THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY
Leaders in Wildlife Science, Management and Conservation

Final TWS Position Statement

Conservation and Management of Old-growth Forest On the Pacific Coast of North America

The coastal temperate rainforest of North America extends along the Pacific coast from northern California to southern Alaska. This forest encompasses nearly 100,000 square miles, representing approximately half of the coastal temperate rainforest worldwide. This large region has a maritime climate with cool summers, mild winters, and abundant precipitation. The rarity of wildfire in this climactic zone promotes the development of complex forests of very old age, termed "old-growth" forests. Trees are mostly coniferous species, including Sitka spruce and western hemlock in the wetter, northern two-thirds of the biome. Douglas fir and western red cedar are most prevalent in the slightly drier rain-shadow areas in the south. Coastal redwood occurs in the near-shore fog belt in California.

Old growth composition and structure varies depending on forest type and the history of disturbance. Natural disturbance in coastal temperate rainforests is typically driven by wind, geomorphic processes and, in drier areas, fire. When disturbance is severe enough to result in stand re-initiation (e.g., following catastrophic fire, wind, landslides, or clear-cutting), typically centuries are needed before the regenerating forest acquires the composition, structure, and function of old growth. These structural attributes are the product of chronic low- to moderate-intensity disturbance, commonly from wind and to a lesser degree from insects, disease, and fire. These disturbance agents tend to act at a fine spatial scale, affecting individual trees or small clumps of trees, within the old-growth forest. More catastrophic stand replacement events are relatively isolated and infrequent.

Old-growth forest can be defined as stands possessing most of the following attributes:

- Large, old trees for the species and site
- Wide variation in tree sizes, ages, and spacing
- Large dead standing and fallen trees
- Multiple canopy layers
- Heterogeneous vertical and horizontal structure
- Complex upper canopies often including large upper limbs and clusters of epicormic branches
- Canopy gaps and understory patchiness
- Abundant ferns, lichens, and bryophytes
- Dense shrub layers dominated by salal, blueberries, and huckleberries
- Decadence in the form of broken or deformed tops or boles and root decay
- Canopy tree mortality that is mostly agent-based (i.e., from insects, disease, and wind) rather than competition-based, except within dense patches of regeneration in the understory.

Old growth has been the dominant forest type across most of the Pacific Northwest coastal region since the last ice age retreat, about 10,000 years ago. Over time, complex relationships and dependencies have developed between the forest and resident wildlife. For example, Sitka black-tailed deer depend on the canopy of old-growth forest to shelter them from deep winter snows at the northern end of their range. The northern spotted owl and the marbled murrelet depend on old growth for suitable nesting sites, and the decadent and dead trees in an old-growth forest provide important habitat for other birds and small mammals. Coarse woody debris provides important in-stream rearing and spawning habitat for several species of Pacific salmon. As the carcasses of spawned-out salmon decompose, they provide an important source of nutrients for terrestrial, freshwater, and estuarine systems. Old-growth forests provide important permanent or seasonal habitat for bald eagles, wolves, wolverines, martens, mink, otter, brown and black bears, mountain lions, and mountain goats, all of which are still relatively abundant in substantial portions of this biome. There is also a number of endemic amphibian and invertebrate species, such as torrent salamanders, tailed frogs, and jumping slugs, which are reliant on the structure and function of old-growth forests.

Old growth clearly has value as wildlife habitat, and as such, has value to wildlife users, including hunters and wildlife viewers. Others recognize the aesthetic value of "cathedral-like" old-growth stands or the existence value of extremely old trees, many of which predate European settlement. Old growth can also provide a valuable ecological laboratory, yielding important insights into climatic change and models of sustainable management. Recent research has resulted in a better understanding of how forest structure and wildlife species interact, yet much more remains to be done in this nascent field.

This Pacific Coast Temperate Rainforest biome has been substantially altered over the past 150 years by human activity. Urban, suburban, and agricultural developments have permanently converted former forestland to non-forest. Where the land is still forested, there has been a shift from dominance by old forest stages to dominance by young forests and plantations. The scale and pattern of disturbance with clear-cut logging has reduced the complexity of old-growth forest in parts of this biome managed primarily for timber production.

The effects of forest conversion and timber harvesting have been greatest in the southern half of the rainforest biome, where only 5-10% of the original forest remains. These southern forests are closer to major population centers, more productive, easier to log, and economically more valuable than forests in the northern reaches of the biome. In north coastal British Columbia and coastal Alaska, much of the forestland consists of stunted trees growing on steep slopes or on cold, poorly drained soils. These stands have lower commercial value, and consequently, less logging has occurred. Here, more than 90% of the forest may still be old growth.

Although the percentage of old growth remaining varies within the region, logging has focused on the most productive and most economically valuable stands. Landscape analyses in portions of Southeast Alaska show that while only 10-50% of the commercial forestland in some areas was logged, that acreage often included a high percentage of the big-tree old growth, particularly flood plain spruce and larger trees near tidewater. This pattern of timber harvest, a form of "high-grading," reduces forest structural diversity and disproportionately impacts wildlife, recreation, and esthetic values associated with those forest types. Concerns are focused not only

on how much old growth has been lost, but also on what types have been lost, and on how the remainder is spatially distributed in a fragmented landscape.

As old-growth forests decline globally, the conservation and management of remaining stands assumes greater importance. The responsibility for this conservation and management rests largely with federal, provincial, state, and tribal governments that manage most of the old growth remaining today.

The policy of The Wildlife Society with regard to the management and conservation of old-growth forests on the Pacific coast of North America is that:

1. Federal and state/provincial agencies and tribal governments should collaborate in developing unified definitions and inventories of old-growth forest types, and accurately monitor their abundance and rates of change.
2. Watersheds with significant old-growth forest should have the highest priority for conservation. Timber management should focus on areas with more extensive logging and existing roads.
3. Wildlife research should identify how structural and compositional attributes of various old-growth types affect different wildlife species. Emphasis should be placed on those species associated with rare or dwindling old-growth resources, such as species dependant on old, large trees, or species requiring large intact areas of old-growth.
4. Silvicultural research should focus on alternatives to clear-cutting such as variable retention and harvest methods of single trees and small-group selection. Timber harvesting should transition from a silvicultural system based on clear-cut logging to a system based on variable retention. Retention should be designed to mimic the species mix and stand structure extant in the original forest.
5. Retention should be viewed as a long-term investment in non-timber resources. Increased retention within cutting units should not be negated by adding more cutting units, increasing the size of the cutting units, or by later harvesting the identified retention.
6. Rare forest types should be preserved, especially those that are most vulnerable. Examples include highly productive old-growth stands at low elevations, or stands dominated by relatively rare, commercially valuable trees such as large yellow cedars.
7. Where past logging has significantly reduced the extent of certain old-growth types, research should focus on restoration of old-growth attributes on managed forestland, particularly in areas deemed sensitive or critical as wildlife habitat.
8. Investment should be made in educating the public about the ecology of old-growth forest, its natural diversity, and the importance of conserving and managing old growth for the benefit of wildlife.

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