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THE DILEMMAS OF CONSERVATION

North American conservationists are facing a tricky dilemma. In the 1980s endangered northern spotted owls were at the centre of a bitter dispute between loggers and environmentalists over the protection of their habitat, the old-growth forests of the Pacific North-West. They are under threat once again – this time from other owls. More aggressive barred owls have been expanding their range across North America, and wherever they turn up in the North-West, the spotted owls disappear.

After a lot of soul-searching, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has decided to try shooting enough barred owls to create breathing room for the spotted owls (far be it from me to suggest that they should have saved plenty of room for them in the first place). But how many is ‘enough’? Some experts are talking about a figure of 10,000 barred owls every year, indefinitely. Is that even possible? And would the species survive?

Some protagonists liken owl removal to pulling up weeds, while others are concerned that this

approach ignores any sense of compassion. It is a choice between the survival of an endangered species and the lives of individual animals, with the added worry that, if the spotted owls disappear, there will be a weaker argument for protecting their forests. The US Fish and Wildlife Service is damned if it does, and damned if it doesn’t.

Conservationists often remove some animals

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for the sake of others. In the UK we kill grey squirrels to protect reds and American mink to protect water voles (see p70), while rats, mice and other introduced predators are killed everywhere from New Zealand to South Georgia to safeguard ground-nesting birds.

There is no easy answer. It makes sense to sacrifice invasive rodents, yet I sympathise with the man who told the US Fish and Wildlife Service, “You should trap the barred owls and put them on a train to us. We’ll have them.”