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TRANSCRIPT

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Report

Biologists Struggle to Save the Spotted Owl

Lee Hochberg reports on the battle between biologists and loggers over the northern Spotted Owl. The animal has been on the Endangered Species List for the past 17 years, but is not recovering as expected.



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JIM LEHRER: Now, the battle over the still-endangered spotted owl. NewsHour correspondent Lee Hochberg of Oregon Public Broadcasting has our Science Unit report.

LEE HOCHBERG, NewsHour Correspondent: When biologist David Wiens took us out to a forest near Eugene, Oregon, recently to photograph spotted owls, it was a frustrating experience.

DAVID WIENS, Biologist: So, it's going to be a little more challenging than I thought.

LEE HOCHBERG: The threatened birds have been fitted with radio tags, but Wiens wasn't picking up many signals. That's been the experience of biologists across the Pacific Northwest, where the northern spotted owl has been on the endangered species list for 17 years.

Original solution ineffective

LEE HOCHBERG: It had been hoped a Clinton administration agreement to stop logging in the remaining seven million acres of northwest old-growth forest would save the birds' habitat and, thus, the species. Today, the forest has been saved, but the spotted owl still is in trouble. An unwelcome relative called the barred owl moved into the forests instead.

DAVID WIENS: Right now, we estimate that barred owls currently outnumber spotted owls in this area by about three-to-one. It's actually pretty amazing. Their populations have really exploded, particularly in Washington and Oregon at this point.

LEE HOCHBERG: In the areas where the spotted owls were supposed to come back, right?

DAVID WIENS: Exactly.

LEE HOCHBERG: The barred owls, which migrated from the eastern U.S., basically outmuscled the spotted owl for food and space. Today, there are fewer than 5,000 pairs left, down 62 percent since they went on the endangered species list.

Wiens found one, finally, 60 feet up, sheltered behind branches.

DAVID WIENS: There he is.

LEE HOCHBERG: The owl's setback has sent a chill through the scientific community. Its health is thought to reflect the health of old-growth forests themselves.

But the timber industry argues if stopping logging didn't save the spotted owl, then it's time to start cutting trees again. In timber towns like Oakridge, Oregon, many support that. We spoke with loggers at John Weddle's Sportsman Cafe.

JOHN WEDDLE, Restaurant Owner: But I think the government's got to say to itself, "Hey, we made a mistake. This was not the answer." If we're still going to save the spotted owl, then it was obvious that approach didn't work.

LEE HOCHBERG: Weddle's restaurant served the boisterous clientele 24 hours a day during the logging heyday of the 1980s, when two mills operated and 5,000 people lived in the town.

But owl protections, together with over-logging and industry automation, led to the shutdown of mills and the loss of jobs. Today, Oakridge's downtown has empty storefronts with peeling paint; 40 percent of its residents have moved away.

Former logger Gene Altemus.

GENE ALTEMUS, Former Logger: If it isn't recovering, where is it going to recover? This timber should come down, and be logged, and provide industry so people can work.

LEE HOCHBERG: Eighty-three-year-old Ed Roberts says there's a limit to what man can do to recover the owl.

ED ROBERTS, Logger: The Lord is in charge of his creation, believe me. Man isn't. He's just fooling around here.

Loggers, scientists begin new fight

LEE HOCHBERG: Biologists, though, say man created the problem by clear-cutting all but 15 percent of the bird's habitat and the invasion of the barred owl makes it more important than ever to protect that 15 percent.

DAVID WIENS: The more habitat you protect, the more you're going to alleviate the competitive pressure between the species. Rather than reducing it and increasing the competitive pressure between these two species, we need to provide as much habitat as possible for them.

LEE HOCHBERG: In fact, the owl's rate of decline inside the protected area is only half of the decline outside of that area. In the government's most recent status review of the spotted owl, scientists conclude, without the forest protection, the situation of northern spotted owls would be far bleaker.

But despite that, the timber industry has filed several suits against the government, trying to reopen the forests to logging. It argues it has localized studies that show each spotted owl doesn't always require 3,000 acres of old-growth forests, as many biologists claim, so forest managers should be allowed to decide on a case-by-case basis which forests need to be protected.

Industry spokesman Chris West.

CHRIS WEST, Industry Spokesman: If we want to continue to do from on high, draw with a big magic marker lines on maps and say, "This is spotted owl habitat, this is what we need," that's not going to deal with the site-specific decisions that need to be made on a given piece of real estate. What we need to do is have a recovery plan that will be flexible enough to deal with the actual situation on the ground.

LEE HOCHBERG: In a settlement of one lawsuit in 2003, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to assemble a recovery team and re-examine critical habitat for the owl. West wanted a plan that would focus on the threat of the barred owl, rather than the decline in old-growth forests.

CHRIS WEST: Can we truly as a society continue to vest all this land and resource into a situation that isn't working, not because of timber harvesting, but because of other issues?

LEE HOCHBERG: Late last year, the recovery team released a draft recovery plan for the owl. It recommended continuing the approach of setting aside large chunks of habitat, known as managed owl conservation areas, for the bird.

Bush administration steps in

LEE HOCHBERG: But in October, a high-level Bush administration oversight committee asked for a second option. It told the recovery team to create an approach less focused on habitat preservation and to identify as priority number one for owl recovery the barred owl threat, not habitat loss.

Forest ecologist and recovery team member Dominick DellaSala was furious.

DOMINICK DELLASALA, Recovery Team Member: We were directed by a team of officials from the Bush administration to ignore the science, to ignore the body of evidence that the spotted owl survival depends on old-growth forest.

The barred owl is being used as a shell game. If the administration can point to another threat, then it can log the last of what remains of the old-growth forest that the owl and the whole ecosystem depends on.

LEE HOCHBERG: The recovery team did draw up a second option. That option eliminated the large managed owl conservation areas. And it left land managers to decide on a case-by-case basis which forests to protect and which ones to open for possible harvest.

The plan could reduce preserved owl habitat by 23 percent to 33 percent. It also called for luring barred owls into close range with decoys and recorded calls and then shooting them.

DOMINICK DELLASALA: It's not based on the best available science; instead, we've got a recovery plan that was politically motivated.

LEE HOCHBERG: DellaSala testified before a House Natural Resources Committee in May, alleging political interference in the recovery team's work.

At the same hearing, Washington State Democrat Jay Inslee asked Deputy Interior Secretary Lynn Scarlett, a top figure on the administration's oversight team, if the requested second option ignores the science.

LYNN SCARLETT, Deputy Interior Secretary: The science was absolutely unaltered and remained the same in both of them.

REP. JAY INSLEE (D), Washington: Well, let me ask you. Did the option two eliminate the mapped owl recovery areas? Just tell me. Did it or not?

LYNN SCARLETT: What option two does is to present using the exact same science and adaptive management approach.

REP. JAY INSLEE: You'll excuse me, but I will ask the questions, and then you'll be answering them.

LYNN SCARLETT: That's right.

REP. JAY INSLEE: And my question is, did option two eliminate the mapped owl recovery areas, yes or no?

LYNN SCARLETT: Option two presents an adaptive management approach to addressing the recovery of the spotted owl.

REP. JAY INSLEE: I'm going to ask this question until I get an answer. Did the option two eliminate the mapped owl recovery areas? Let's get this over. It did, didn't it?

LYNN SCARLETT: The option two is an adaptive management approach.

REP. JAY INSLEE: It eliminated the mapped owl recovery areas, didn't it?

LYNN SCARLETT: It's an adaptive management approach.

REP. JAY INSLEE: And your answer is yes, isn't that correct?

LYNN SCARLETT: Sir, these are management options. They are not about science.

LEE HOCHBERG: But the administration's science adviser, Jim Tate, wrote, "The draft recovery plan fails to address the basic biology of the listed species and the threats to its survival or recovery."

The head of the owl recovery committee, Fish and Wildlife Service Deputy Regional Director David Wesley, says, as a biologist, he believes the first option is a better recovery plan, but science only informs policy. It doesn't dictate it.

Policy shaped by political reality

DAVID WESLEY, Spotted Owl Recovery Team Leader: I re-did it, because as a good manager I also have to look at what the folks above me ask me to do. I think that they were probably looking for other ways that could ameliorate some of the other factions that are present whenever we deal with a natural resource issue like commodities. Certainly, I think that's probably in the mix year.

LEE HOCHBERG: The timber industry?

DAVID WESLEY: Sure. The political reality is that that's just the way the system works.

LEE HOCHBERG: One hundred and thirteen scientists and 23 Democratic members of Congress have called on the Interior Department to start from scratch and create a new plan.

JIM LEHRER: The administration hasn't gone that far, but today the Fish and Wildlife Service asked a panel of scientists to review option two. Their assignment is to establish an independent record of the best available science on spotted owl issues.

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