

The Northern Spotted Owl



The northern spotted owl transformed how the U.S. federal government managed its forests.

By James G. Lewis

The Northern Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*) primarily inhabits old-growth forests of southwestern British Columbia in Canada to just north of San Francisco, California. Considered an important indicator species, nearly a half-century after studies showed its population was dropping, it remains threatened due to continued population decline from habitat destruction and competition from invasive species.

The Northern Spotted Owl achieved iconic status in the early 1990s when it became the focus of an intense controversy in the Pacific Northwest. In March 1991, a U.S. District Court judge ordered the U.S. Forest Service to halt its planned timber sales in Oregon and Washington until the agency developed a final plan to protect the threatened species. Virtually overnight, the spotted owl became the symbol and subject of a larger, very complex debate that seemingly pitted the management of old-growth forests against the thousands of jobs that timber provided the forest products industry. The resulting

Northwest Forest Plan, approved in 1994 to protect the bird's habitat, forced the federal land management agencies to change how they managed their forested landscapes and helped usher in the era of ecosystem management.¹

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1. K. Norman Johnson, Jerry F. Franklin, and Gordon H. Reeves, *The Making of the Northwest Forest Plan: The Wild Science of Saving Old Growth Ecosystems* (Oregon State University Press, 2023). 11–26.