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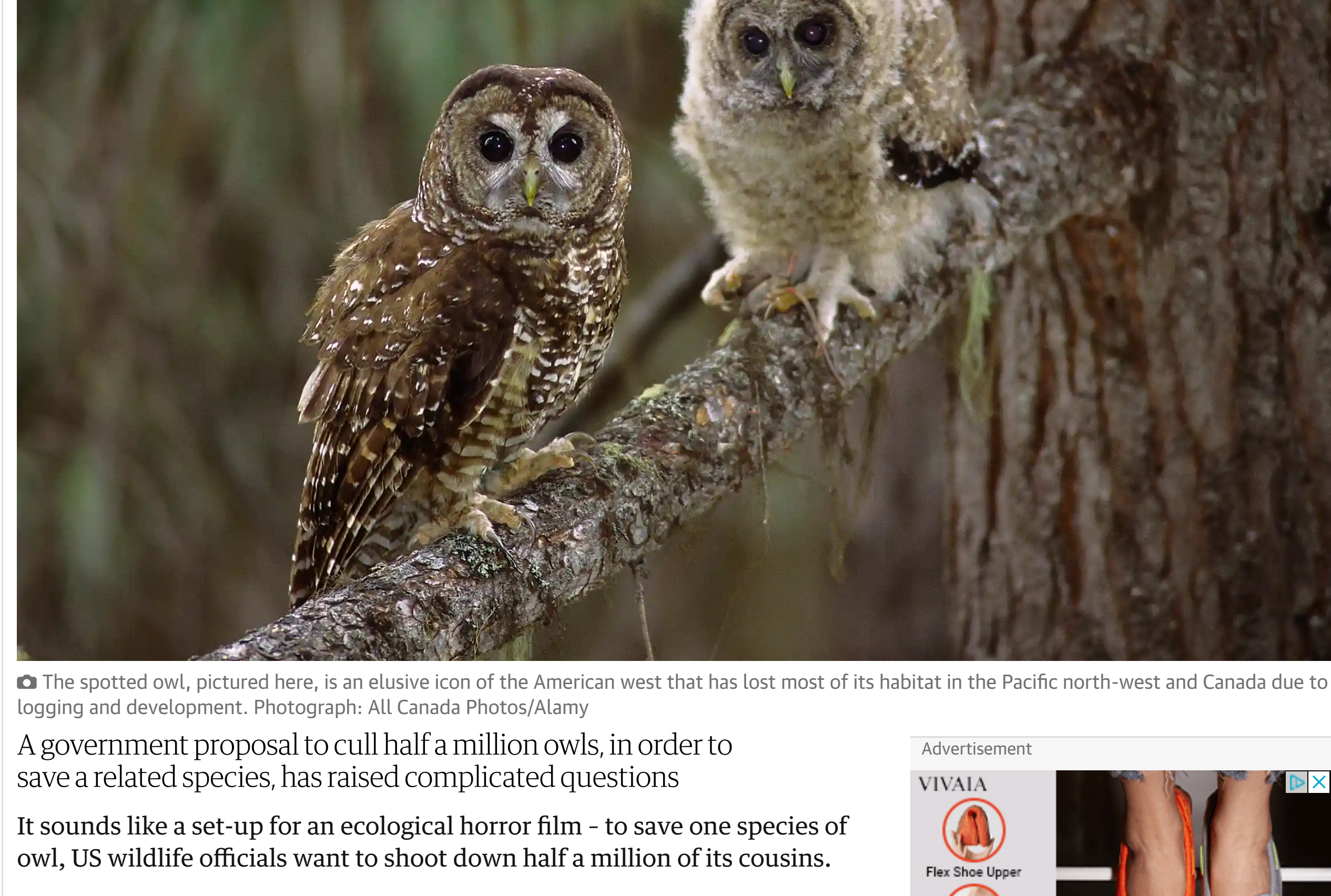
The Observer Conservation

Killing owls to save owls: the US wildlife plan that sparked an 'ethical dilemma'

Maanvi Singh in Oakland

Sat 6 Apr 2024 14:00 BST

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▣ The spotted owl, pictured here, is an elusive icon of the American west that has lost most of its habitat in the Pacific north-west and Canada due to logging and development. Photograph: All Canada Photos/Alamy

A government proposal to cull half a million owls, in order to save a related species, has raised complicated questions

It sounds like a set-up for an ecological horror film - to save one species of owl, US wildlife officials want to shoot down half a million of its cousins.

The federal government's latest proposal to save the endangered spotted owls has raised complicated questions about the ethics of killing one species to save another, and the role of humans to intervene in the cascading ecological conundrums that they have caused.

The spotted owl - an elusive icon of the American west - has lost most of its habitat in the old growth forests of the Pacific north-west and Canada due to logging and development. The species has also faced increasing competition from the barred owl - a slightly larger, more successful cousin which was lured west over the last century as settlers and homesteaders reshaped the North American landscape.

Now, to save the spotted owls, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has finalised a proposal to cull hundreds of thousands of barred owls across California, Washington and Oregon over the next 30 years.

The plan has pitted animal welfare and conservation groups against each other. The proposal was published in November, but it drew renewed attention last week after 82 animal welfare organisations based around the US signed a letter calling it "colossally reckless". Researchers and wildlife officials who support the plan have said that if the barred owls are not culled, the northern spotted owl's demise is ensured.

"This is a case that poses a genuine ethical dilemma," said Michael Paul Nelson, a professor of environmental ethics and philosophy at Oregon State University. "You're either going to kill a bunch of individual living beings, or you're going to let a species disappear. No matter what, harm is done."



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▣ The spotted owl has lost most of its habitat and in the Pacific north-west and Canada. Photograph: All Canada Photos/Alamy

An invasive species, or natural competition?
Spotted and barred owls look very similar to the untrained eye, and they can interbreed to birth offspring that are called "sparred owls". But the barred owls are more adept survivors. They hunt a greater variety of prey, are slightly less discerning about where they nest, and tend to reproduce more quickly. And over the past few decades, biologists have noticed that the barred owls are edging the spotted owls out of their territory.

"Barred owl removal is not something the Service takes lightly," said Jodie Delavan, a public affairs officer with USFWS in Oregon. "However, the Service has a legal and ethical responsibility to do all it can to recover northern spotted owl populations. Unless invasive barred owls are managed, the federally listed northern spotted owl will be extirpated in all or a significant portion of its range."

The northern spotted owls were listed as threatened in 1990 after fierce campaigning by environmentalists who fought to protect the ancient forests where the birds nest from the logging. But the protections came too late - 70% of their habitat is already gone. The climate crisis and increasingly fierce megafires now threaten to destroy what little remains of their forest habitats.

The arrival of barred owls in the west appears to have hastened the spotted owl's decline. It's unclear why exactly the barred owls migrated westward, but researchers agree that it coincided with the arrival of European settlers in the east, and their reshaping of the owls' native landscape. Previously, a scarcity of tree habitats in the Great Plains may have prevented the barred owls from venturing west until homesteaders planted trees for lumber, which provided new habitats. They also abandoned or outlawed Indigenous forest management practices, trapped beavers, over-hunted deer and elk, and drove away bison - all of which caused forests to overgrow.

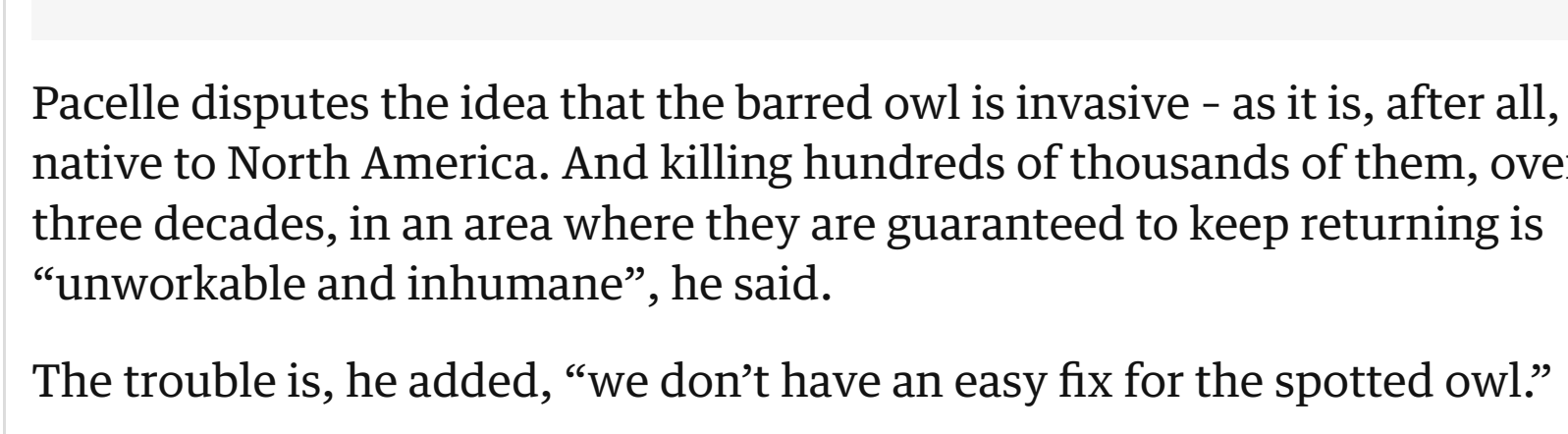
That's one of the reasons that the Fish and Wildlife Service, and biologists, consider the barred owl to be an invasive species - human intervention led to their arrival in the west. And that is why many believe it is humans' responsibility to remove them.

"I gappled with it constantly. It's not an easy thing," said David Wiens, a wildlife biologist with the US Geological Survey who has spent his career studying interactions between spotted owls and barred owls. Several years ago, he and fellow researchers ran an **experiment** that involved shooting more than 2,400 barred owls across the north-west - and found that over five years, culling the barred owls helped spotted owl populations stabilise.

Even as the researchers culled barred owls, however, more of them moved in. In order to truly control their populations in the west, hunters would have to keep shooting them over a long period of time. "It's a very tough decision," he said. "Do you use lethal removal techniques? Or do you do nothing - just throw up your hands and let the cards fall where they will?"

Many conservationists have - squeamishly - agreed that the barred owls should be culled. But animal rights activists, some wildlife groups and the editorial board of **the Los Angeles Times** remains sceptical.

"The United States is targeting a native species not ever hunted for simply engaging in normal range expansions," said Wayne Pacelle, president of the Center for a Human Economy and its lobbying arm, Animal Welfare Action, who co-authored the letter opposing the culling proposal. "If the US Fish and Wildlife Service is now going to start to manage social conflicts between animals, where does this end?"



▣ There is debate over whether the barred owl, pictured, is considered 'invasive' to the US west and should be culled. Photograph: Kena Betancur/AFP/Getty Images

Pacelle disputes the idea that the barred owl is invasive - as it is, after all, native to North America. And killing hundreds of thousands of them, over three decades, in an area where they are guaranteed to keep returning is "unworkable and inhumane", he said.

The trouble is, he added, "we don't have an easy fix for the spotted owl."

Fraught questions for the Anthropocene

For Lisa Sideris, a professor of environmental ethics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who specialises in environmental ethics and the intersections of science and religion, the case of the two owls inspires introspection about the follies of anthropocentrism. "Some would argue that humans have altered ecosystems and the whole planet to such an extent that it becomes very hard to discern what it would mean to restore something back to natural conditions and whether that's even possible."

This isn't the first time the coy spotted owls have pushed people to grapple with fraught philosophical ideas. "The spotted owl has been the poster animal for environmental conflicts for decades," said Sideris.

The species found itself at the centre of what became known as the Timber Wars in the 1980s and 1990s. Loggers and environmentalists seeking to save old growth forests in California and the Pacific north-west clashed - in the courtroom and in the woods. In Oakland, California, Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney - two anti-logging activists campaigning to save the spotted owl - were critically injured by a pipe bomb that exploded under their car. In 1990, amid escalating conflict, the spotted owl was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act - and made the cover of Time magazine.

Still, tensions between timber industry leaders - who said that efforts to save the owl would cost tens of thousands of jobs - and environmentalists continued to build. In 2021, the Trump administration drastically slashed protections for the spotted owl. Joe Biden reversed the decision, but conceded 200,000 acres in owl habitat as part of the settlement of a timber industry lawsuit.

The spotted owl and the barred owl remain caught in the political crossfire. And all the while, wildlife officials and biologists are left with fraught questions about how best to save the species under strained circumstances.

Preventing extinction has become a Sisyphean task, said Nelson, and despite government, scientists and conservationists' best efforts, it remains impossible to predict or control exactly how nature will react.

"There is a hubris that underlies this idea that we're just going to engineer our way out of these situations," he said. "Because that is the same attitude that created these problems in the first place."

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▣ A male hybrid owl, produced by a northern spotted owl and a barred owl, in Oregon. The two owl species are related and can interbreed. Photograph: Jeff Barnard/AP

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