

A new view of the forest

Owl debate goes beyond one species or one industry

by Bill Dietrich
Times staff reporter

Sometimes a big crisis has small beginnings. In the case of this year's battle over the Northwest's remaining ancient forests, it began in 1967 with the hoot of an owl.

Eric Forsman, an Oregon State University graduate student, was sitting on the steps of a national-forest guard station one dusk, taking a break from a summer job.

A bird hooted from the dark trees of enveloping old-growth forest. Forsman, intrigued, hooted back. The owl answered.

So started a chain of ecological research that has rocked the Northwest's timber industry, is initiating a quiet rebellion within the U.S. Forest Service, and has led to charges by some environmentalists that in our heedless harvest, Washington and Oregon have become the Brazil of the United States.

Now the issue is in Congress, where the Northwest delegation is wrestling with the issue of whether the Northwest's economic need for logs should outweigh a swelling chorus of scientific concern.

'KINDER, GENTLER FORESTRY'?



■ The Times examines some of the scientific debate behind the old-growth controversy, C 1.

A compromise agreement was struck by key members of Congress last week and now goes to floor votes in the House and Senate. But the long-range fate of the region's remaining ancient forests is far from settled.

Forsman can be found today at a Forest Service research station outside Tumwater.

"I had been looking for the owls before then, but I didn't know what I was doing," recounted Forsman of that owl's greeting at dusk. "This was the catalyst that got things started."

That owl's call has grown louder. Even as Congress considers regulations on the timber harvest, new research challeng-

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Richard S. Hayza / Seattle Times

UW Professor Jerry Franklin measures a Douglas fir.

Seattle Times

Old forests no longer called ecological deserts

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ing the assumptions that have governed forestry here for decades is gaining momentum. Government foresters discussed it in Newport, Ore., last month; industrial foresters debated it in Spokane last week.

The battle over old-growth timber is almost a textbook case of how pure research can have shattering economic and social consequences.

The fight over the owl this spring led first to a Forest Service proposal to set aside 374,000 acres for the bird, then to court injunctions in response to environmental lawsuits that cut Forest Service timber sales in half.

One congressional study claims that the logging reductions sought by environmentalists could cost 27,000 direct jobs in Washington and Oregon and 54,000 jobs overall.

Accordingly, the timber industry has successfully portrayed the issue as owls vs. jobs, or, because harvest of state logs helps finance

schools, owls vs. children.

Yet many scientists believe the stakes have been distorted. At issue is not just an owl, they say, but an entire ecosystem involving thousands of species. More than 80 percent of the Northwest's old growth has already been chopped down and the remainder is disappearing at the rate of up to 100,000 acres per year.

The question is what the 21st century Northwest will look like. And because forest cover affects things such as stream flow and water supplies, the issue has ramifications for fishermen, hunters, Indian tribes, irrigators and municipal watersheds.

"Old growth" is not simply virgin timber. What scientists want to save are stands with 10 or so trees per acre that are fatter than 30 inches in diameter. The stands must also have trees of varying ages, standing dead snags, downed logs and rotting wood, and a multilayered canopy of leafy and evergreen branches.

Replanting does not replace that ecosystem, they contend. Instead, tree farming produces even-aged stands of smaller trees with no rotting wood, no snags, and a less-complex biology.

John Lehmkuhl, a Forest Service biologist who recently identified 28 old-growth species statistically worthy of concern, told his

colleagues: "If you consider all the attention being given to just one species, the spotted owl — if you multiply that by 28, we're in big trouble."

From tree mice to weasel-like martens, from forest-fertilizing lichens to a yew tree that may prove valuable for cancer treatment, the ancient forests of the Northwest have value besides beauty.

They moderate temperatures and flooding, use up carbon dioxide that otherwise could add to the greenhouse effect and offer resiliency against drought, fire and disease.

All these findings are relatively new.

"Up until 1970," recounted Dr. Jerry Franklin of the University of Washington, "no one was researching old-growth forest." Then the National Science Foundation financed an ecological study by the University of Washington, a study that got under way at the same time Forsman began studying owls at Oregon State.

"The national forests, we found, are more complex than we ever imagined they were," Franklin said.

No matter how magnificent it appeared, old growth — quiet, dark, short of big game and choked with rotting wood — was assumed to be biologically sterile and decadent. Logging it was do-

ing it a favor.

New research is turning this assumption on its head. Franklin, whose middle name is Forest, has been dubbed the guru of old growth for his call for urgent change.

"We found a lot of organisms lived there, and there are literally hundreds, and probably thousands, of invertebrates dependant on old-growth forest," he said. "This was not the biological desert people had assumed."

The result is a grass-roots call among government scientists toward what Franklin calls "the new forestry," or, more jokingly, a "kinder and gentler forestry."