

On September 15, 2011, Woodsy Owl celebrated his 40th birthday. Originally created by the U.S. Forest Service to promote the agency's antilitter campaign, Woodsy Owl has changed over the decades, reflecting the major trends in American environmental consciousness, environmental policy, and the public standing of the Forest Service. For several reasons, it is difficult to precisely gauge the effect of the Woodsy Owl campaign.

WOODSY OWL AT 40

In the early 1900s, the influence of the conservation movement on American popular culture was limited to print media—magazines, books, and newspapers. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, though, America's second environmental movement used media that were in their infancy during the first movement.

Movies such as *Chinatown* and *Soylent Green*, popular songs such as Marvin Gaye's "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" and Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi," and children's books such as Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* brought unprecedented attention to the numerous environmental threats to quality of life and warned of a future in which the health and diversity of the natural world were at risk.

During the same period, Congress and the White House determined that increased federal oversight of industry could lower pollution and improve the environment. The creation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 changed the way the federal government approached environmental conservation, as did the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the National Forest Management Act of 1976, and the significant amendments to the Clean Air Act in 1970 and the Clean Water Act in 1972.¹ Some policymakers also decided a greater degree of individual citizen responsibility was desirable and could be achieved through environmental education and antipollution participation programs. Woodsy Owl was created as part of this new educational effort and came to symbolize both

the federal government's heightened interest in the environment and the growing responsibility felt by individual citizens to do their part for the environment.²

SMOKEY GETS SOME BACKUP

During this period of expanding environmental consciousness, employees of the Forest Service and other agencies began using the popular image of Smokey Bear, which had been around since 1944, in campaigns not related to forest fire prevention. Others in the Forest Service, and especially the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention committee, became concerned that Smokey's message was becoming diluted. They believed that a new character who could speak to a broader range of conservation concerns was needed.

Like Smokey Bear, Woodsy Owl was the result of a public-private partnership. Woodsy Owl was created by three individuals working in the Los Angeles area in 1970. Two of them—Glen Kovar and Chuck Williams—were employees of the Forest Service, who at the time were consultants to the television show

BY HARALD FULLER-BENNETT AND IRIS VELEZ

Lassie. The other, Harold Bell, was a merchandising agent who managed accounts for *Lassie*, Smokey Bear, Walt Disney, and others. (Betty Conrad Hite of the Forest Service joined the Woody Owl campaign when Williams moved to the national office in 1971 to head up national radio and television efforts. Hite designed and created the first Woody costume.)

The group talked about using a raccoon, because the animal washes its food before it eats, and they considered a trout and an elk. They settled on the owl as their symbol, however, because owls were considered wise and, as species often found at the edges of urban areas, could appeal to both urban and rural populations.³ This duality was reflected in the lyrics of “The Ballad of Woody Owl”: “Woody Owl has got a home on the big branch of a tree / When he looks from left to right, town and forest he can see.”

Through a series of brainstorming sessions, informal discussions, and prototypes, Williams and his collaborators collectively came up with the Woody Owl character and the motto “Give a hoot, don’t pollute.” That trademark injunction was first used in a student film Chuck Williams made in 1970 for an evening cinematography class he was taking while working on the *Lassie* show. The film, an antipollution public service announcement, featured scenes of litter and pollution and ended with an image of a real owl sitting in a tree while in the voice-over Chuck recited the lines, “Are you concerned about your environment? Then do something about it. Give a hoot, don’t pollute.” Woody’s alpine hat was inspired by a promotional item Williams had picked up for his daughter while on location for *Lassie*.

To gauge children’s reaction to Woody, they test-marketed the symbol with students at schools, summer camps, and church groups in La Habra, California.⁴ After agreeing on Woody’s basic concept and design, the team worked to develop artwork, posters, fan photos, fact sheets, a costume, and other campaign support materials. The first sample of Woody Owl items was sent from Los Angeles to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in Washington, D.C., on August 20, 1970. Also included in the package were Woody Owl balloons, sewing cards, coloring sets, felt pennants, and plates.⁵ The trademark was approved the same day the first official public mention of Woody Owl appeared—April 23, 1971. Published in the *Federal Register* and signed by Forest Service Chief Edward P. Cliff, the article stated simply, “The Woody Owl symbol was designed by the Forest Service in March 1970. It is being filed with the Patent Office as an Agriculture Department service mark. The character, Woody Owl, and his slogan have already received protection through the laws governing interstate trade.”⁶

OFFICIAL LAUNCH AND EARLY SUCCESS

Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin officially launched the Woody Owl campaign on September 15, 1971, which is now



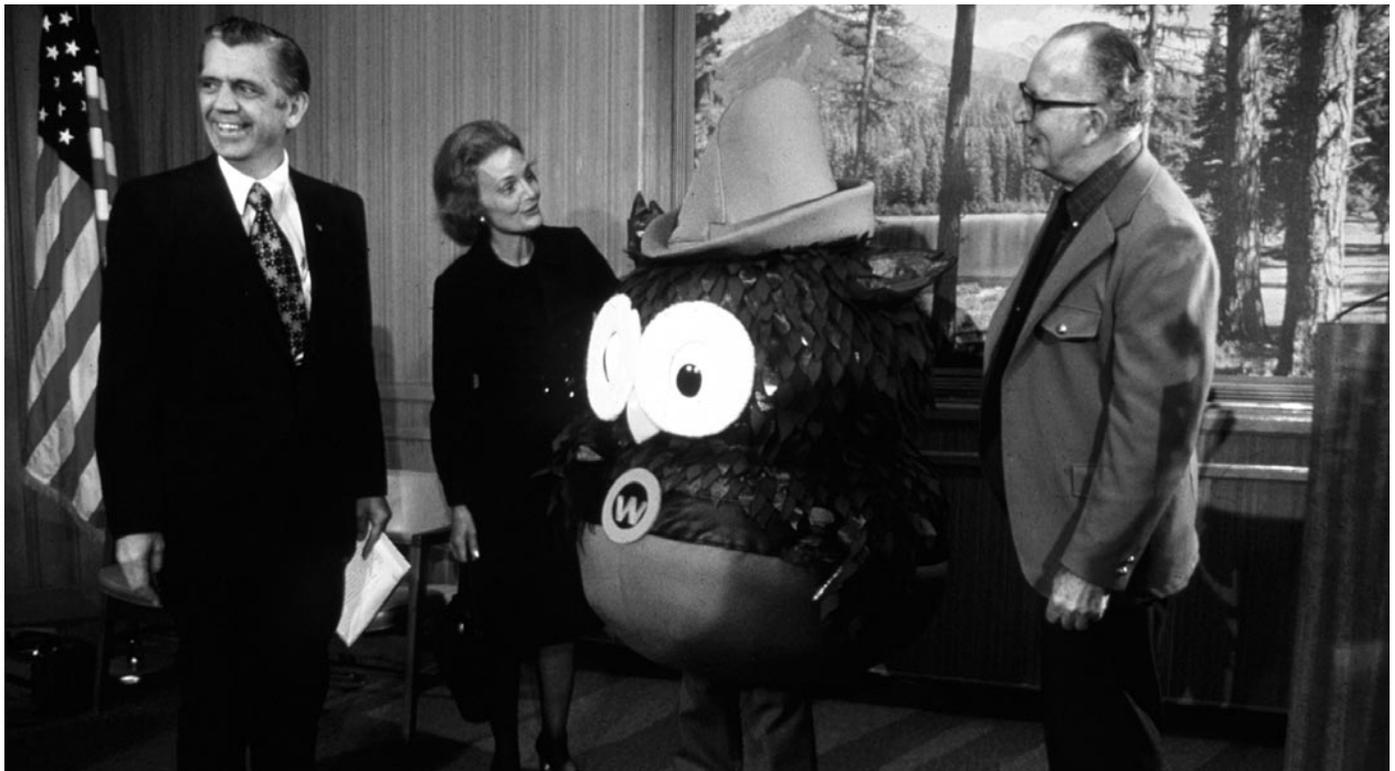
RUDDOLPH WENDELIN PAPERS, FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY

Smokey Bear may have been bemused by Woody Owl and his message when first introduced to him, but the Department of the Interior and the marketing licensees of Johnny Horizon saw Woody as unnecessary and a threat to their program.

celebrated as Woody’s “birthday.” A department press release explained the purpose of the new symbol:

Woody will work as a constant reminder to children and adults of positive ways in which pollution can be fought... [He] will focus attention on improvement of the outdoor environment through such advice as: protecting the soil, vegetation, air, and water through wise and thoughtful use; elimination of unnecessary noise; and public appreciation and personal responsibility for the control of vandalism and destruction of our Nation’s out-of-doors.⁷

With the weight of the government’s public relations machine behind him, Woody quickly entered the American popular culture mainstream. Articles in *Time* magazine and other national magazines and in major newspapers like the *Denver Post*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Stars and Stripes* all touted the birth of America’s new leader in the fight against pollution and littering. Images of Woody standing alongside Secretary Hardin were splashed across the pages of newspapers large and small. The agency also commissioned the aforementioned song, “The Ballad of Woody Owl,” to introduce Woody and his mission. As part of his promotional campaign,



From his inception, Woodsy was designed so that children could easily relate to him, right down to the height of the costume. Pictured with Woodsy at the press event held to announce his “arrival” and message on September 15, 1971, are from left to right, Secretary of Agriculture Clifford Hardin, Mrs. Hardin, and Forest Service Chief Edward Cliff.

Woodsy appeared on a Rose Bowl Parade float on New Year’s Day 1972.

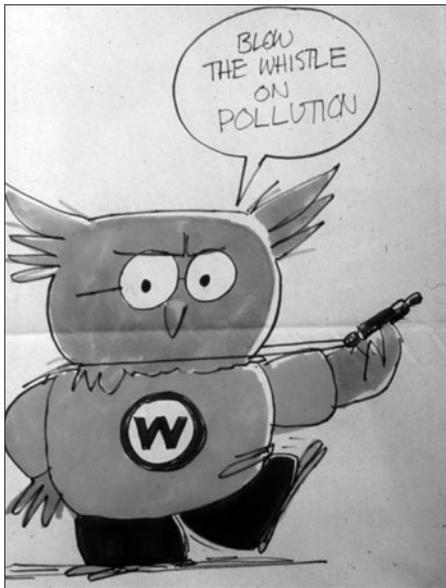
Yet it was not until June 1974 that Woodsy was protected by his own federal law. The Smokey Bear and Woodsy Owl Act declared the name and character “Woodsy Owl” and the associated motto as the property of the United States, to be managed by the secretary of Agriculture.⁸ The act defined Woodsy’s characteristics:

The term “Woodsy Owl” means the name and representation of a fanciful owl, who wears slacks (forest green when colored), a belt (brown when colored), and a Robin Hood style hat (forest green when colored) with a feather (red when colored), and who furthers the slogan, “Give a Hoot, Don’t Pollute”, originated by the Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture.

Why did it take so long—almost three years since the owl’s introduction by Secretary Hardin—for the Smokey Bear and Woodsy Owl Act to reach the president’s desk? One sticking point was that Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton objected on the grounds that Woodsy would compete with Interior’s nascent Johnny Horizon program, an issue noted by journalists when Woodsy was launched in 1971.⁹ Johnny Horizon was a character developed and debuted in 1969 by the Bureau of Land Management to fight against litter on public lands. A year later, his own act of Congress (Public Law 41-419) established him as the official symbol of a public service antilitter campaign. Johnny soon branched out into other areas of interest, like planting trees and testing for pollution. By February 1972, when the first draft version of the Woodsy Owl Act was proposed in Congress, Johnny Horizon’s supporters lobbied against the introduction of Woodsy.



The Forest Service contended that urban residents might not relate to Johnny Horizon because he “was strongly masculine, very white, and definitely western.”



IMAGES COURTESY OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

Woodsy's hat, belt buckle, eyes, and even his slogan changed before his creators settled on the final version. Twenty-five years later, he received a major redesign and update (see following page).

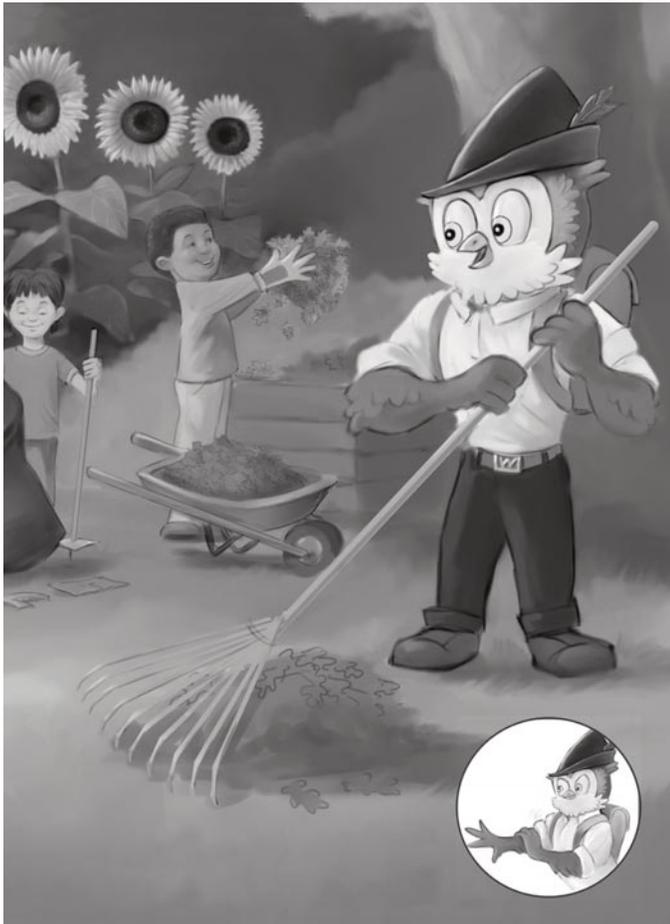
Secretary Morton wrote to the director of the Office of Management and Budget:

We recommend against transmittal of the draft [Woodsy Owl] bill.... The "Woodsy Owl" program proposal is practically identical to the already successful "Johnny Horizon" program initiated by the Department of the Interior in June, 1968.... Introduction of a competing Government program such as that now proposed by the Department of Agriculture would forsake the loyal support which has thus far been given the "Johnny Horizon" program.¹⁰

Woodsy faced opposition from the private sector as well. In May 1971 Roger B. Minkoff, director of merchandising and licensing for Columbia Records, wrote to Representative Julia Butler Hansen (D-WA), arguing, "We have presented opportunities for industry participation through Johnny Horizon

licenses to hundreds of companies and industry representatives throughout the country. The response has been excellent.... The birth of another symbol, Woodsy Owl from the Department of Agriculture, is diluting the major thrust made by the Department of the Interior and us to date."¹¹

But the Forest Service had reasons for wanting its own symbol. E. W. Shultz, acting chief of the Forest Service, wrote to Hansen, "Our field people on the ground felt the need for a fantasy symbol that could partner with Smokey Bear and talk about environmental concerns. The major problems with Johnny Horizon for this purpose were that he was strongly masculine, very white, and definitely western."¹² Woodsy was designed to appeal to urban and rural residents around the country, not just in the West. By making him a short woodland animal who was friends with Smokey, his creators believed Woodsy would appeal to children more than would a fictional adult human. In fact, when she designed the first Woodsy costume, Betty Conrad



Today's Woodsy Owl is a slimmer, healthier bird than the original version. His message has been updated to "Lend a Hand – Care for the Land." In educational materials, he is often depicted participating in clean-up activities.

Hite designed it to be about the same height as preadolescent children and thus more relatable.¹³

GAUGING WOODSY'S INFLUENCE

Woodsy's popularity increased steadily over the course of the 1970s and into the 1980s. As with Smokey Bear, the U.S. Forest Service is authorized to collect royalties from companies that produce Woodsy Owl-themed merchandise and to invest these royalties back into Woodsy Owl program activities. Income from this source peaked at \$50,000 in 1976, declined to \$25,000 by 1985, but rebounded to \$35,000 by 2010 (or less than \$8,800 in 1976 dollars). However, Woodsy's income lags far behind that of Smokey Bear. Throughout the 1970s and until the mid-1980s, TV public service announcements created by the Public Service Council and the advertising firm of Carson-Roberts were frequently aired.¹⁴ In a 1974 survey, Woodsy was recognized by more than 50 percent of households and 65 percent of households that had a child under the age of 10. When the survey was repeated in 1976, he was known by 65 percent of households and 80 percent of those with a child under 10.¹⁵ When a similar survey was conducted in 2002, however, only 25.5 percent of adult respondents said they were familiar with Woodsy Owl, and 31.9 percent of respondents who reported caring for a young child recognized Woodsy Owl.¹⁶ Both numbers clearly represent declines from Woodsy's mid-1970s popularity.

Although popular familiarity and earnings from royalties can be tracked, it is difficult to precisely gauge the effect of the Woodsy Owl campaign. One reason is that other public service campaigns with similar messages, such as the Johnny Horizon campaign and Keep America Beautiful's "Crying Indian," existed alongside Woodsy. Those have been largely replaced by the "adopt a highway" antilitter programs that began in the late 1980s and have the same purpose as Woodsy initially did. Another factor that makes it difficult to measure the effect of the Woodsy Owl campaign is the lack of data on littering. And although America's air and waterways may be measurably cleaner than they were four decades ago, this is surely more attributable to stricter laws and new technologies than to the work of Woodsy Owl.

What of Woodsy's interaction with his pal Smokey over the years? A clear indication of Woodsy's success is that Smokey Bear remains a popular symbol for wildfire prevention. The muddling of Smokey's message—the fear of which drove the creation of Woodsy Owl—has been largely prevented.

Both Smokey and Woodsy have had to negotiate their relationship with the real-life species they represent. Although Smokey Bear was first introduced to the public in 1944, it was not until a real-life bear cub found after a 1950 fire in the Lincoln National Forest was named Smokey that he entered the national consciousness in a big way.¹⁷ Woodsy had the opposite experience when his status as a fanciful owl collided with the issue surrounding the northern spotted owl of the Pacific Northwest. After controversy over the spotted owl's listing as a threatened species in 1990 and the Forest Service's subsequent limits on timber harvesting in national forests to protect the owl's habitat, Woodsy became, in the words of one journalist, an "owl non grata." His appearance in editorial cartoons as a stand-in for the spotted owl and the Forest Service contributed to a sharp decline in his use and popularity, especially in the Pacific Northwest.¹⁸

In the midst of this downturn in fortune, a focus group study done in the early 1990s returned the recommendation to either update Woodsy to make him more relevant or stop using the character. Unwilling to kill the messenger, because they valued his critically important message, in 1993 the Forest Service decided that Woodsy would receive a makeover. Redesigned by the Forest Service in partnership with Children's Television Workshop (the creators of *Sesame Street*), the new Woodsy Owl debuted on Earth Day 1997. Dramatically redesigned "in response to a growing sense that Woodsy's 1974 physical appearance and message were failing to keep pace with a 1990s world,"¹⁹ he now looked less like a real owl and more like a person.²⁰ He was slimmer and—to project an active and healthy image—he sported a backpack, hiking boots, and field pants. He also came with an expanded, more relevant message: "Lend a Hand, Care for the Land."

Recently, Woodsy Owl has been the subject of satirical treatment in popular culture. He has been pilloried on the television show *South Park* and on the web in an article published in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*.²¹ In both, Woodsy was depicted taking part in criminal activity. While such characterizations may keep Woodsy in the public eye, they likely undermine or detract from his mission by tarnishing his image.

In the 21st century, Woodsy Owl has evolved from a public service campaign into an environmental education program. In 2001, a strategic session conducted with agency partners and field conservation education practitioners determined that Woodsy Owl should be used in educational products and services to

promote conservation practices and messages among young children. In consequence, a partnership was established in 2003 with the Office of Head Start (the early childhood program administered by the Department of Health and Human Services) to instill conservation messages among children from prekindergarten through third grade. In addition, several products were developed to facilitate Woodsy's transition, such as the *Woodsy's ABCs* book and the *Woodsy Owl Invasive Weeds* package. Today, Forest Service conservation education practitioners in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, California, Texas, Puerto Rico, Illinois, Arizona, Alaska, and Washington, D.C., work with Head Start teachers to use Woodsy Owl to teach conservation-related topics and practices to some 5,000 children and their families per year.

Although littering and many kinds of air and water pollution have declined in the United States, the environmental challenges posed by climate change and other issues will continue to confront Americans long into the future. As he has done over the 40 years, Woodsy Owl will evolve and adapt to changing conditions to

remain relevant and help the nation and the Forest Service respond to the next generation of conservation threats. □

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NOTES

1. For more on the history of federal environmental policy in this era, see J. Brooks Flippen, *Nixon and the Environment* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).
2. USDA Press Release, "Woodsy Owl Launches Anti-Pollution Campaign," September 15, 1971, U.S. Forest Service Woodsy Owl Collection, Special Collections, National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, MD (hereafter cited as Woodsy Owl Collection).
3. Chuck Williams, interview with author, February 16, 2011.
4. "La Habra Students Help Design Ecology Symbol," *La Habra (California) Daily Star Progress*, September 21, 1971.
5. Harold Bell to Rueben Hoffman, Deputy Director of Patents, 20 August 1970, Woodsy Owl Collection.
6. "Department of Agriculture, Forest Service: Woodsy Owl Symbol, Notice Concerning Plans and Protection," *Federal Register* 36 (23 April 1971): 7695.
7. USDA News Release, "Woodsy Owl Launches Anti-Pollution Campaign."
8. The Smokey Bear and Woodsy Owl Act is 16 USC 580 – Sec. 580p.
9. A sampling of articles may be found in "Forest Service: U.S. Department of Agriculture Press Clippings, Special Edition: Woodsy Owl Clipsheet," in "Woodsy Owl—Environmental Campaign" folder, Subject Files, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
10. Secretary of the Interior to George Shultz, 28 February 1972, Woodsy Owl Collection.
11. Roger B. Minkoff to Representative Julia Butler Hanson, 28 May 1971, Woodsy Owl Collection.
12. E. W. Schultz to Representative Julia Butler Hanson, 28 June 1971, Woodsy Owl Collection.
13. Chuck Williams, interview by James G. Lewis, April 19, 2011, Forest History Society, Durham, NC.
14. Barry Walsh, "Woodsy Owl's a Teenager," *Journal of Forestry* (December 1986): 10–11.
15. Unknown author, "Woodsy Owl Background Information," U.S. Forest Service History Office files, U.S. Forest Service, Washington, D.C.
16. LISBOA, Inc., "Woodsy Owl NSRE Survey Preliminary Summary of Key Findings" (June 11, 2002), U.S. Forest Service Conservation Education Office files, U.S. Forest Service, Washington, D.C.
17. William Clifford Lawter, Jr., *Smokey Bear 2025: A Biography* (Alexandria, Va.: Lindsay Smith Publishers, 1994), 154–58.
18. Linda Keene, "Is Woodsy Owl Endangered? Whoooo Knows?—Rangers Fearful of Ruffling Feathers in Logging Areas," *The Seattle Times*, June 14, 1990.
19. Jack Ward Thomas, "Woodsy Owl Program Legislation," Decision memorandum for Under Secretary James R. Lyons, 1996, Conservation Education Office files.
20. "Presenting: The New Woodsy Owl!", *USDA News Green Line* 56 (5) (May 1997), accessed December 8, 2011, <http://www.usda.gov/news/pubs/newslett/old/vol56no5/article5.htm>.
21. Jay Wexler, "Woodsy the Owl Loses His Mojo," accessed at <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/woodsy-the-owl-loses-his-mojo>.
22. Jamie Lewis, "Remembering Harold Bell, Creator of Woodsy Owl," *Peeling Back the Bark* (blog), December 15, 2009, <http://fhsarchives.wordpress.com/2009/12/15/remembering-harold-bell-creator-of-woodsy-owl>.
23. "Talk: Woodsy Owl," accessed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Woodsy_Owl.
24. Ibid.

"I CREATED WOODSY OWL"

Woodsy Owl's origin and the identity of those who created him are well documented. Nevertheless, rival claims to his parentage often emerge. Several individuals have stated online that they invented Woodsy Owl when as children they entered a poster contest; some allege that the Forest Service stole their idea without giving proper credit.

What makes these claims curious is that the would-be inventors share a similar recollection. A recent post about the origins of Woodsy on the forest history blog *Peeling Back the Bark* elicited comments from four readers who believed that they created Woodsy.²² The discussion section of the "Woodsy Owl" Wikipedia page also features numerous comments posted by people from many parts of the country asserting that they or a relative invented Woodsy in 1969 or 1970.²³ The U.S. Forest Service is occasionally contacted by people attempting to have their claim recognized.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that an educational organization or children's publisher may have held a poster contest in 1970, when Woodsy Owl existed but had not been officially launched and was not widely recognized.²⁴ Perhaps children were asked to design posters using an owl character and the motto "Give a hoot, don't pollute." Students who made posters might therefore think that they created Woodsy.

The second possibility is closely related. Beginning in 1961, the National Garden Clubs, in partnership with the Forest Service, ran an annual Smokey Bear coloring contest for students. In 1972, the first "free-hand" Smokey Bear coloring contest was held, and children were encouraged to create original images of Smokey. Woodsy Owl was first included in the contest in 1973 and has been a fixture ever since in the Smokey Bear and Woodsy Owl poster contest. Young students who participated in the early 1970s may have confused their artwork with the simultaneous appearance of the official symbol. To this day, no evidence has been produced by any person or organization substantiating an alternative creation story for Woodsy Owl.