

ANIMALS

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time," Westra said. "It was a lot like being in a MASH unit in a war zone. I now understand how war veterans feel."

Westra, who has been an animal rehabilitator for five years, recently moved to Jacksonville from Florida to be with her husband, a research scientist. She brought with her an owl, a red-tail hawk, a pilated woodpecker, a skunk, a raccoon, a squirrel, a great blue herring, a white egret, an annhinga, and three small wild birds in a fish tank. She has so many animals that one bedroom of her home is filled with seven cages. The white egret, annhinga and great blue herring stay in the bathroom.

At one time all either suffered broken bones or other injuries, or were once pets and abandoned by their owners.

"It's not an easy job," Westra said. "There are a lot of days when you cry a lot, because the animals are in such bad shape it seems like everything you touch dies."

Like in Valdez.

From Westra's Alaskan diary:

"I've cried again tonight as I lost another otter. I've been working with number 109 for the past four days that he's been here. I didn't dare name him. When he came in he was heavily oiled and had ingested a lot (of oil).

"At 10:30 p.m. his body tightened up and he went into a coma. We worked on him with oxygen and medication the vet injected into his heart to keep him alive. At 11 p.m. they called it quits. Yet his handler and I couldn't quit. We climbed into his pen. I held his head in my lap and his handler and I rubbed him to stimulate his heart."

"At 11:30 p.m. he stopped breathing totally. All I could do was hold his head in my arms, his paws in my hands and cry. Up until then I wouldn't let myself feel or get attached to any animal. But you can't help it here. They look at you with those sad bloodshot eyes and you fall in love. I will carry number 109 in my heart forever."

The key to ending man's war on his environment, said Westra, is education. That is the goal of Back to

Nature Wild Life Centers, Inc., which she co-founded in Florida in 1988 with a friend. Centers have been established in Ashton, N.C., and Nashville, Tenn. She has plans to establish one Jacksonville and in Homer, Alaska.

"Education is one way to turn the tide," Westra said. "We want to set up someplace where people and school groups can come in and see the animals. When my children's friends come in to see the owl, the hawk or the skunk you can see a sudden awareness in their eyes. They realize they are looking at the real thing, and not a picture in a book. They walk away with a new respect."

"Right now, we're basically working to get the education program started," Westra said. "Through education, we can change things."

The first step in setting up her education center will be to find people in Jacksonville willing to begin learning animal rehabilitation on an apprenticeship basis, as she did. While she does not have a degree in veterinary medicine, Westra pointed out she does have the training needed to obtain a federal license in animal rehabilitation.

She served a two year apprenticeship with the Florida Audubon Society Bird of Prey Center in Mateland, Fla., and two years with the Ann Young Bird Sanctuary at Altamont Springs, Fla. In addition, she has completed two courses in animal rehabilitation offered by the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Councils. Plus she's had lots of hands-on experience, she said.

"There aren't that many animal rehab specialists in the country," Westra said. "We desperately need more. But it's not an easy job. I don't get paid anything for doing this, so it takes a person who loves animals. A person who cares. And I'll be honest, sometimes it's really tough on you."

Like in Valdez.

From Westra's Alaskan diary:

"I am physically, mentally and emotionally tired and I need to go home. There are only 38 otters left and enough people are here to tend to them.... There are no accidents in the universe. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. I pray the good that comes out of this bad will be man's awakening."