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GOVERNOR

OPINION

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DESTROYING THE TIMBER INDUSTRY FAILED, SO NOW FEDS WANT TO KILL COMPETING OWLS

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

Consider Neanderthals. They were shorter, slower and less mobile than their cousins, modern humans. As a result, Neanderthals' range stayed small and restricted over time while smarter, more adaptable humans spread across the globe. Eventually, the competition was too much for them and Neanderthals died out.

Now consider the northern spotted owl. It's smaller, less aggressive and more specialized in its diet and habitat than its cousin, the barred owl. As a result, the spotted owl's range stayed small and restricted over time while the barred owl spread from the East Coast to the Pacific. The competition was too much for the spotted owl, but they didn't quite die out.

Instead, man intervened.

In 1990, the federal government tried to save the spotted owl by listing it as a "threatened species" and by shutting down logging on vast swaths of Northwest old-growth forests, destroying an industry and the communities it supported. Since that didn't work, wildlife experts now want to try killing thousands of those bigger, stronger, more adaptable barred owls.

Clearly the Neanderthals could have used some federal experts and Endangered Species Act protections.

Meanwhile, John James Audubon and Charles Darwin are rolling over in their graves.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently announced plans to spend about \$3 million to kill 3,603 barred owls in four areas of Oregon, Washington and northern California over the next four years. That works out to almost \$833 for each dead barred owl.

Back in 1994, when the Northwest Forest Plan was launched to protect about 20 million acres of federal land from logging in defense of spotted owls, we all were assured that habitat was the key to their survival. We were told that abandoning an economy and a culture that had supported generations of people would pay off with the salvation of an "indicator species" and, by extension, a unique and irreplaceable ecosystem.

It sounded a lot like what's by now become shop-worn shorthand for the insanity of war: "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."

As it turned out, that federally protected old-growth habitat did nothing for the spotted owl population, which has continued to decline. That's a lot more than unfortunate for the timber towns and the families who used to live there. But now the Fish and Wildlife Service has identified the real culprit, and has it in its sights.

A final decision is expected this month on whether to "experiment" with the systematic killing of barred owls, which now outnumber spotted owls by as many as five to one in some locations.

We soon may have armed federal experts roaming through our forests, calling and then killing thousands of one type of owl to save another. You might recognize these folks as the same ones who "reintroduced" wolves to Idaho, and now they're desperately trying to salvage what a misguided but powerful government policy has failed to achieve for decades.

What could possibly go wrong with that?

Like most federal programs, it figures to be LOPSOD – long on promises, short on delivery. But if it winds up working better than shutting down our forests did, which is a very low bar to clear, should we then start saving a place on the endangered species list for barred owls next?

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