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WHO NEEDS OWLS?

BY MICHAEL ALDERMAN

I've had it up to here with this spotted owl thing. Both camps in this debate have got so caught up in the particulars that, if you'll pardon the expression, they've missed the forest for the trees.

The well-meaning ecologists who have placed this unfortunate creature on a pedestal were apparently unaware that they had also nailed it to a crucifix. Presumably, their intention was to create a tangible symbol for their effort to save the old-growth forest that is the owl's habitat. Unfortunately they neglected to consider the fact that the opposition lacks the intellectual capacity to recognize it as a symbol. (For proof of this, one has only to note the plethora of anti-owl t-shirts and bumper stickers promulgated by that particular special interest group.) These people are concerned with bottom lines, and have neither the time nor patience for symbolism.

Why are we concerned about the spotted owl, anyway? The dinosaurs are gone and we don't miss them. The question is, of course, rhetorical. I am paraphrasing a recently published argument by some chowderhead who was apparently able to draw a parallel between the spotted owl and the dinosaur. Come to think of it, maybe that individual was trying to be symbolic...

I digress. The fact is, thousands of species will perish with the harvesting of the old-growth,

not just an owl. Unlike the owl, however, most of them are too small to attract attention. Heck, two hundred species A DAY are disappearing from the earth due to human damage to the environment. How can this be? I won't delve into entomology and microbiology here. There are those better suited to explain such things. Suffice it to say the earth is being irreparably altered every moment of every day.

The workings of mother nature might be illustrated by a stone wall, with the stones at the top representing humans. (You non-symbolic types can skip over this part.) The stones are of various shapes and sizes and fit neatly together in the wall, but those on top keep getting bigger and heavier; more difficult for the rest of the wall to support. Smaller stones are removed periodically without damaging the wall's integrity... until too many are gone and a large stone works itself loose; then another, like dominoes. Eventually someone inadvertently removes the keystone and... well, you know the rest.

Is this a risk we're willing to take? Is short-term gain of greater importance than long-term stability? I'll bet the unemployed salmon fishermen whose livelihood was decimated by short-term thinkers aren't losing any sleep over the lamentations of the timber industry.

What about this longterm/shortterm thing, anyway? Recently, it was announced that the amount of protected old-growth was to be reduced by 25%. The immediate outcry was that this served only to delay the inevitable (the inevitable, I assume, being unemployment and hungry children). Fair enough. If, hypothetically, conceding one-fourth of this timber delays the inevitable for, say, one year; does it then follow that permitting access to 100% would delay the inevitable only four years? What happens then? Do we reassess the value of National Forests? Sounds pretty 'bottom line' to me.

Trees are a renewable resource. Indeed. So are humans, as we prove every minute of every day, ad nauseum. Millions of acres of trees are being bulldozed in Brazil* to make room for them (indirectly, of course, but that's another soapbox). I read somewhere that it takes about 250 mature trees for every man, woman and child on the planet, to replenish the oxygen we use of pollute in a single year. The human population doubles every twenty years or so. Does the number of trees double? I suspect not.

What can we do about the environmental destruction in Brazil? So far, not much. Then again, what right have we to interfere? After all, they are concerned about unemployment and hungry children as well, and I doubt the Brazilians have much respect for hypocrisy.

So why not blame the spotted owl for all the problems that plague mankind? It's much easier to pick a scapegoat than it is to accept responsibility. Just ask Adolf Hitler.

Michael Alderman lives in Astoria. He wrote this article for the Clatsop Post, published by Clatsop Community College.

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*Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is the site of the international Earth Summit, which is taking place this month.



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