

The long-awaited recovery plan for the northern spotted owl is nearing completion by an 18-member recovery team. The owl, which was listed as threatened in July 1990, has been the center of a controversy over management of Pacific Northwest forests for nearly 20 years. This medium-sized bird inhabits late successional forests, commonly referred to as "old-growth forests." These forests have enormous economic values; thus, a conflict exists between those who wish to harvest timber and those who would preserve old-growth habitats.

Northern spotted owls are found in several areas of the National Park system, however Olympic NP and Point Reyes National Seashore are especially critical to the species. The southernmost breeding pairs are located in forested areas of Point Reyes, just north of San Francisco, and they may be reproductively isolated from other pairs by residential development as well as natural grasslands.

Low and mid-elevation forests of Olympic NP provide a core of habitat for the remaining spotted owls on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. The park contains most of the remaining unharvested forest on the peninsula, and this population of spotted owls also may be reproductively isolated.

The recovery plan is based on a conservation strategy for the northern spotted owl which was developed in 1990 by the Interagency Scientific Committee chaired by Jack Ward Thomas. Doug Houston, Pacific Northwest Regional research biologist, played a major role in formulation of this strategy. Ed Starkey, research biologist with the NPS CPSU at Oregon State University, is a member of the recovery team.

The plan proposes that, on federal lands, suitable habitat be provided for clusters of owls distributed across their range. Although no commercial harvest would be permitted within these habitat areas, the areas would be surrounded by a matrix of forest lands on which a wide range of timber management activities would occur. However, matrix lands would have to provide habitat that would at least allow spotted owls to move freely between clusters.

Following public and agency review of the draft recovery plan and any needed revisions, the proposed final plan will be reviewed by the Secretary of the Interior. If the recovery plan is approved by the Secretary, it would provide guidance for federal agencies as they develop action plans for management of the northern spotted owl.