

The misguided spotted owl shell game

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Guest View

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I was appointed to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service recovery team in 2006-2008 as an independent scientist tasked with producing a recovery plan for the imperiled spotted owl under the George W. Bush administration. At the time, the timber industry blamed the demise of the spotted owl on competition with the barred owl and habitat loss from wildfires instead of logging.

This was a carefully coordinated shell game to dismantle protections for millions of acres of older forests and insert the industry's ill-fated "recovery plan" in a sue-and-settle agreement with the Bush administration.

Fortunately, that plan was overturned by the Obama administration because it was deemed scientifically indefensible, risky to the owl and hundreds of older forest species, and politically motivated. Amanda Astor's Feb 20 op-ed in The Register Guard — a tale of two owls — is déjà vu all over again.

Amanda Astor: A tale of two owls: the real threat to the northern spotted owl

Spotted owls need intact, older forests to thrive, especially in the presence of barred owls. The superior barred owl only recently emerged in our region after decades of habitat alterations allowed this highly mobile species to crisscross the continent. Today's landscapes include remnants of old forest patches in a sea of clear-cuts that have tilted the competitive advantage toward the invading barred owl at the expense of the spotted owl. The more forests are logged, the more intense the competitive pressure for space between related owl species.

Natural wildfires in our region are not ecologically catastrophic nor do they destroy spotted owl habitat as claimed. Instead, they produce a mixture of burn intensities across the landscape that reset the forest renewal process and are associated with extraordinary levels of biodiversity. Wildfires kill patches of mature trees but also leave behind unburned to moderately burned areas in a natural mosaic pattern. This creates an ideal “bedroom-and-kitchen” effect where unburned patches provide nesting opportunities and burned patches are populated by shrubs and young trees supporting abundant prey for spotted owls. Recent research shows that these wildfires are actually beneficial to the owl, which instead loses out when the burned patches are logged (“salvage logging”) because they are incorrectly assumed to be unusable by the owl.

The timber industry’s plan to log the forest to save the owl is disingenuous and unscientific. While “thinning” may seem like a benign activity, it removes the largest trees needed by the owl to survive. In the Rogue Basin of Southern Oregon, championed by the industry as The Nature Conservancy’s kumbaya-thinning collaborative, such logging has been opposed by local conservation groups because it is harmful to spotted owls. These concerns also were backed by scientists that have shown forest thinning — especially when it removes large trees — damages spotted owl habitat far more than presumed wildfire impacts to owls.

During the Bush administration’s failed coup to overturn spotted owl habitat protections, scientists testified in Congress that deleting habitat protections was a recipe for extinction. At the time, widespread political interference in endangered species protections was uncovered by the government’s oversight office of the inspector general. That same playbook has resurfaced with the recent decision by the Trump administration to reject a petition to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to strengthen protections for the owl by up-listing it from threatened to endangered, a higher protection status afforded by the Endangered Species Act. At the dismay of scientists, the Trump

administration also shrunk critical habitat protections by 3.4 million acres at a time when the spotted owl is circling the extinction drain due to the logging-facilitated expansion of the barred owl.

Recognizing the long history of political interference in spotted owl recovery, Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley joined six other congressional members in thankfully requesting the office of inspector general look into the Trump administration's mishandling of owl habitat decisions. The U.S Interior Department responded by placing a "freeze" on the plan so it can reconsider putting back habitat protections, noting the Trump plan was put forth without public input or scientific basis.

Like 2008, the timber industry is poised to open up old wounds where most of the region has moved on and federal agencies no longer have the social license to log older forests whether by thinning or clear-cutting. The industry's repeated attempt is destined for the same treatment from scientists and the public who can see through this thin veil.

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