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Whatcom Humane Society Wildlife Rehab Intern

Laelil Peto
Western Washington University

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: WHS Wildlife Rehab Center Internship

Student Name: Lalie Peto

Internship Dates: 6/19/2022 - 9/3/2022

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Lalie Y. Peto

DATE: 03/14/2023



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Abstract:

Throughout my academic career at Western Washington University, I have had the opportunity to learn about the relationships that exist between the social and natural sciences as well as the intersections with humanity. My courses have taught me to contemplate our relationship with the natural world and the creatures that surround us. This past summer I had the pleasure of becoming an intern for the Whatcom Humane Society (WHS) at their Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. I had the opportunity there to learn more about wild animals in the Bellingham and Whatcom County area as well as the responsibilities of a Wildlife Rehabilitator. I performed the daily fundamentals of wildlife care, such as cleaning, feeding and care of patients, as well as assisting the WHS Wildlife staff with intakes, releases, rescues, triage and administering treatments and procedures. My learning curve was high as each new animal came into care. Each raccoon, harbor seal, or seagull had its own needs and care requirements. Gaining this knowledge and getting to know each animal and the best way to rehabilitate each one for possible release back into their wild environment was invaluable. This unique and remarkable experience is imprinted on my education and my life as one I won't forget and the exponential learning I gained will remain a foundation I can build upon in my future endeavors.

Introduction:

This past summer I was fortunate to become a live-in intern at the Whatcom Humane Society (WHS) Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. Between June 19th through September 3rd, 2022, I completed 403 hours of service at the center. My typical work week was 40 hours over the course of five days. This internship was everything I was looking for and more. I have always loved animals and the environment growing up and wanted to go into a field where I would work with and for them. I credit my early and passionate love of dogs for teaching me life lessons about compassion and empathy. I have learned so much from many kinds of animals and knew I wanted to give back to them while also educating others. I wanted to be able to advocate for the wildlife whose voices needed to be heard and the environment they live in.

Going into this internship my goal was to learn as much as I could about wildlife rehabilitation in hopes it would help me determine what I want to do after graduating. I wanted to learn more about how I could care for wildlife using the knowledge I had about the environment and animals while also greatly expanding it. Through this experience I saw how wildlife rehabilitation/care was a culmination of fields and skill sets. There was a deep intersect of what I was learning at the center with my studies at Western Washington University (WWU). Wildlife care encompasses so many fields: veterinary sciences, animal husbandry, environmental science, environmental studies, animal anatomy and physiology, environmental ethics, and justice. I learned more about the relationship among humans, the environment and animals, and the questions that arose from it. I was also able to learn more about myself and make new connections in the field. During my time at the care center, I was able to meet and work with so many compassionate and experienced people including staff, other interns and volunteers. The care in which the staff took to teach and guide us was incredibly enriching and inspiring.

Background info on Whatcom Humane Society (WHS):

The WHS Wildlife Center is part of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association and the International Wildlife Rehabilitators Council. The center operates on permits and licenses through the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and the United States Fish and Wildlife Department. The organization started in 2014 at a property located in Nugent's Corner in Whatcom County but made a move over in last year to a new facility, which was previously known as the Anderson Creek Lodge (*see below*):



Figure 1. WHS Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. Courtesy of WHS Facebook

The move would not have been possible without support from the community and the hard work of staff members and volunteers of the Whatcom Humane Society. Many volunteers came to help the set-up outdoor enclosures or help maintain some groundwork throughout my internship. The hard work of volunteers does not go unnoticed. They are part of what makes WHS Wildlife Center so great!

The WHS Wildlife Rehab Center is a non-profit organization and receives no state, city, or county funds. It is entirely funded through donations. Staff at the center work year-round, seven days a week, to help any patients that come through the door. They do all they can to provide any patient with specialized treatments and services as needed in hopes of releasing them back into the wild with their integrity intact. Animals are typically brought in by the public or by WHS Animal Control officers. After drop-off and intake, patients are examined and assessed as to the next steps of care and what the prognosis is for their outcome.

The ultimate goal for animals is for them to be rehabilitated and released back into the wild, into their natural environment. However, if they have medical or physical injuries, illnesses or other conditions that either cause them too much unnecessary pain or would prevent them from surviving in the wild, the animals are humanely euthanized. Occasionally, animals are transferred to another permitted and licensed wildlife rehabilitation center or sanctuary for specialized and/or continued care.

When I applied for this internship, I thought about these goals and knew that I would not only be helping rehabilitate wildlife but also witnessing some with pain and suffering. I knew that not all the animals I came across would survive and it was important for me to share in my application and interview that I would be able to handle that. I wanted them to know I would be OK dealing with dead or dying animals, sad as it was, because I knew any animals in the care of the WHS Rehab Center would be given the best treatment possible.

Creating a successful and safe environment at the WHS Wildlife Rehab Center is not easy. An amazing amount of care and thought is put into everyday operations. The center follows a strict set of guidelines and protocols to ensure the safety of both patients and staff to keep the center healthy and efficient.

Internship Activities

My first week as an on-site intern had a very rocky start as I had not yet received my keys to get in and out of the facility. So, while moving my belongings in after operational hours, I got locked out of the main building while also being locked in the connecting outside entry. So, there I was locked in and out in this undercover area, which I thought was ironic given the circumstances of animals also being an enclosure. Eventually, I got back in with the help of another live-in intern and a quick call to 9-1-1. I got back to my room and was eager to start my first day the next morning. The next day I was scheduled for a PM shift which is from 12pm-8pm. The AM shift is from 7:30AM to 3:30 PM.

When I arrived for my shift, there were five other interns there, three of which had already been in the program for a month, and we all gathered around the whiteboard for rounds. The PM shift is when the center starts to shift towards its afternoon care and chores. The staff went on to explain how the various whiteboards with patient care and projects were to be read. I quickly realized how fast-paced everything was and how steep the learning curve was going to be. There were two other new interns besides me taking this all in.

Daily duties and responsibilities included a lot of husbandry work including laundry, dishes, sanitizing the area and cleaning of the enclosures. There was never a moment where I wasn't on my feet.

During rounds everyone was given a set of patients and tasks they needed to accomplish before the next rotation. All the patients are weighed in the morning and recorded in their chart along with any changes in diet or excretion that happened overnight. The next step in patient care is replacing the sheets or spot cleaning the patient's enclosure with clean laundry and then setting out their diets for the morning. Depending on the patients' medications will also be administered

in the morning if need be. This is all to be recorded in their charts so we can track the progress they make. Often, I found myself taking care of the bird room as it was “baby season”, taking care of fledglings and juveniles. In the bird room there were patients set up in a playpen, pen or in one of the aviaries on site. I spent a lot of time in this room as many of the patients required feedings every 30 minutes or every hour. The staff taught us how to read the feeding chart and figure out what patients need what and when.



Figure 2. Nestling during feed. Courtesy of WHS Facebook

While care varied from patient from patient, I was able to tong feed and syringe feed many of the patients that came in. I learned how to properly feed a nestling and some of the basic anatomy of birds. They taught us to make sure not to clog the glottis which is how birds breathe and how to prevent it from aspirating. I also learned how to tube feed different mammals and birds. The amount given would always be listed on their charts and was dependent on their age and weight. The formula and diets that were given had to be prepared with special instructions

and vitamins. Making the diets was one of my favorite responsibilities because I got to learn about the different nutrients and vitamins that each patient needed. I also got to play and mix different foods and formulas together to make an interesting plate. The wildlife center's patient pantries are frequently filled with donations of cat food, dog food and baby food along with donations of fresh produce, meat and seafood from local farmers and fishers. It was a great day when a new donation was dropped off to see what we had to work with and how we could best treat the patients to a new dish.



Figure 3: Juvenile diet

One of the most interesting and unexpected tasks I encountered was that many of these wild animals eat smaller animals and fish. Going into the internship I had not anticipated the number of frozen mice, rats and frozen fish I would have to thaw and cut up. It took me awhile to get comfortable cutting and gutting some of the food, but it was all necessary to ensure that I

gave my best to the patients. One of my favorite diets to prepare was for Sahara, the bearded dragon at the center. Her diet consisted of greens, dandelions, berries, and live meal worms.



Figure 4. Sahara's Diet

A crucial part of the operations was completing projects and enrichment. These were secondary to patient care. Some of the projects were tasks that couldn't be done in a spot check and required more labor in the process. Such as going out and cutting greenery for the enclosures, which required a lot of work with saws and dragging branches around. Another example of a project would be moving dead branches/greenery to the designated burn/woodchipper pile to make way for the new greenery. In which after taking away the dead branches we would then start to replenish and set up enclosures for new patients. This was a project I didn't realize would be so laborious, we would have to completely clear and clean an enclosure and then fill it with new greenery to mimic the habitat. The projects although sometimes grueling, showed me how a center like this operates as well and efficiently as it does.

Additionally, there were opportunities to create enrichment for the patients. The purpose of the enrichment was to encourage mental and physical stimulation as well as serve as a test for some patients to see how their survival skills are. This was a fan favorite among the interns as it gave us a chance to make weird food puzzles and obstacles for the patients to engage with. I remember scavenging the center grounds for slugs and worms to give to the raccoons to eat. The raccoons were one of the most entertaining to care for and create enrichment for. One of the projects I was tasked with was going out to get feeder fish for the live catch test for the raccoons. This would help the staff evaluate their wildlife skills in hopes of release as well as a fun engaging activity for the raccoons.

Another part during feeding that we had to follow was that some patient required us to vocalize while feeding to imitate the mother coming to feed. With this we also had to wear a camouflage sheer hood so that patients like the crows and jays would not recognize us. Similarly, when caring for the baby raccoons we had to wear a raccoon mask so they wouldn't get habituated with us. This was of high importance as it hinders with potential release and ability survive in the wild.

1 *Protocols & Projects*

A crucial part of how the center operates, staying up to code and adhering to safety guidelines, is due to protocols and projects that everyone is assigned to throughout the day. One of the most important parts of this job is following health and safety protocols. We were required to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as masks and surgical gloves, while conducting our work with patients or other materials. This is not only due to the

COVID-19 regulations but also in part to potential exposure of zoonotic diseases and other hazards that we may encounter.

There was separation between all the equipment used for the raccoons, otters, deer and corvids/scavengers. Other safety protocols that were implemented were the use of footbaths located at the entry and exits of certain species of patient's enclosures. The footbaths were to make sure we wouldn't track anything on our shoes when we go from patient to patient. We also made sure to frequently sanitize surfaces and replace our gloves. This was to protect not only us but the patients we took care of. Because we often worked with different species throughout the day, we had to make sure that we didn't have rotation where we would put other patients at risk. For example, waterfowl are at higher risk of carrying avian flu (among other diseases), so to keep others safe whoever was taking care of them that rotation or day made sure to not go into other species' enclosures.

For most outdoor patients I had to wear a full gown, N95 mask, gloves and a face shield while taking care of them. For the feeding we also had taken the necessary precautions to avoid cross contamination during preparation. All the dishes and utensils used for preparation was cleaned in a separate area that had been designated for the set species. Making sure that there was separation or quarantine between the different dishes, sheets, clothing etc. was key to make sure there was no cross contamination. The staff provided us with the protocol handbooks we frequently referred to for all things related to husbandry, diet, release, medicine, and emergencies. These protocol handbooks were incredibly helpful throughout the internship.

Not only did we have to be ever vigilant of the physical safety of the patients, we also had to take care not to imprint our human scent or image onto wild animals that were to be

released into the wild. For example, when taking care of the raccoons we wore gloves, gowns, and a raccoon mask.

Internship Achievements

I achieved my goals and so much more during this internship. At first, it was very difficult, living on site away from friends and family and with people I'd just met. The work was exhausting and the learning curve was very steep.

After a few weeks though, the work and the animals became a part of me. I felt responsible for their well-being and was learning so many interesting things in the process of caring for them. I enjoyed spending time with Sahara, the resident bearded dragon, and I looked forward to working with new animals and gaining more experience. A few highlights were working with baby harbor seals and releasing a coyote.

I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do when I graduated from college. Now, at the edge of graduation, I know that I want to find a job working with animals. Caring for animals with policies and procedures that help both animals and the environment is what I want to do with my life going forward. This amazing internship experience has opened my eyes in so many ways. I have learned as much about myself in the process as I have about caring for animals.

Acknowledgments:

To the staff at the WHS Wildlife Rehabilitation Center: Alysha, Rachel, Anna, Annie, Riley, Diane, Renata and Meg,

This summer has been one of the most rewarding experiences and I am so thankful to have been given the chance to work beside you all. Your compassion, grit, kindness, and dedication to this field is unparalleled. I have been in awe of all that you have shown me and I leave completely inspired by the work you've all done. Thank you for answering any questions I had and helping me out when I needed extra guidance. I have learned a lot from you all and will take it with me forever. Being able to listen and exchange stories about different programs from all around was so exciting to hear as I start to enter the world of wildlife rehabilitation care. Beyond learning about wildlife care, I learned a lot about myself and that was also fulfilling. Thank you again for this amazing opportunity!

To Laura (WHS Executive Director), Whatcom Humane Society staff and volunteers:

By being an intern for the Whatcom Humane Society, I have had the privilege to meet so many different people within the organization. No matter where I went or who I talked to, whether it be at the farm facility, thrift store or the administrations team, I was always met with extreme kindness. To be met with such kindness and passion for the work at WHS was truly remarkable. It truly is a labor of love and to see a community unite with a common goal to help animals and the environment reminded me why I picked Environmental Studies as my major. Thank you for all your hard work and dedication.

To my fellow interns I met along the way:

Although our time was short, I enjoyed getting to know and work beside you. It was fun navigating this new territory and new challenges with you all. There were some tough days and we all helped each other get through it. I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to learn with. I will always cherish and appreciate our time together and wish you all well on your next endeavors.

Appendices

