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ing Challenge

Is the World Wildlife Fund Polar Bear Campaign Based on False Advertising?

with 3 comments

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has been running commercials to appeal for members and donations. The commercials have claimed that global warming is causing the population of polar bears to decrease rapidly thereby putting the species at risk of extinction. Might the WWF be engaged in false advertising? This the question that Scott Armstrong, a professor of marketing at the Wharton School who has taught advertising for over 35 years, is asking. Professor Armstrong will discuss this case at the International Conference on Climate Change on March 9 in New York City. He has been trying to contact senior officers of the WWF since December 12, 2008, to ask them to explain their side of the story. Despite many attempts, he has not received a response from the WWF. See a full description of the problem and prior correspondence below.

In an appeal for members and donations, commercials by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have claimed that the number of polar bears is decreasing rapidly, thereby putting the entire species at risk of extinction. For example, here are excerpts from a TV commercial, "Noah Wyle for the WWF," posted on YouTube and stating that because of climate change:

"Polar bears are on their way to extinction. If we don't act now, most will die in our children's lifetime. But you can help change that. Call now and join the Wildlife Rescue team. . . . If we don't act now, it could be too late for the polar bear."

Professor Scott Armstrong, a Wharton School professor wondered what the basis was for these claims. The statement that "polar bears are on their way to extinction" is at odds with the conclusion of his recently published paper which showed that there were no scientific forecasts to support such a claim (Armstrong, Green & Soon, "Polar Bear Population Forecasts: A Public-Policy Forecasting Audit," *Interfaces* (2008), 38, 382-405).

As was discussed at the Hearings by the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works on January 30, 2008, there are apparently many more polar bears now than there were a few decades ago because the ban on hunting has been so successful in protecting them.

Interestingly, as of February 2009, the WWF website claims that:

"The general status of polar bears is currently stable, though there are differences between the populations. Some are stable, some seem to be increasing, and some are decreasing due to various



Gore V Armstrong



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pressures. The status of several populations is not well documented.” This statement contradicts the claim in their advertising campaign.”

Do the WWF commercials represent a case of false advertising, that is, of soliciting money under false premises? If so, should the WWF be required to return the donations that might have conceivably been raised from this campaign? What actions might be taken? Is it a case for federal regulators?

Professor Armstrong has been attempting to contact the WWF’s President and CEO and seven of its trustees by mail, phone, and e-mail since December 12, 2008. Armstrong recommended that the campaign be stopped and that corrective ads should be run to offer to return donations and membership fees. He also mentioned that he would discuss this case in his talk at the International Conference on Climate Change in New York City on March the 8th to 10th and, to be fair, he would like to present the WWF’s side of the story. To that end, Armstrong said he would circulate a WWF response at his talk. The correspondence for this case is posted at theclimatebet.com.

As of February 25, he had not received a response from the WWF.

Reference: Armstrong, J.S., K. C. Green and W. Soon “Polar Bear Population Forecasts: A Public-Policy Forecasting Audit,” with commentary, *Interfaces* (2008), 38, No. 5, 382-405

Contact: For further information, contact Professor J. Scott Armstrong at armstrong@wharton.upenn.edu

Mr. Bruce Babbitt, Chairman of the Board February 17, 2009

World Wildlife Fund

1250 Twenty-Fourth Street, N.W.

P.O. Box 97180

Washington, DC 20090-7180

Dear Mr. Babbitt,

I have been trying to contact representatives of the World Wildlife Fund, but so far, I have not had much luck. Might you be able to respond to my concerns? I attach a record of my previous correspondence.

Thanks you for your help in this matter.

Sincerely,

J. Scott Armstrong

Professor of Marketing, The Wharton School, U. of PA.. Phila., PA 19104

Phone 610-622-6480

Home address: 645 Harper Ave., Drexel Hill, PA 19026

Fax 215-898 2534

Homepage: <http://jscottarmstrong.com>

To the Trustees of the World Wildlife Fund

February 14, 2009

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I sent the letter copied below to the President and CEO of the WWF, Mr. Carter Roberts, on December 12, 2008 via U.S. mail. I sent a follow-up letter on January 13, 2009, followed by a fax on January 27. I have received no reply to my correspondence and my attempts to obtain an email address or phone number for him have been fruitless.

I have checked the WWF website and found it difficult to obtain contact information for many of the key people. The six Trustees to whom I have addressed this message were the only ones whose email addresses I could find.

My letter to Mr. Roberts concerns the important issue of misleading advertising by the WWF, a subject with which I am familiar having taught advertising at the Wharton School for about 38 years. I would be grateful if you would acknowledge receipt of this email and respond to my original letter to Mr. Roberts.

I plan to discuss this issue in my talk at the upcoming 2009 International Conference on Climate Change in New York City on March 8 to 10. In the interests of fairness, the WWF's side of the issue should be presented. If you like, I will make an enquiry as to whether it would be possible for a representative of the WWF to attend the conference and give a short reply from the floor.

Sincerely,

J. Scott Armstrong

Professor of Marketing, The Wharton School, U. of PA.. Phila., PA 19104

Phone 610-622-6480

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Fax 215-898 2534

email: armstrong@wharton.upenn.edu

Homepage: <http://jscottarmstrong.com>

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Previous Contacts

On January 27, 2009, I sent a fax to Mr. Roberts that followed up on the letter of January 13 and included the material below.

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On January 13, 2009, I resent the letter to Mr. Roberts with the following note at the beginning:

“On December 12, 2008, I sent the following letter to you by U.S Postal service, but to date, I have not received a response. Perhaps you did not receive the letter?

I look forward to hearing from you.”

Mr. Carter Roberts
President and CEO
World Wildlife Fund
1250 Twenty Fourth Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20090-7180
Dear Mr. Roberts,

December 12, 2008

On November 9th, 2008, I watched a World Wildlife Fund TV commercial in which I believe you were the spokesperson, but essentially the same video has also aired with Noah Wyle and Sharon Lawrence as spokespersons. In an appeal for members and donations, the advertisement provides a message that the number of polar bears is decreasing rapidly, thereby putting the entire species at risk of extinction.

The claim is surprising because the following statement was on the WWF website at http://www.panda.org/about_wwf/what_we_do/species/about_species/species_factsheets/polar_bear/pbear_population_distribution/index.cfm on November 14, 2008:

“The general status of polar bears is currently stable, though there are differences between the populations. Some are stable, some seem to be increasing, and some are decreasing due to various pressures. The status of several populations is not well documented.”

With my colleagues, Drs. Kesten Green and Willie Soon, I have reviewed the U.S. Department of the Interior reports on the polar bear population, and they do not provide scientific support for the claims made in your organization’s advertisement. We were unable to obtain evidence indicating a decline in the polar bear population.

Based on relevant published information, we found that the polar bear population has in fact been increasing since hunting restrictions were imposed in the 1970s. These findings were commonly accepted in the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works hearing on January 30, 2008. Attached is a copy of my testimony for your examination. In addition, I invite you to read our subsequent paper that also addresses this issue:

Armstrong, J. S., Green, K. C., & Soon, W. (2008), “Polar Bear Population Forecasts: A Public-Policy Forecasting

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117,593

Audit," *Interfaces* , 38, 382-345. Available in full text with commentary at <http://tinyurl.com/pbforcast>

As I am sure you are aware, it is important for advertisers to avoid making false claims. I suggest that you withdraw your inaccurate advertisements and run corrective ads that offer to return donations and membership fees.

I look forward to hearing from you on this matter.

Sincerely,

J. Scott Armstrong
Professor of Marketing, The Wharton School, U. of PA.. Phila., PA 19104
Phone 610-622-6480
Home address: 645 Harper Ave., Drexel Hill, PA 19026
Fax 215-898 2534
Homepage: <http://jscottarmstrong.com>

Attached: Professor Armstrong's Testimony Submitted to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (Written version) on January 30, 2008

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Written by mzfeldm

March 2nd, 2009 at 9:19 am

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3 Responses to 'Is the World Wildlife Fund Polar Bear Campaign Based on False Advertising?'

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1.

My money is on Scott!

Gio-



[giovanniworld](#)

3 Mar 09 at [10:11 pm](#)

2.

During browsing of Arctic and Northern Hemisphere ice cover sites, I came across a website for the Svalbard group of islands, which is about halfway



between the northern end of Norway and the North pole.

As part of their tourist information I found that they claim a population of approximately 3000 polar bears. They also mentioned the dangers to polar bears from climate change and pollution from chemicals such as PCB's.

Svalbard's industries include tourism and coal mining.

I feel that the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) are playing on emotions to garner funding from gullible people. It makes me angry to see monies raised from school children "to save the polar bears".

3.

This is in response to the WWF false advertising, I recently watched one of those please donate programs, where they have features the Polar Bear. But also during the program they did a little spot about the "Spirit Bear" also known as the Kermode bear. The spot was about how this species is close to extinction as there are only 400 left in the wild. They did the whole please donate so we can see this bear in the wild for years and years to come and so on and so forth. The Spirit Bear is a subspecies of the American Black Bear. Kermode bears are usually black or brown but they say approx. 1 in 10 are born white. For a species to be condensed to 1 area in the world there is a significant amount of them. Basically my point is the WWF is making people think that these "white bears" are on the brink of extinction, but these bears aren't always white.

JeffT

12 Mar 09 at [7:24 am](#)



Tara

14 Mar 09 at [8:56 am](#)

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