speed up the processing of drilling permits.

Is the US government really trying to silence a well-respected scientist conducting a legitimate

study at a time when it is making key decisions about drilling in Arctic waters? It wouldn't be the first time that there has been a thinly veiled attempt to disrupt scientific studies that the authorities don't like.

Meanwhile, sceptics have already dubbed the affair ‘Polarbeargate’ and are claiming that Monnett's original work has been discredited. It's all hot air,



Polar bears: at the centre of a drama worthy of a Bond movie.

“*Sceptics have dubbed the affair ‘Polarbeargate’ and say that the original work has been discredited.*”

of course. But, unlike the vast majority of peer-reviewed research adding to the weight of evidence for climate change, they seem to be making the headlines.

Can conservation get any more frustrating than this?

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer and TV presenter.