



The latest environmental news from the US is that...giant pandas are under threat! Researchers at Yale University – that paragon of academic excellence – and Michigan State University came up with the shocking news when they discovered that the bamboo the pandas feed on could be wiped out by the process of global warming. Apparently, some of the species of bamboo found in areas of China where the pandas live only flower every 30-35 years, so any event that affects that cycle would be catastrophic for the plants, and hence the pandas.

The researchers particularly studied an area around the Qinling Mountains in Shaanxi province, where giant pandas have become isolated by human habitation over the centuries. The provincial capital, Xian, is also the site of the famous terracotta army and the area is known as the beginning of the Silk Road. In the celebrated words of John Bishop: "Someone, somewhere is gonna get a grant."

I was flabbergasted to read the news of the threat to panda survival, but even more filled with admiration for WWF, which picked the creature for its emblem all those years ago: must have been a lucky guess.

It's been a close shave for the environment on another front in the US this month. While Barack Obama isn't particularly known for his enthusiastic espousal of green energy, at least he is giving it a go. Even that would probably have ground to a halt if the American people had seen fit to elect Mitt Romney as President. At least that was the view of a leading expert on the issue. Barry Bozeman is Andrew Crenshaw Professor and Regents' Professor of Public Policy at the University of Georgia. In an interview with James Morgan for ScienceOmega.com, the European science news site, carried out on election day, Prof Bozeman outlined the effects on science policy if each won.

On the environment, he said: "If Romney follows through with what he says he's going to do, I think that we would see several differences in US environmental policy. We would have a much stronger commitment to 'clean' coal, which is certainly an oxymoron if ever there was one. We would also be likely to step away from some alternative energies such as solar and wind. Whilst President Obama's commitment in these areas hasn't been huge, Romney's would be negligible."

His conclusions on climate change denial were less than complimentary. "I think that we would continue to pretend – at least for a while – that extreme weather events have nothing to do with human action," he said. "We would probably keep saying that they are being caused by CO2-emitting giant sequoia trees or cow belching."

I couldn't let pass in this column the outburst of the BBC's arts editor Will Gompertz on Have I Got News for You on 2 November. His views on windfarms – that they are "pig ugly" – and his seeming impression that conventional power stations are less polluting because they "have a certain aesthetic beauty" are astounding. You would expect nothing else from the programme's host Jeremy Clarkson, but I hope Gompertz's comments were made with his tongue firmly in his cheek.

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