

In Search of Sanity

Lawsuits doom woods and wildlife.
By Thomas M. Bonnicksen, Ph.D.

Environmental groups are unwittingly killing forests and wildlife throughout America with lawsuits. Ironically, they are doing so while claiming to save them.

Activists file lawsuits to stop cutting trees, which they call “logging” to make it sound bad, and our government pays them to do it. Then they craft legal settlements to end their harassment that pays them handsomely with taxpayer money so that they can live well and file the next lawsuit. No wonder they are inflexible.

The latest example of this is using the California spotted owl and Pacific fisher in arguments supporting a lawsuit to stop restoration thinning in the Giant Sequoia National Monument. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service hasn’t listed either species as threatened or endangered.

The activists claim that spotted owls nest in dense forests, so no management should be allowed anywhere the owl might one day live. But they neglect to mention that owls also nest and thrive in managed forests. They ignore the fact that owls have to eat and their prey lives mainly in young forests.

Like the owl, Pacific fishers prefer mixed forests, where patches of young, middle-aged, and old forest spread across the landscape like squares on a checkerboard. In fact, science proves that fishers prosper in managed forests that mimic this patchiness. Not only that, but recent data suggest there may be more than 800 fishers in the sequoia monument, which should be more than enough to maintain the population.

Unfortunately, legal action by activists has blocked commonsense thinning which would restore forests to their natural diversity and make them resistant to catastrophic wildfire. Already many of California’s forests, as well as forests throughout the West, have grown dangerously overcrowded with 10 to 30 times more trees than is natural or sustainable. The Giant Sequoia National Monument is near the top of the crowded-forest list. It already burned once, and it is certain to burn again. In 2002, the McNally fire blackened 151,000 acres in and around the monument, coming within one mile of the packsaddle grove of giant sequoias. Without active management,

it is only a matter of time before another major wildfire hits, possibly destroying all 38 sequoia groves in the monument.

Rather than protecting forests and wildlife with lawsuits, activists are condemning them to destruction. Much of the forest burned by the McNally fire has turned to brush, robbing

The Pacific fisher is also at risk because of catastrophic wildfire. The forest thinning that activists have blocked in the Giant Sequoia National Monument is legal and necessary and was approved by the Clinton administration with environmentalist support.

New legislation is urgently needed like the



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ABOVE: McNally fire, that converted forest to brush. **LEFT:** Ladder fuel in the Walk of One Hundred Giants. Unfortunately, legal action by activists has blocked commonsense thinning which would restore forests to their natural diversity and make them resistant to catastrophic wildfire.

wildlife of habitat, possibly for centuries. Massive wildfires also move so fast that flames can overtake animals like deer, bears, and fishers before they can escape. Streams boil, killing fish. Ash fills burrows, suffocating ground dwellers. Smoke inhalation kills most animals before the flames reach them.

In New Mexico’s Los Alamos fire, 90 percent of the Mexican spotted owl’s habitat was lost. Between 1999 and 2002, the U.S. Forest Service identified 11 California spotted owl-nesting sites as lost. In 2002, the Biscuit fire destroyed tens of thousands of acres of spotted owl habitat in southern Oregon and Northern California, including 49 known nesting sites.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service cites wildfire as the primary threat to spotted owls.

bill that Rep. Devin Nunes introduced last year, which allows the approved thinning operations to proceed to protect the sequoia groves, nearby communities, Indian reservations, spotted owls and Pacific fishers from catastrophic wildfire.

Sanity must prevail. We must work together—the public and private sectors as well as professional activists. Lawsuits are not the answer to our forests’ problems. Active forest management is the only way to protect lives and property, and to conserve the forests and wildlife we cherish. ■

Dr. Bonnicksen has studied California forests, including the Giant Sequoia National Monument, for 35 years. He has published numerous scientific papers on the sequoias and he is the author of “America’s Ancient Forests” (John Wiley, 2000), which includes a section on the sequoia forest. Dr. Bonnicksen is a Texas A&M University professor emeritus of forest science and serves on the advisory board of The Forest Foundation.