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Western Life & Philosophy

Thoughts on living in the West. Viewpoints on politics, life, mathematics, sport and nature.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2006

➔ Spotted Owl Fiasco

The Wall Street Journal had an article written by Jim Petersen of [Evergreen Magazine](#) about the plight of the Northern Spotted Owl. The article sustains other reports indicating that the mid 1990's halt of logging in the Northwest was premature and based on short-sighted science.

Jim Petersen has kindly given me permission to reprint his WSJ article.

Owl Be Damned

By JIM PETERSEN

February 18, 2006; Page A9

[Wall Street Journal](#)

Last month the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a call for proposals to develop a recovery plan for the northern spotted owl. It's about time: The owl was added to the nation's burgeoning list of threatened and endangered species nearly 16 years ago. That it took so long helps explain why only 10 of the 1,264 species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) have ever recovered.

If my gut reading is correct, the owl won't be No. 11. It is already doomed across much of its range, and the reason is well known among field biologists who have been observing the bird for some 20 years. More aggressive barred owls are pushing them out of their 21-million-acre home range, or killing them, or both. In any case, spotted owls are fighting a losing battle, a fact that has me wondering if the Fish and Wildlife Service isn't whistling past the graveyard.

Barred owls, not to be confused with common barn owls, migrated from their native East Coast environs a century or more ago. No one knows why, and until they started killing already-threatened spotted owls, no one cared. Now they do. Just how long it will take the barreds to finish off their brethren isn't known, but the situation has become so precarious that a federal biologist recently opined that shooting barred owls might be the only way to save spotted owls.

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How and why the government failed so miserably in its costly attempt to protect spotted owls is a sordid tale that illustrates what happens when science is politicized. Begin with the fact that protecting owls was never the objective: Saving old-growth forests from chainsaws was. The owl was simply a surrogate -- a stand-in for forests that do not themselves qualify for ESA protection. But if a link could be established between harvesting in old-growth forests and declining spotted owl numbers, the bird might well qualify for listing -- a line of thinking that in 1988 led Andy Stahl, then a resource analyst with the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, to famously declare, "Thank goodness the spotted owl evolved in the Northwest, for if it hadn't, we'd have to genetically engineer it. It's the perfect species for use as a surrogate."

Indeed it was. But to back their play, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society and their friends in the Clinton administration needed a good story for the judge. They found it in three obscure reports: a 1976 master's thesis written by wildlife biology major Eric Forsman at Oregon State University; Mr. Forsman's 1980 doctoral dissertation; and a 1984 report written by him and two other biologists. All three reports suggested a strong link between declining owl populations and harvesting in old-growth forests. Unfortunately, the hypothesis has never been tested, so despite 16 years of research, no link between old-growth harvesting and declining owl populations has ever been established.

Moreover, we know little about the relationship between harvesting and owl populations. One such study -- privately funded -- infers an inverse relationship between harvesting and owls. In other words, in areas where some harvesting has occurred, owl numbers are increasing a bit, or at least holding their own, while numbers are declining in areas where no harvesting has occurred.

This news will come as no surprise to Oregon, Washington and California timberland owners who are legally required to provide habitat for owls. Their actively managed lands are home to the highest reproductive rates ever recorded for spotted owls. Why is this?

One possible answer is that the anecdotal evidence on which the listing decision was based is incomplete. No one denies the presence of owls in old-growth forests, but what about the owls that are prospering in managed forests and in forests where little old growth remains? Could it be that spotted owls are more resourceful than we think?

We don't know -- and the reason we don't know is that 16 years ago federal scientists chose to politicize their hypothesis rather than test it rigorously, to flatly reject critiques from biometricians who questioned the statistical validity of the evidence on which the listing decision was based, and to declare with by-god certainty that once the old-

growth harvest stopped owl populations would begin to recover.

Some biologists believe that spotted owls still have a fighting chance for survival east of the Cascades in Oregon and Washington, but there is a problem: White fir is pushing native Douglas fir out of these forests in the same way barred owls are pushing spotted owls out of their home range. Minus a long-term thinning program, opposed by many of the same environmental groups that pushed the owl's threatened species listing, the birds will probably vanish from these forests, too.

No doubt one or more environmental groups will use the government's call for recovery plans to demand that even more habitat be set aside for spotted owls. When that demand is made, someone ought to remind Congress of a recent U.S. Forest Service estimate that an additional 1.1 million acres of federal forestland in the Pacific Northwest have grown into old-growth status since the owl's listing. But owl numbers continue to decline.

Perhaps the untold story of the northern spotted owl will lead the U.S. Senate to endorse changes in the Endangered Species Act ratified by the House of Representatives last fall. Among other things, the House version mandates immediate development and implementation of recovery plans for all listed species. To avoid repeats of the spotted owl fiasco, it would also be nice if the scientists selected to peer-review listing proposals represented all sides of inevitably controversial questions.

It should not take 16 years to write a recovery plan. The fact that it did ought to prompt some very pointed questions about what went on behind locked doors in the Portland, Ore., U.S. Bank Tower -- nicknamed the "Tower of Power" by government scientists who gathered there, beyond public and congressional scrutiny, in the spring of 1990 to sift through the pieces of their story. Congress ought to ask for their notes. I'm told they were shredded daily.

Mr. Petersen is the founder of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation and the publisher of Evergreen Magazine in Montana.

Go [here](#) to see my last blog on this subject.

Here is another [link](#) that speaks to the Northwest Forest Plan from the Clinton years. The publication this link goes to is far from being a neutral observer, and yet this article quietly agrees that the plan has done little to save the Northern Spotted Owl.

posted by Newell Scott @ 8:03 PM  0 comments  [links to this post](#)



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