

The owl: Minor role in big issue

*Saving an ecosystem
is the real crusade*

By HARRY ESTEVE
The Register-Guard

BLUE RIVER — The northern spotted owl is only a tiny piece of the rich mosaic of plants and wildlife that make up an old growth forest, say researchers who are just beginning to understand the complexities of virgin timber stands.

Nevertheless, protecting the owl under the U.S. Endangered Species Act represents a giant step toward preserving what remains of a unique and scientifically important North American landscape, researchers and conservationists say.

■ **A Noti mill** owner sees his dream fading
■ **Sen. Hatfield** expects White House pre-emption.
■ **Chronology** of events leading up to Friday's historic decision.

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"If you're trying to pick a species, I suppose the owl is as good as any to serve that purpose," said Mark Harmon, an Oregon State University botanist whose studies of rotting logs and biological decay in Oregon's ancient forests are gaining national attention.

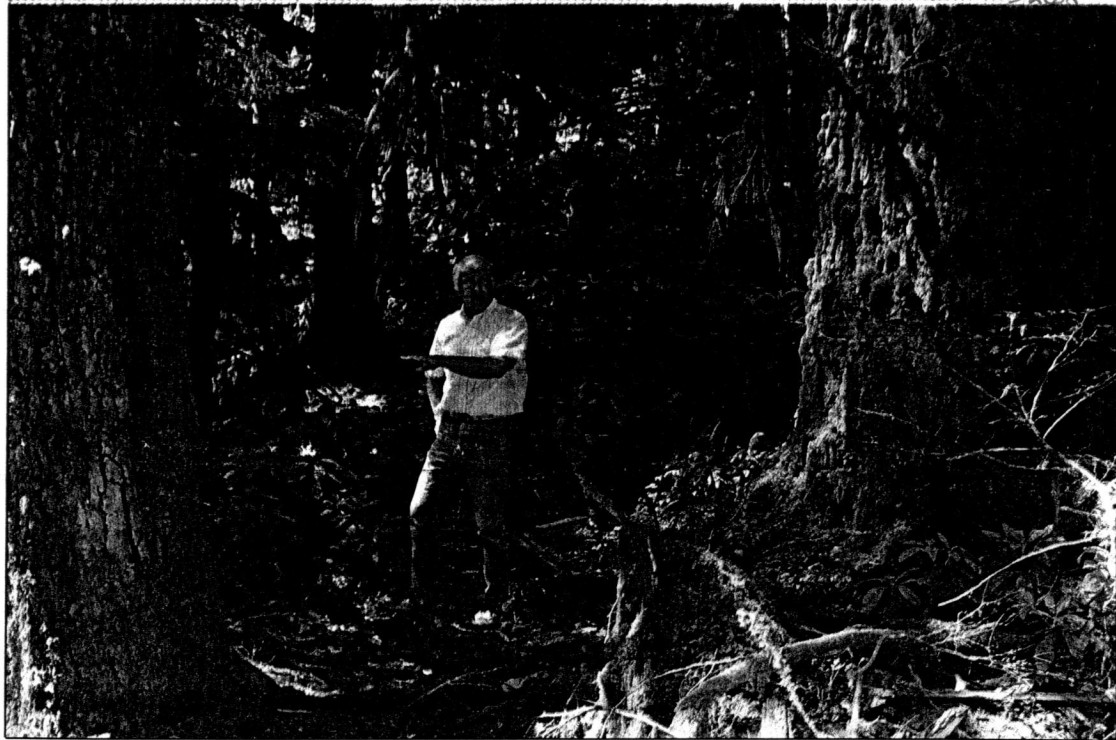
Most biologists and ornithologists who have studied the spotted owl believe it requires large tracts of old growth forest for survival. The huge trees and dense leaf canopies provide protection from predators, while the abundance of smaller animals that live in the undergrowth provides a reliable food source.

Yet to Harmon and other scientists, the owl is only a supporting character in a cast of thousands of birds, mammals, rodents, insects, plants, fungi, lichen and microorganisms that interact in the old growth ecosystem.

Preservation of that ecosystem has been at the heart of the attempts by environmentalists to gain federal protection for the spotted owl.

"If we protect enough old growth to ensure the survival of the spotted owl, we will have accomplished a great deal toward protecting the old growth ecosystem," said David Wilcove, senior ecologist for The Wilderness Society, a national environmental watchdog organization.

Much of the research into the workings of old growth ecosystems is centered at the H.J. Andrews Experimental



Mark McKee at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest. "This is your garden variety old growth forest," McKee said of the site where 400-year-old trees tower 225 feet overhead. Staff photo by Joe Watkins II

Forest, a few miles east of Blue River. There, teams of OSU scientists and graduate students complete exhaustive studies on everything from the role of lichen in adding nitrogen to the forest floor to the growth rates of partially shaded Douglas firs.

"This is your garden variety old growth forest," Mark McKee, site manager of the 18,000-acre research reserve, said during a recent visit to a thickly wooded grove near Blue River Reservoir.

The 400-year-old trees — Douglas fir, western red cedar and western hemlock — tower 225 feet overhead, interspersed with standing dead snags with broken, jagged tops.

Sword ferns, rhododendron bushes, salmon berry brambles, moss and a tangle of other plants make up the "understory." Decaying logs and bark add to the soft, spongy feel of the ground cover.

Each plant has its role, McKee said. The tall trees provide shade and shelter and trap moisture, the dead snags provide homes for birds and mammals, the moss

and lichen add nutrients to the soil, as do the decaying logs.

"Contrast what we see here with forests we see under intensive management practices," McKee said, referring to forests that have been clear-cut, stripped clean of undergrowth, sprayed with herbicides and fertilizers and replanted.

"There is nowhere near the diversity" of plants or animals, he said. "You've lost a very complex system. You've simplified the system."

In nature, simple rarely is better. Simplified ecosystems lack the biological diversity that is necessary for vigorous, productive growth and for animal habitat, McKee said.

From the onset of their attempts to gain federal protection for the spotted owl, conservationists have acknowledged that their underlying goal is to save as much of the

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Spotted owl update

Effective date listed as threatened: July 23, 1990

Interim protection plan due: Tuesday, June 26

Estimated number of owls: 3,000 to 5,000

Penalty for taking a threatened species: Up to \$200,000 plus a year in jail



Decline in population: Up to 15 percent per year in some areas

Total owl habitat proposed for protection: 8.4 million acres

Quake toll at least 40,000



Iran agrees to accept aid from United States

By MARTIN MARRIS

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LISTING OF THE SPOTTED OWL

CRUSADE

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Pacific Northwest old growth ecosystem as possible.

"We believe strongly that we should not cut another old growth tree in the West," said James Monteith, director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council. "The party's over in terms of old growth."

Some researchers, such as Fred Swanson, a U.S. Forest Service geologist who works at the experimental forest, believe that the intense attention given the spotted owl has obscured and oversimplified a much more complicated issue.

"What we're really witnessing is a land allocation battle," Swanson said. The owl debate has polarized factions into those who want to lock up all old growth forests forever and those who would like to clear-cut them for timber, he said.

"We'd be best off as a society if we could look at a whole system and together sort out how to deal with it," he added.

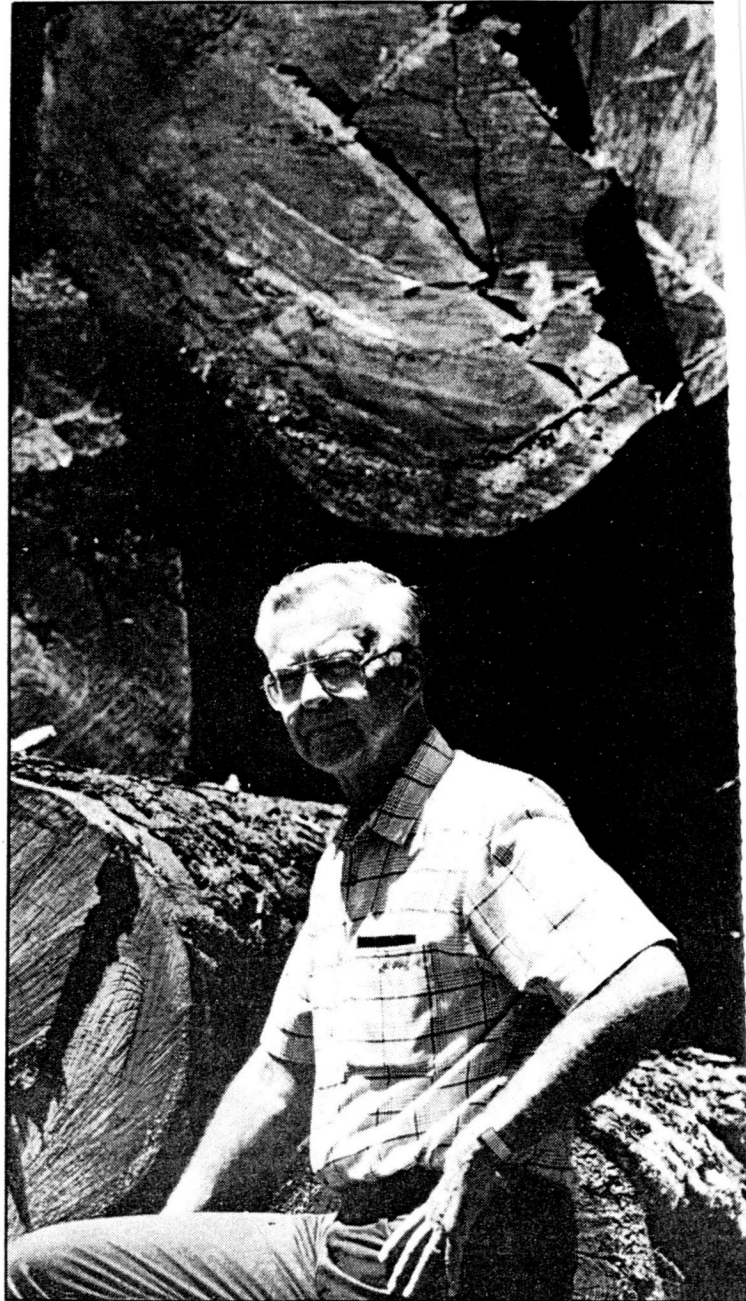
Now that the owl has been listed as a threatened species, the battle to save untouched timberlands may indeed shift away from preservation of individual animals, Wilcove said. The Pacific Northwest forests are being seen as a national, even global, treasure, he said.

"We have lost virtually all of the ancient forests that once covered the United States by essentially cutting from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the Pacific," he said. "Now we're dealing with the remnants."

The whole country, and many other nations as well, will be watching to see how the Northwest handles the old growth issue, Wilcove said.

"If, with all of our tremendous intellectual and financial resources, we can't find a way to protect the last of these forests, then we cannot expect any nation, whether it's Brazil or Madagascar, to protect their natural resources either," he said.

Log shortage



staff photo by Andy Nelson

Sam Konnie says his Noti mill is barely breaking even if not losing money.

OWL

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ed that federal timber sales in the Northwest would be slashed in half if previously recommended owl protections are combined.

I think we're going to see some real blood on the floor." the listing

ed that Northwest would be recommended owl protection already planned cut-

view, owls will always be endangered Species Act is not exempted by Congress. The Environmental Law Center said in a phone inter-

the Oregon Natural Resources said, "We don't really take the listing seriously. The forefront of the owl is said he expects political try to compromise the the Endangered Species

the Associated Oregon timber industry is of cabinet-level officials to attempt the owl from the impact on the communities that depend on

to the Bush administration. "We need their help

resident of the American Washington, D.C., timber said, "In terms of impact,

I think we're going to see some real blood on the floor."

"We're looking at tens of thousands of families not knowing whether they will be able to make their mortgage payment," said Charlie Janz of the Yellow Ribbon Coalition in Springfield.

Friday's announcement clearly pointed toward acceptance of recommendations in a scientific report prepared by a team led by Forest Service biologist Jack Ward Thomas. In April, the team recommended that 8.4 million acres of old growth forest — including about 3 million acres not previously protected — be reserved for spotted owl habitat.

Turner said the service "intends to use the basics and principles of the Thomas report" in developing a recovery plan, but he stopped short of accepting the designated large habitat areas, most of which are 50,000 acres or more in size.

Charles Meslow, an Oregon State University biologist and spotted owl expert who worked on the Thomas report, said Friday's announcement means failure "because for 15 years we've been trying to prevent this day from happening. As a nation we are committed to preventing animals from being threatened or endangered, and this decision means we just lost."

Fish and Wildlife Service officials said they will review by July 23 all the Forest Service and BLM timber sales — including those that have been sold but haven't yet been logged — to see if they meet the interim guidelines. July 23 is the effective date of

the listing.

Officials also raised the spectre of logging perhaps being curtailed on private lands, saying they consider any harvest that significantly disturbs the owl as an illegal "taking" of a threatened species. Penalties for violating the law range up to \$200,000 and a year in jail.

George Frampton Jr., president of The Wilderness Society, praised Friday's owl listing as "an important first step toward protecting this nation's irreplaceable ancient forests." However, he said, "we are alarmed that a political pressure campaign is now being waged by the White House . . . to subvert the Endangered Species Act."

Dennis Hayward, director of the North West Timber Association in Eugene, said Friday there is no firm evidence that spotted owl populations are declining. "We have never seen a study that has looked at population levels over time," he said.

Hayward said there are alternatives to the Thomas report. The large habitat areas could be relocated to include more land already off limits to logging, for example, he said, adding, "A little more risk for the owl might significantly lower the risk to people."

Hayward praised legislation introduced Thursday by Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., that would direct the Forest Service and the BLM to develop alternatives to the Thomas report. But Meslow said the Thomas report remains "the best plan, and we wish to stand by that. We would not be advocating for any modifications."

Owl chronology

Summer 1969: Oregon State University student Eric Forsman, working a summer job near Blue River east of Eugene, begins a pioneering study of owl behavior that leads him and other biologists to conclude that over a 20-year period, the spotted owl is threatened or endangered by continued logging of its old growth habitat.



January 1987: A now-defunct Massachusetts environmental group, GreenWorld, files the first petition with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to have the spotted owl declared an endangered species. Northwest conservation groups follow with their own petitions.

Oct. 19, 1987: Eleven conservation groups file a lawsuit in federal court in Portland to halt U.S. Bureau of Land Management timber sales in spotted owl habitat. Many timber sales are blocked by court injunction until October 1989. The case is dismissed in 1989.

June 7, 1988: Environmental groups file a lawsuit against the U.S. Interior Department, challenging the refusal by its Fish and Wildlife Service to list the spotted owl as an endangered species. A federal court later requires the agency to reconsider its decision, saying the Fish and Wildlife Service failed to justify its actions.

Feb. 8, 1989: Conservation groups sue the U.S. Forest Service, saying the agency's spotted owl management plan is inadequate. The lawsuit is still pending in U.S. District Court in Seattle. About half the region's timber sales are blocked by court injunction until October 1989.

Feb. 24, 1989: The fired regional director of the Fish and Wildlife Service says political pressure was exerted by top Interior Department and other federal officials in 1988 to not list the spotted owl as a threatened or endangered species.

June 23, 1989: The Fish and Wildlife Service formally proposes listing the spotted owl as a threatened species under provisions of the Endangered Species Act.



June 24, 1989: Gov. Neil Goldschmidt, the Oregon congressional delegation, environmentalists and timber industry and federal officials hold a summit meeting in Salem that produces a compromise proposal. After four months of wrangling, legislation is signed into law by President Bush lifting court injunctions halting timber sales, setting timber sale targets and supposedly protecting significant stands of old growth and spotted owl habitat.

April 4, 1990: A team of top government scientists, led by Forest Service wildlife biologist Jack Ward Thomas, releases results of a study showing that the spotted owl is imperiled by continued logging of old growth forests. Scientists recommend setting up a system of large owl conservation areas totaling 8.4 million acres, including nearly 3 million acres of forest currently open to logging.

April 27, 1990: Bush makes his first public statement about the spotted owl, saying, "We cannot turn our back on people who are struggling to make ends meet."



May 3, 1990: A report issued by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management says timber sales would be reduced by 40 percent and result in the loss of more than 28,000 jobs by the end of the 1990s if the Thomas report's recommendations are implemented.

June 22, 1990: The Fish and Wildlife Service lists the spotted owl as a threatened species. The Forest Service and BLM announce interim plans allowing some timber sales to proceed.

SOURCE: Register-Guard research
GRAPHIC: The Register-Guard

Field expects changes in plan



Mark Hatfield

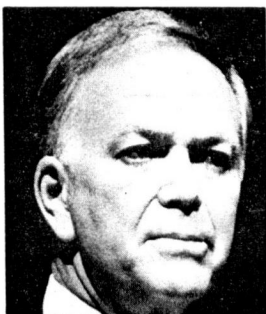
Outlines new timber compromise

cies had been set to announce those strategies Friday but the announcement was postponed Thursday night.

Hatfield confirmed Friday that the agencies clashed over the plans and that the White House had become involved in the dispute. Forest Service Chief F. Dale Robertson had earlier endorsed the Thomas report but BLM officials rejected it and proposed a strategy that would permit the agency to cut more timber than the scientists' report would allow.

Hatfield also outlined a new timber compromise he said will be revealed Tuesday. Under that compromise, timber harvest levels will be reduced, but not by as much as called for in the Thomas report. He said Forest Service harvests in the Northwest would be reduced by 8 to 13 percent and the reduction on BLM land would be 20 to 25 percent.

The Forest Service had estimated that logging on federal land would be



Bob Packwood

Special legislation might be needed

slashed by nearly 50 percent when the effects of the Thomas report were combined with new management plans for the region's 19 national forests. The new plans already call for reductions in logging.

The owl's listing Friday prompted reactions ranging from anger to resignation from other members of Oregon's congressional delegation.

Sen. Bob Packwood said special legislation might be needed to convene a Cabinet-level panel that could exempt the owl from the endangered species list. Under current law, the panel can be convened at the request of one of the two affected federal agencies or by the governor of an affected state.

Packwood said the current process can take up to two years because of "bureaucratic hoops." He said Congress could mandate an emergency session of the panel to obtain an answer more quickly.



Ron Wyden

"Administration is in disarray"

Rep. Ron Wyden said he was dissatisfied by the White House's statement last week that Bush would veto any federal legislation designed to aid timber workers who lose their jobs because of the owl's listing. "What really makes me angry is that President Bush has already told us he is turning his back on any effort to help affected workers," he said.

Rep. Peter DeFazio said in Eugene that the key question is how the Bush administration will respond to the owl's listing. He said the Thomas report "was not handed down from the Mount in stone tablets. . . . The prudent course, the truth, and the science encourage us to seek a middle ground."

Meanwhile, Rep. Denny Smith told a Salem timber forum Friday that the listing will cause an economic crisis in Oregon. "This is D-Day for people who work in Oregon's timber industry," he said. "We have a potential here for economic disaster in this state."