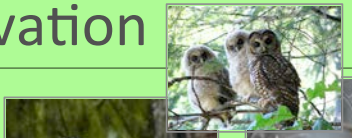
Conservation-Reliant Species & the Northern Spotted Owl: The Future of Conservation

Taylor Riso, ENVS 400, Spring 2012



The ESA-Success or Failure?

- In 1973, Congress enacted the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to stem the extinction of species
- In November 2011, 1383 species were listed under the ESA as endangered or threatened; only 23 species have recovered since 1973
- When ESA was written in 1973, it was thought species recovery would be relatively uncomplicated and easily attainable
- ***Then why have we recovered so few species?***

Argument

The conservation community is reluctant to embrace the rise of conservation-reliant species as evidenced by their reaction to managing the Northern spotted owl under the RMA management strategy.

Conservation-Reliant Species & RMAs

- Scott et al. termed the notion of "***conservation-reliant species***" which are "species that can maintain a self-sustaining population in the wild only if ongoing management actions of proven effectiveness are implemented" (2005, 386)
- Due to the barred owl invasion and the impending threat of climate change, the ***Northern spotted owl (NSO)*** is also a conservation-reliant species
- Scott et al. (2005) propose the notion of ***Recovery Management Agreements (RMAs)*** to recover conservation-reliant species
- RMAs "will consist of an enforceable contract between the federal wildlife agency and another entity" such as "a federal land-management agency or a state, tribal, or municipal government; in appropriate circumstances, it could be a non-governmental organization" (2005, 387).

Methods

- Research situated in ***Oregon*** to explore the relationships across different land use types (e.g. BLM lands, national forests, and wildlife refuges) and the various actors that are coupled with those land use types
- ***Legal document analysis*** of the Revised Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl (2011) and ESA
- Informational and interpretive ***interviews*** with key experts (biologists, ecologists, bureaucrats), including:
  - USFWS, USFS, and BLM agency personnel
  - ODFW agency personnel
  - Actors at NGOs such as Geos Institute, Center for Biological Diversity, and Green Diamond Resource Company

Sources

Endangered Species Act of 1973, 16 U.S.C. § 1531 et seq. (1973).

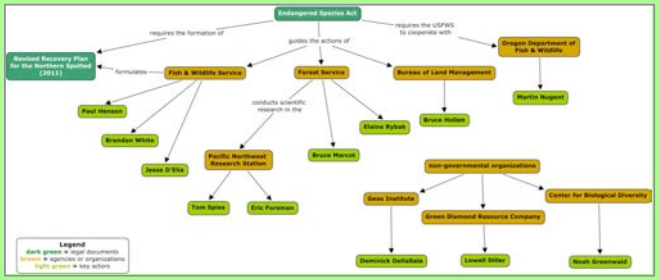
Scott, J.M., et al. 2005. "Recovery of imperiled species under the Endangered Species Act: the need for a new approach." *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 3 (7): 383–389.

Scott, J.M., D.D. Goble, A.M. Haines, J.A. Wiens, and M.C. Neel. 2010. "Conservation-reliant species and the future of conservation." *Conservation Letters* 3 (2): 91–97.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011b. Revised Recovery Plan for the Northern Spotted Owl (Strix occidentalis caurina). *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*. Accessed January 20, 2012. http://www.fws.gov/species/nso.

Results

- Legal document analysis illustrates that the RMA approach is a legally permissible management strategy for species, such as the NSO, and that the ESA will not need to be amended to authorize this approach
- How do we mold conservation-reliant species to fit into the execution of the ESA which provides no guidance on how to manage them?
- Conservation community is reluctant to delist species, specifically the NSO, and relinquish management to entities outside of the federal government

Conclusion

- Idea of conservation-reliant species and RMA represents a ***paradigm shift*** which the conservation community is unwilling to embrace
- Fear that by the time we culturally and politically accept these threats to conservation, we will have long passed the time in which we could have implemented an effective strategy to preserve species and ecosystems
- Broader problem stems from the pervasiveness of the ***old-guard of environmentalism*** which is unable to adapt as conservation dilemmas evolve