

California is killing off our spotted owls



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How do we care for the spotted owls that remain? Can we bequeath ecologically robust forests to future generations?

We're killing off spotted owls in California. We're doing it with unprecedented speed, fueled by megafires that are entirely our creation. New U.S. Forest Service data reveals how bad the situation has become.

We need active forest management to rescue the species and replenish our diminishing Sierra ecosystems. Climate change only adds to the urgency for ground-level intervention.

In the closing decades of the 20th Century, our national forests were getting hammered with clear-cuts, in a wood-centric management epoch I characterize as "Timber Beast Forestry". The 1990s saw the end of heavy logging on our public lands. Outrage, activism and litigation led to a push to preserve forest habitat for the [California Spotted Owl](#). After all, the California owl's cousin, the [Northern Spotted Owl](#), had been officially listed, in 1990, as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Its listing marked the start of an austere new conservation regime. Spotted owls were useful surrogates, but the goal of the most activists was to end all logging. From this perspective, there was no middle ground. Forestry (and not just clear-cutting) was obviously bad. Only non-forestry could be good. Nature, including its magnificent spotted owls, would be safely protected (metaphorically speaking) by seeking to manage the forest as a museum.

California forests rapidly transformed from factories of harvesting to our new era of "nothingism."

Then came the megafires.

Recent Forest Service data drops a flaming curtain on the era of nothingism and neglect. Instead of providing protection, the owl's overgrown habitat was primed for destruction. In 2021 alone, the 222,000-acre Caldor Fire in El Dorado County incinerated, with high severity wildfire, 43% of the Protected Activity Centers set aside for the California Spotted Owl's well-being.

The Dixie Fire, in the Northern Sierra, consumed 1,500 square miles, with 46% of its Protected Activity Centers in the Plumas and Lassen National Forests similarly impacted. Habitat conditions today are "degraded." Prospects for restoration are "unlikely."

These numbers do not include the many additional Protected Activity Centers tallied as moderately burned, with “degraded” habitat values. They reflect what everybody can see for themselves as they travel the Sierra these days: a spreading blight of denuded moonscapes overtaking what naturalist John Muir referred to as our cherished Range of Light.

What do we do now, given that periodic drought cycles are a fixture of California life, and that human-caused climate warming is an undeniable reality? How do we care for the spotted owls that remain? Can we bequeath ecologically robust forests to future generations?

Nothingism failed to deliver on its guiding fantasy. Neither is a return to clearcuts and “maximum sustained yield” an option. What could work rests somewhere in between, what is referred to as climate resilient forestry.

A step in this direction is a far-reaching policy statement recently completed by the California Society of American Foresters, “[Forestry Solutions to California’s Wildfire Crisis](#).” The paper offers a credible, science-based path forward if we are willing to cut our losses and renew our ties to the land. After all, each of us is tethered to the unpaved world whether we recognize it or not. We benefit from healthy forests, clean water, abundant wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities.

Let’s stop being helpless.

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