



Cindy Westra holds "Hope," a barred owl she rehabilitated after it ate a poisoned rat. The owl is one of many animals she has worked with during

her career as an animal rehabilitation specialist. (Leader photo)

Alaska oil spill makes specialist care even more about animals

By PAT McHUGHES

Leader Staff

The beach was a disaster.

Cindy Westra, formerly of Orlando, Fla., now of Jacksonville, looked up. Overhead she could hear the familiar chop, chop, chop of the helicopters.

The choppers were either headed out over the sound, or coming in with the wounded. Either way, there was still that chopping sound. To this day, Westra still cringes when she hears a helicopter.

If the chopper was bringing in the wounded, Westra knew that soon she would be very busy. The wounded numbered in the thousands. Some, she knew, would live. Many more

would die. And she would probably cry again, too.

It looked like another hard day.

From Westra's diary:

"The loss here is profound. All we have learned in the past years is to be utilized now to help heal the damage man has done."

Westra didn't write that in Vietnam. Nor in Angola, El Salvador, Honduras or Afghanistan. She was in Valdez, Alaska, and it was April 1989.

She said it was like being on the newest battlefield in a war man has declared on his planet. The beaches were fouled when 240,000 barrels of oil came spilling out the wrecked guts of a super tanker. The wounded were

the animals that lived in Prince William Sound.

Westra, a registered animal rehabilitation specialist, was working with five other Floridians at the sea otter rescue center in Valdez after the supertanker Exxon Valdez ran aground, spilling its cargo. Prince William Sound is home to 15,000 otters, the greatest concentration in North America.

Westra and her friends spent two weeks in Valdez trying to cope with the damage done to the otters. Those memories are hard to put away, she said.

"After what we saw up there we walked around just numb for a long

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