



SPOTTED OWL FOREST REVIVAL



RARE BIRD LANDS LANDMARK FOREST PROTECTION DEAL



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If you live anywhere in the South Coast region of British Columbia and enjoy spending time in local forests, the spotted owl could be your new best friend. After 21 years of dragging their heels, the Canadian government is about to release the finalized Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy, as required by their own Species At Risk Act, and it's good news.

This recovery strategy more than doubles the area of protected spotted owl forests and is the single largest forest protection initiative ever in the South Coast region.

The recovery strategy designates more than 4,000 square kilometres¹ of low elevation forests as critical habitat for the spotted owl — an area about a third larger than Metro Vancouver². Around half of the critical habitat mapped so far has some restrictions on logging, but the remaining 2,000 square kilometres had no protection at all, until now. These forests will have a chance to be saved and restored to their former old-growth splendor.

This is a really big deal. Over half the people in B.C. live in the Lower Mainland³. Protecting and restoring forests here will make this region healthier and more resilient in the face of ongoing industrial

pressures and climate change-worsened forest fires, landslides and floods⁴.

It's also a big deal because the spotted owl is the most endangered bird species

in Canada, with only one wild-born owl remaining in the forest⁵.

The federal government estimates that before industrial logging at the start of the 20th century, there were 500 pairs of spotted owls living in the old-growth forests of this region⁶. But the unrelenting clearcutting of old-growth has wreaked havoc on the 300 at-risk species here, including the spotted owl⁷.

In 2007, B.C. created a captive breeding facility to produce spotted owl chicks,

which currently houses 34 spotted owls⁸.

A few of these captive owls have finally been released over the past few years, mostly without success. As of October 2023, only three individuals are known to exist in the wild, including the one wild-born and two captive-bred owls⁹.

Is all this really about saving a handful of rare birds?

The preservation and restoration of old-growth forests has never been just about the spotted owl. It's about saving where we live. It's about saving our future. The bottom line is despite promises made by the logging industry, and the provincial and federal governments over the decades¹⁰, forests

here have been, and still are, grossly mismanaged. This has huge consequences for ecosystems and the many wild plants, fish, birds, amphibians and mammals that depend on them¹¹. The spotted owl is simply the

messenger, telling us just how bad things have gotten in the woods.

The federal government has stepped up with a plan to double spotted owl forest protection and bring the species back from the brink. Over a period of 50 years it will protect and then restore a connected network of old-growth forests until the owl population rebounds to 250 adult individuals¹².

What's more, the plan allows people to see, for the first time, how their favourite outdoor recreation spots — ancient tree hiking trails, fishing spots and swimming holes — benefit from this protection afforded by the Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy. Read on to find out more about the plan for recovery and what you can do to turn this fantastic opportunity into the future we all want.

The preservation and restoration of old-growth forests has never been just about the spotted owl. It's about saving where we live. It's about saving our future.



Photo top: Northern spotted owl (Jared Hobbs).
Photo bottom: Spotted owl captive breeding program booth at Spó'zém (Joe Foy).



Photo: Teapot valley old-growth Douglas fir tree (Joe Foy).

FIRST NATIONS PUSHED FOR A BETTER PLAN – AND GOT ONE

Spotted owl range in Canada is on the unceded territories of Salish-speaking First Nations¹³. And it was one Indigenous community within this spotted owl range — Spó'zêm First Nation — that played a critical role in protecting it. The Nation brought the Canadian government close to finalizing the Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy and ensuring all 4,000 square kilometres of critical habitat was included.

As recently as 2023, things weren't looking very good for the Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy. After consulting with B.C., Canada decided to include only those forests in the strategy's core critical habitat map where logging was already somewhat restricted by the province¹⁴. This meant only the 2,000 square kilometres of forests — found primarily in provincial parks, Metro Vancouver's drinking water supply areas¹⁵ and Wildlife Habitat Areas previously designated for the spotted owl — were to be granted critical habitat status. Another 2,000 square kilometres of unprotected forests were proposed as "potential future critical habitat" and wouldn't require protection from logging under the federal Species At Risk Act¹⁶.

In early 2023, when people saw the feds delete half of the habitat proposed for protection in the critical habitat maps draft, they went ballistic¹⁷. More than

a thousand of you wrote to the government, calling for all critical habitat to be protected — not just the habitat already inside parks and other protected areas.

Spó'zêm First Nation is part of the Nlaka'pamux Nation in the Fraser Canyon area. Spó'zêm lands are home to the last remaining spotted owls in the wild and they are determined to protect and recover their old-growth forest critical habitat¹⁸. Spó'zêm Chief James Hobart used the Salish word for owl *Skelúle?* in his submission to the government of Canada calling for all critical habitat to be designated on the feds' maps:



Photo: Clearcuts and landslide in Spó'zêm valley (Joe Foy).



Photo: First Fish Gathering at Spó'zêm (Joe Foy).



Photo: Wild alpha male wolf (John E. Marriott).

Spó'zêm Chief James Hobart



“ Only just recently, in January 2023, Canada released the 2023 Amended Recovery Strategy for public consultation. The 2023 Amended Recovery Strategy is not the same as the one that was shared with our Spó'zêm peoples in 2021. Spó'zêm was not consulted on the 2023 Amended Recovery Strategy or, crucially, the changes to the critical habitat maps contained in the 2023 Amended Recovery Strategy. Again, as a leader for my community, I must question the continued lack of transparency our Nation faces constantly regarding our *k'wátłp* and our *Skelúle?*. The critical habitat maps have been completely gutted. Some of the previously identified habitat remains as "core" critical habitat but — crucially — the maps in the 2023 Amended Recovery Strategy now also contain a new category

of "potential future" habitat. Importantly, much of the habitat the spotted owl requires to survive and recover is found in this latter category.

In the spirit of truth and reconciliation and in the knowledge that irreversible harms to the environment deleteriously affects us all, the only path forward is to abide by our previous correspondence with the provincial and federal governments and the Canadian Wildlife Service and to identify all spotted owl critical habitat as "core" — removing "potential future" as a designation. Following this, British Columbia and Canada must meaningfully consult with Spó'zêm to ensure the entire amount of critical habitat needed for the survival and recovery of *Skelúle?* is protected. ”



Photo: Spotted owl (Francois Xavier DeRuydts).

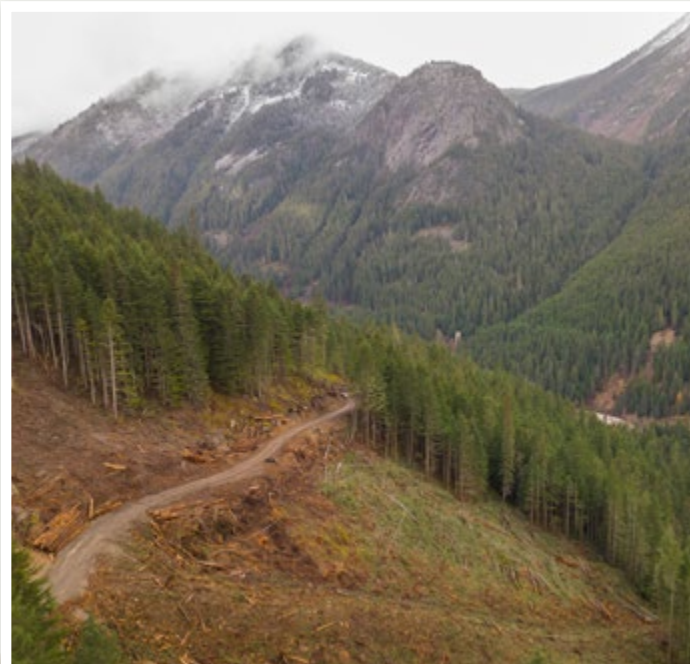
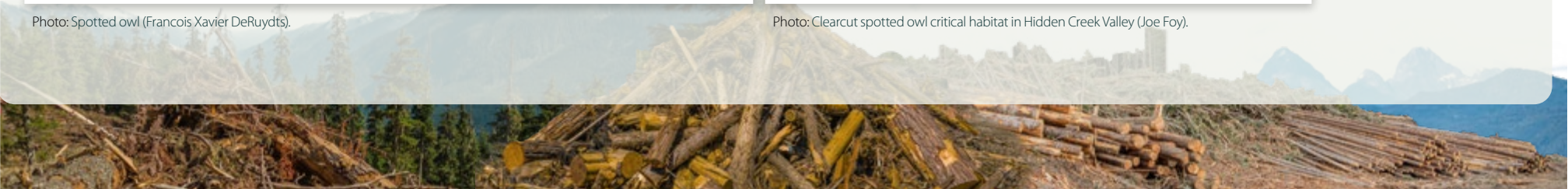


Photo: Clearcut spotted owl critical habitat in Hidden Creek Valley (Joe Foy).

Then, in an exciting turn of events, the government of Canada listened to the concerns of Spó'zêm and to all those who wrote in. We are now on the verge of a finalized Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy, returning all the critical habitat identified — totalling more than 4,000 square kilometres¹⁸!



ONE BILLION REASONS TO BE HOPEFUL

Canada is about to publish its final draft of the Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy with mapped critical habitat. But we're not out of the woods yet. Far from it.

In a complicated division of powers, Canada is responsible for protecting species at risk like the spotted owl. But it's the provinces that are responsible for the management of natural resources — like forests. Additionally, this spotted owl range falls within unceded First Nation territories, and these communities have been fighting to defend their rights to protect this at-risk species and to manage their resources¹⁹.

In November 2023, in a move vitally important to the survival of the spotted

owl and many other wild species, the governments of Canada, British Columbia and the First Nations Leadership Council (FNLC) signed the historic Tripartite Nature Conservation Agreement to protect and conserve biodiversity, habitats and species at risk²⁰. The FNLC, which comprises the political executives of the BC Assembly of First Nations, the First Nations Summit and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, works to develop coordinated approaches to issues relevant to First Nations communities across the province.

The agreement enables action rooted in recognition of Indigenous

Title and Rights to reach the shared goal of protecting 30 per cent of lands in B.C. by 2030. The governments of Canada and B.C. have pledged financial support totalling one billion dollars over the life of the agreement to ensure the promises made in the agreement are kept on the ground²¹.

This billion dollar financial backing is a great cause for hope that the Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy will soon be enforced in all of the critical habitat forests, through legislated preservation and restoration.



Photo: Western toad (Jakob Dulisse).

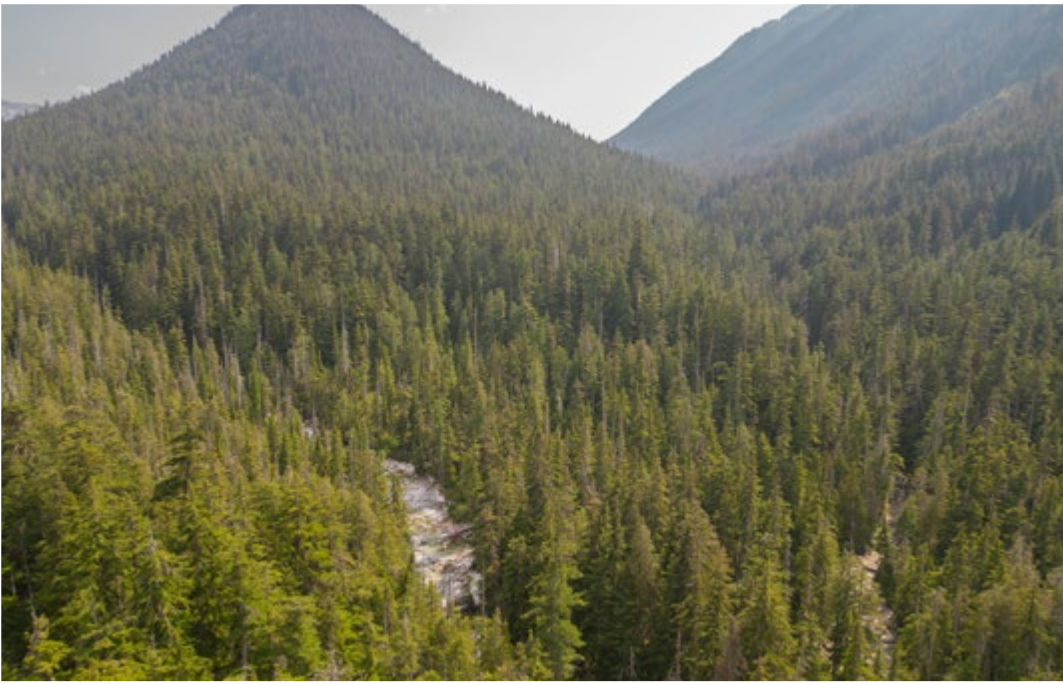


Photo: Teapot Valley old-growth forest (Joe Foy).



Photo: Grizzly bear (John E. Marriott).

OWL PLAN PROTECTS RECREATIONAL GEMS

The Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy critical habitat map calls for a network of specific protected forest corridors that parallel the streams and rivers along the South Coast region valley bottoms and lower mountain sides. It stitches together provincial parks within the owl's range²², including E.C. Manning, Skagit Valley, Sxótsaqel/Chilliwack Lake, Pinecone Burke, Golden Ears, Garibaldi, Birkenhead Lake, Stein Valley Nlaka'pamux Heritage, Nahatlatch, Mehatl, and a series of smaller provincial parks, ecological reserves and Wildlife Habitat Areas.

If these corridor forests had been protected back in the 1920s, when the first large provincial park here, Garibaldi, was designated²³, the region wouldn't have so many species at risk of disappearing today. A recent assessment on the ecological health of Garibaldi and adjacent parks finds this to be the largest protected cluster in the region²⁴.

Yet, it's still too small to offer secure refuge for species like grizzly bears or spotted owls. Clearcut industrial logging of the low elevation forests outside parks, happening right up to the park boundaries, impacts the amount of habitat a park can actually provide to the species that live within it. Implementing the Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy and protecting critical habitat will not only provide a pathway to bring spotted owls back to healthy numbers, it will also give a fighting chance to the wildlife in the region's parks and protected areas.

But it's the forests outside the

provincial parks that will benefit the most. Take a close look at the mapped habitat. You'll see that many of the unprotected and endangered outdoor recreation areas we rely on are within forests requiring protection. For example, the Chehalis Valley located northeast of Mission is a popular outdoor recreation area²⁵, but the scantily protected forests there are falling fast²⁶. The Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy calls for significant forest protection in the Chehalis²⁷.

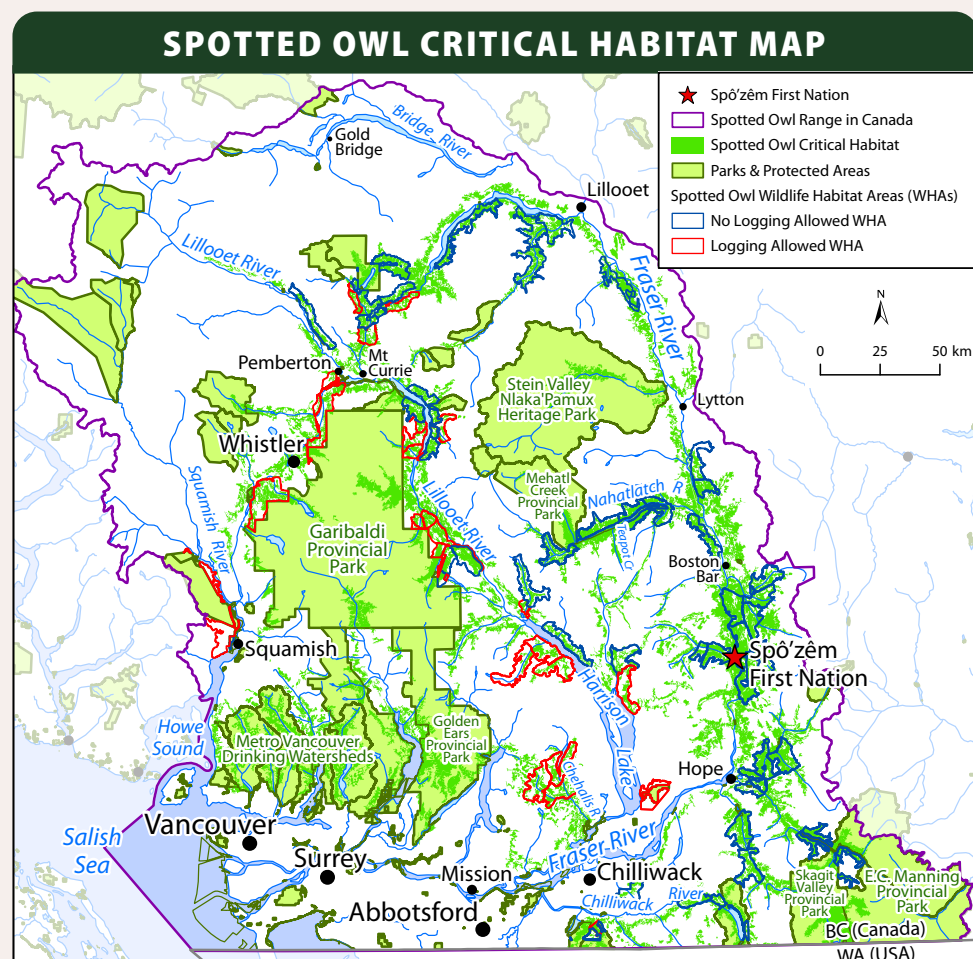
Some very popular recreation areas are found in the Nahatlatch watershed, west of Boston Bar. Some of the watershed is protected within provincial parks like Mehatl and Nahatlatch²⁸, and in Wildlife Habitat Areas designated off-limits to logging. But areas of the Nahatlatch Valley still open to logging, like the intact Teapot Valley²⁹, are protected in the critical habitat maps. The recovery strategy would also help make the proposed Stein Nahatlatch Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area come true³⁰.

The Chilliwack Valley is another favourite destination for outdoor recreationists that would benefit from this increased protection. In 2019, the Fraser Valley Regional District completed a report on the economic benefits of outdoor recreation in Chilliwack and

throughout the Regional District³¹, and their findings were eye-opening. It estimates 7.4 million recreation days — based on the number of days one individual did one recreational activity — in the Regional District in 2019. These recreationists spent almost \$948 million on outdoor recreation-related products and services in the region that year on equipment purchase and rental, transportation, food and

beverage, accommodation and retail items. This economic impact shoots up to \$1.5 billion, when the indirect economic spin-off impacts from the recreation industry are included.

The Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy is hopeful news for the survival of wildlife, the enjoyment of outdoor recreationists and the prosperity of the communities that support them.



To view interactive map visit: [Bit.ly/WCspottedOwlMap](https://bit.ly/WCspottedOwlMap)

CHAINSAWS IN THE CATHEDRAL

A horrifying disaster. There is no other way to describe what industrial forestry has done to the old-growth forests of the Salish territories. Clearcutting in these magnificently complicated ecosystems has been a horrifying disaster any which way you look at it.

The plight of the spotted owl is merely one of many sad stories in this rapidly unravelling landscape. A myriad of species from the mighty grizzly bear³² to the diminutive forest-dependent marbled murrelet seabird³³ have all but disappeared from many of their former haunts. Entire runs of salmon have sputtered out³⁴, their loss masked by hatcheries that churn out thousands of salmon fingerlings — in an attempt to make up for severely damaged habitat in these once thriving rivers³⁵.

Old, eroding logging roads³⁶, steep clearcut slopes no longer held in place by the roots of rotting stumps³⁷, and powerful climate change-fuelled Pacific storms — these are a dangerous formula for river-scouring landslides, floods and washouts that we've all seen increase in frequency, impact, heart-break and loss³⁸. Then there are the forest fires made all the more explosive by climate change-powered heat domes. Extensive clearcutting over decades has turned many of the mighty mist-shrouded ancient temperate rainforests into dried



Photo: Old-growth Douglas fir in Teapot Valley (Joe Foy).

out tree plantations. The skinny stick trees now form vast areas of fire starter³⁹.

When the iconic 900-year-old Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France erupted in fire back in 2019⁴⁰, it was a shock for people around the world. The government there set a five-year deadline to build it back and the people got the ball rolling with about a billion dollars tossed in the hat to get it done. Build it back — not exactly the way it had been, but as close as possible. It's 2025 now and the people of France have pulled it off! Notre-Dame has indeed reopened, and a precious part of the world restored.

Here in B.C., where old-growth trees can live for well over a thousand years⁴¹, we might not be able to heal the old-growth forest ecosystems back to the way they were. But we can take action today to give endangered wildlife a chance at a future. The federal and

provincial governments and First Nations Leadership Council have agreed to work together to double the size of the provincial protected area system five years from now, bringing coverage to 30 per cent of the landscape by 2030. A billion dollars has been earmarked for the project. The federal government is about to publish the finalized Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy, which is a blueprint for how to start

repairing forest damage by protecting and restoring a network of low elevation old-growth forests surrounding the communities more than half of us call home.

This is our Notre Dame moment. We can do this. The first phase will take 50 years. But we won't come back from our forest disaster unless we start now. We must demand fast and sustained action from the federal and provincial governments to work in partnership with First Nations to actually permanently protect the mapped spotted owl critical habitat. We won't save the spotted owl or other wildlife or our future unless we seize this moment and run with it. Time and time again we've seen that when it comes to environmental protection, we only get what we're willing to fight for. The time for change is now. Let's do this. Let's win back the future we all want.

TAKE ACTION

We have never been so close to repairing the damaged old-growth forest spotted owl habitat of the Salish-speaking First Nation territories as we are right now. But this rare opportunity could slip through our fingers if we don't speak up and write now.

- ▶ Please write to Premier David Eby and the B.C. government demanding they work in partnership with Indigenous Nations and the government of Canada to permanently legislate protection for the more than 4,000 square kilometres of spotted owl critical habitat mapped in the Spotted Owl Recovery Strategy.



Photo: Northern spotted owl (Jared Hobbs).

WildernessCommittee.org/ProtectOwlHabitat

YES!

Return to:
Wilderness Committee
46 E. 6th Avenue,
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LET'S SECURE A FUTURE FOR SPOTTED OWL!

Your support fuels the fight to protect critical spotted owl habitats and the other at-risk species that rely on them. Together, through education, advocacy and grassroots action, you're making a difference. Thank you!

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