



Oh Idiocy, Thy Name Is Government

Shooting owls will not fix the problems that federal biologists created themselves.

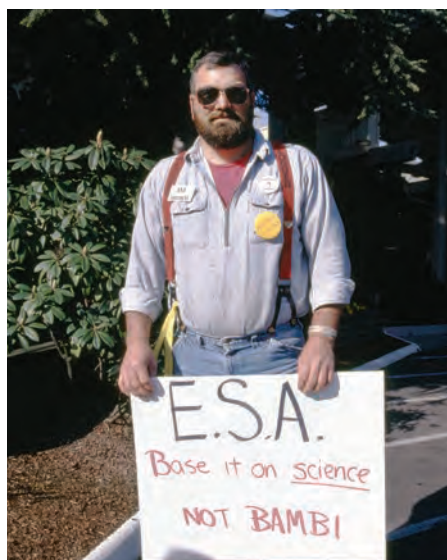
By Jim Petersen

“The northern spotted owl is the wildlife species of choice to act as a surrogate for old-growth forest protection. Thank goodness the spotted owl evolved in the Pacific Northwest for if it hadn’t, we’d have to genetically engineer it.”

—ANDY STAHL, STAFF FORESTER, SIERRA CLUB LEGAL DEFENSE FUND, 1988, NOW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FOREST SERVICE EMPLOYEES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

I would not know Andy Stahl if he walked past me, but I suspect his spotted owl conceit from the 1980s is giving him heartburn in the wake of the federal government’s decision to kill 500,000 barred owls over the next 30 years. Our story begins with a report released last November by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS). The 264-page tome explains the agency’s controversial decision to shoot a half-million predatory barred owls over the next 30 years. Why? To save northern spotted owls from being hunted to extinction by barred owls.

Cue the lawyers representing 75 organizations led by two animal welfare nonprofits: Animal Wellness Action and the Center for a Humane Economy. Last April, they wrote a letter to Deb Haaland, secretary of the U.S.



MIKE MCMURRAY PHOTO

Department of the Interior, calling the plan “reckless,” alleging that it will lead to “mistaken identity kills.” Given that barred and spotted owls look very similar, it is likely that hunters hired by the Interior Department will kill many threatened spotted owls in their quest to kill barred owls in western Oregon and Washington and Northern California. How many spotted owls might be killed? Nobody knows.

This tale of woe gets better: The aggrieved

groups blame climate change and deforestation for the fact that barred owls began their westward migration from the Great Lakes region in the early 1900s. This is pure fiction. Scientists aren’t sure how long barred owls have been present in the Pacific Northwest. But there is no evidence that they fled the Great Lakes region because of logging or climate change. Because biologists were only looking for spotted owls in old-growth settings, it’s possible barred owls have been here for hundreds of years. Maybe longer.

The Forest Service played a largely custodial role (very little logging) in western national forests until the post-World War II era. Virtually all the 60 billion board feet of timber consumed by the war came from private forestlands in the Pacific Northwest and Southeast because federal forests in the Pacific Northwest were still largely devoid of roads.

When the Northwest Forest Plan was implemented in 1994, 7.4 million acres of owl habitat were set aside in no-harvest Late Succession Reserves. The plan covered 24.5 million acres in 17 national forests. Several million LSR acres have since been incinerated in stand-replacing wildfires that may never



BARRIED OWL PHOTO COURTESY OF CYNTHIA RAND

ABOVE: Barred owls prey on and interbreed with smaller northern spotted owls. To “save” spotted owls, the federal government plans to shoot 500,000 barred owls over the next 30 years. BELOW: Oregon millworkers understood early that the spotted owl was a surrogate for “saving” old-growth forests. Government refusal to manage old growth has led to the loss of one million acres to wildfire since the 1990 listing. OPPOSITE TOP: Wildlife biologists use dead mice to lure northern spotted owls into their gloved hands. The owl was federally listed as a threatened species in 1990. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: An Oregon millworker protesting the politicization of the Endangered Species Act at a Salem rally in 1990.

have occurred—or would have been much less destructive—had the Forest Service been allowed to initiate some innovative adaptive management prescriptions on those 24.5 million acres.

Four million acres of so-called matrix lands were designated for “adaptive forest management,” but it never happened. The anti-forestry mob that fought and won the fabled spotted owl wars continues to block most Forest Service restoration projects. Very little timber—and no old-growth—is harvested from western federal forests today. But you’d never know it from reading the opening salvo on the Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics website. Stahl’s outfit asks, “Can the Forest Service Kick its 100-year Addiction to Logging?”

President Biden’s Executive Order 14027, issued in April 2022, emphasizes “restoring and conserving the nation’s forests, including mature and old-growth forests,” and states, “My administration will manage forests on federal lands, which include many mature and old-growth forests, to promote their continued health and resilience.”

Health and resilience? Half the nation’s federal forest estate is dying, dead or burnt to a crisp, a direct result of the failure to manage forest density or insect and disease infesta-

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tions since the northern spotted owl was listed in 1990—hence, the wildfire pandemic that is incinerating western national forests, owl habitat and rural western communities.

Stahl claims that Biden’s executive order authorized the first-ever inventory of old-growth and mature forests. More fiction. The Forest Service has been surveying its lands at 10-year intervals since the 1930s. Our Evergreen Foundation library holds dozens of agency reports detailing forest conditions, tree species and ages, including the 1899 U.S. Geological Survey of western forests, much of it written by John Bernard Leiberg, a Swedish-American explorer and botanist who surveyed more than 6,400 square miles of forestland in western Montana, Idaho and eastern Washington.

What has happened on western federal forestlands over the last 30-some years is a political travesty promulgated by the anti-forestry mob and its cohorts in Congress and federal resource management agencies. Despite the billions of dollars Congress has given the Forest Service during the Biden years, the agency is broke and demoralized today. Why?

■ Because rather than invest the public’s money in managing forests, it chose to manage fire.



MIKE MCMURRAY PHOTO

■ Because agency leadership decided it would be easier and less controversial to manage fires than to manage forests.

■ Because managing forests would necessitate l-o-g-g-i-n-g and that would make some people angry so, what the hell, let's just burn it down, shoot some owls and call it good.

■ Talk about a doom loop. While we are inventorying old-growth and mature forests, we are also battling wildfires that are burning everything for miles and miles, including wildlife habitat.

The truth here is that the FWS and several anti-forestry groups, including the Sierra Club, pushed for the 1990 listing because they saw it as the quickest way to shut down the forest management program on federal lands across most of Oregon and Washington and a large part of the Northern California coast range. The California spotted owl restrictions for the Sierra Nevada came into play soon after.

In my opinion, federal wildlife biologists share responsibility for the lack of active forest management that inevitably resulted in the fiery loss of millions of acres of habitat shared by spotted and barred owls. And their solution: shoot a half-million barred owls and blame white settlement. Yup, here's the verbatim quote from the FWS January 2024 press release: "European settlement allowed barred owls to breach the historic barrier of the Great Plains and northern boreal forest, so their presence here is not natural. Unless the Service manages the invasive barred owl population, the federally listed northern spotted owl will be extirpated in all, or a significant portion, of its range. On behalf of the American people, the Service, and other federal agencies have a legal and ethical responsibility to do everything the Service can, within the confines of our respective authorities and funding, to prevent the extinction of the northern spotted owl and help it recover."

In contrast to this muddled logic there still are clear thinkers in the scientific community. It has been my great privilege to work with some of the finest forest scientists in the nation over the last 40 years. Their wisdom

"When we leave forests to nature, as so many people today seem to want to do, we get whatever nature serves up, which can be pretty devastating at times, but with forestry we have options and a degree of predictability not found in nature."

ALAN HOUSTON, PH.D.

WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST FROM GRAND JUNCTION, TENN.

often leaves me speechless. Here's a very timely and memorable observation shared with me years ago by my old friend Alan Houston, a Ph.D. wildlife biologist from Grand Junction, Tenn. "When we leave forests to nature, as so many people today seem to want to do, we get whatever nature serves up, which can be pretty devastating at times, but with forestry we have options and a degree of predictability not found in nature."

Shooting owls to fix the problems that government biologists created themselves is nothing other than proof of government idiocy. They've got things ass-backwards in all this. Here's a clever idea: Instead of thinning

owls, let's try thinning trees by doing the forest stewardship work necessary to reduce the risk, size and destructive power of these fires. That used to work pretty well at protecting things before the wildlife "experts" took over. It's been a disaster ever since. Trees grow. The new experts know nothing about that. If you don't do anything to reliably address the reality of forest

growth, you are going to inevitably have wildfires show up in the dry forests of the West at times when they are not wanted. Or when someone who should know better just thinks their little prescribed fire wouldn't burn that hot—like the Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon Fire, the largest wildfire in New Mexico history which destroyed 341,471 acres, 534 square miles, thanks to a "managed fire" the Forest Service started in tinder-dry spring conditions.

What apparently began as a prescribed burn on April 6, 2022, became a wind-driven colossus that led to the evacuation of 15,500 homes and the loss of about 1,500. It was not contained until August 21. President Biden visited the site on June 11, promising Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham the federal government (a.k.a. you, American taxpayers) would pick up the total cost of the conflagration. To date, the tab is \$4 billion. Not counting replanting. Millions more. And these costs repeat themselves all over the West.

The spotted owl war that spawned the tiny bird's listing and today's wildfire crisis



COURTESY U.S. GOVERNMENT



MIKE MCMURRAY PHOTO

Northern spotted owl [left] and barred owl [right]. Will a government-hired shooter be able to tell the difference? Animal-rights advocates say "No."
BOTTOM: Biologists band a northern spotted owl in hopes of keeping track of its movements.

was a bare knuckles fight to the finish with the anti-forestry mob swooning about “cathedral forests” to distract public attention from their phony owl science; lumbermen citing 70,000 to 80,000 job losses that no one in Seattle, Portland or San Francisco cared about; and loggers and millworkers fighting for the survival of their



communities and families in at least two of the largest public demonstrations in western history: The 1988 Silver Fire Roundup in Grants Pass, Ore., and the 1990 Pioneer Square rally in Portland.

I later told my best friend, Bruce Vincent—who spoke in Grants Pass and Portland—that I thought we might need to fight for 10 years before we convinced the federal government to reverse course. That was 34 years ago. Meantime, millions of acres of federally designated spotted owl old-growth habitat have been destroyed in catastrophic wildfires, the anti-forestry mob continues to litigate most Forest Service efforts to protect communities and forests from wildfires, and the rural West lies in economic ruin. And now the government wants to shoot 500,000 barred owls to save the spotted owl.

Properly deployed, thinning and prescribed fire can transform a troubled forest into a parklike setting in five years. That's not a boast. It's a fact. Get out of the way. Foresters know how to fix this. The wildlife biology community has in large part over the last 30 years proven that it does not.

All this could have been a skit on “Saturday Night Live” 40 years ago. Its writers could have entitled it, “They Shoot Owls, Don't They?” That was when our country could still laugh at what was crazy human behavior. Of course nobody would laugh today at a similar skit. No one laughs anymore at insane ideas. That's because they are all around us and that tells you what kind of world we are currently living in. None of it is funny. This one isn't either. ■

Jim Petersen is the founder and president of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation. You can learn more via www.evergreenmagazine.com.

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