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Ending clearcutting may be key to Spotted owl survival

One issue not discussed in Michael Milstein's otherwise excellent article on the fate of the Northern Spotted owl (July 29th edition) is whether there is a connection between logging practices and the rapidly expanding territory of the Spotted owl's cousin and competitor, the Barred owl.

As your graphic on expansion of the Barred owl's range indicates, expansion along the West Coast coincides with postwar transformation of West Coast forest landscapes as a result of clearcut logging. Since adoption of the Northwest Forest Plan "take" of Spotted owls on public and private land has continued. For example, Green Diamond Resources (formerly Simpson Timber) has "taken" 50 pairs of Spotted owls on its Northwest California holdings alone by clercutting the owl's Old Growth habitat . Has the massive "take" of Spotted owls on private and public lands under the Northwest Forest Plan provided extensive empty and cutover owl territory which Barred owls have quickly colonized? Is one reason the Barred owl is displacing the Spotted owl in Olympic National Park the presence of extensive public and private clearcuts just outside the park's
boundary?

Back when I and others met with President Clinton in Portland, owl scientists told us that the Barred owl was a threat because it could survive in open and cutover forests while the Spotted owl needed Old Growth. Since then clearcutting has continued on private land and regeneration cuts (so-called "sloppy clearcuts") have continued on federal land, albeit at a much reduced rate. The site owling.com tells us that Barred owl habitat is "characterized as heavy mature woods with nearby open country for foraging" - this is precisely the landscape that has been created and continues to expand across Northern California and Northwest forest landscapes.

So what about the hypothesis that part of the reason for the Barred owl's advance is the increase in the percentage of West Coast forests which are newly clearcut, post-clearcut tree plantations or forests on the 30 to 80 year logging schedule common on industrial forestlands today? And might it be that the key to survival of the Northern Spotted owl is eliminating clearcutting and maintaing continuous forest canopy, thereby limiting the "nearby open country" which Barred owls prefer for foraging?

Back in the 90s there was a great deal of denial about the connection between the Spotted owl's decline and the advance of clearcut logging. Could it be that we are in similar denial today about why the Barred owl is supplanting its more Old Growth dependent cousin as well as about what needs to be done to reverse the slide to extinction of the Northern Spotted owl?

During the 1990s Felice Pace led the Klamath Forest Alliance - a Northern California organization providing grassroots leadership in the struggle to protect Ancient Forests on public lands.