



April 15, 2008

Hendry woman starts primate rescue

by *kevin lollar*
klollar@news-press.com

Debbie Misotti is talkin' monkeys.

So much so that she named her state and federally licensed nonprofit primate sanctuary in Hendry County the Talkin' Monkeys Project.

"My husband would come in when I'd be talking to somebody, and he'd say, 'Oh, my God, you're talkin' monkeys again,'" she said. "Some people are always talkin' baseball or always talkin' football. I'm always talkin' monkeys."

With the help of her husband, Tom, and a team of 20 to 25 volunteers, including students from Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida International University and Florida Atlantic University, Misotti takes care of 11 primates (six monkeys, five apes) rescued from private owners or breeding facilities.

Some of the animals had been abused or neglected by their owners; others had been a step away from euthanasia.

"This is more than a sanctuary," Debbie Misotti said. "We want to take it a step further, address issues like why these animals are endangered. It gives me a chance to go out and speak about the environment.

"It's also a place where people can enjoy the animals and build relationships with them."

Talkin' Monkeys is not open to the public, and to get the word out about primates and other environmental issues, Misotti speaks to civic groups and schools, sometimes taking a couple of her animals with her.

TAKING THEM IN

Misotti, who has doctorate degrees in sociology and environmental science, is a life-long primate lover: The first book she ever read was "Curious George"; she worked with primates at Baltimore Zoo (now the Maryland Zoo), Parrot Jungle and Monkey Jungle in Miami, the Center for Great Apes in Wauchula and Save The Chimps in Fort Pierce before starting the Talkin' Monkeys Project in 2003.

She and Tom Misotti got their first primate 17 years ago, a 1-month-old male white-faced capuchin named Kitaro that she'd helped raise after his mother died at the Baltimore Zoo.

"He was going to a breeding facility, but I was upset by the conditions at the facility, and I couldn't stand the idea of him going there, so we bought him," Misotti said. "Then I said, 'This is not the brightest idea I've ever had.'"

Kitaro is still with the Misottis.

Every animal at Talkin' Monkeys has a story, and every one has a distinct personality: Some are affectionate and like to play with visitors; some are shy; some are a little belligerent.

Kanji, an 8-year-old white-handed lar gibbon, for example, temporarily lives alone, and anyone getting too close to his cage might get a healthy whack from a very strong paw.

"He's very aggressive," Misotti said. "He's going through puberty. We had him in with Hope (a female gibbon), but he bit her. He doesn't get a friend until he learns to control his libido."

Some of the animals have psychological problems stemming from abuse.

Take the case of Rocco, an 18-year-old male white-faced capuchin.

"The owners were on crack," Misotti said. "They removed his teeth with pliers; his jaw was broken in three places; he had three broken ribs; the base of his tail was broken; his diaper had been left on for seven weeks, and when we peeled it off, the skin peeled off with it, and he had maggots embedded in his skin.

"The owners' lives were going downhill, and the monkey didn't matter as much as the drugs."

As a result, Rocco has what Misotti calls "anger issues."

"He's our Hannibal Lecter: He can be as sweet as anything, then turn around and bite you hard, and his blood pressure won't rise a bit," she said. "We've learned to live with his vagaries because it's better to have a live monkey than a dead one."

VOLUNTEER WORK

Keeping a primate sanctuary is hard, time-consuming work. The large cages, which are full of plenty to play with and climb on, must be cleaned; the animals are fed five times a day (diet includes fruit, vegetables, bagels, cereal bars, bamboo and monkey biscuits); the 5-acre property, which is covered with 100 species of bamboo, must be maintained.

A large portion of the work is done by volunteers.

"We couldn't run the project without our volunteers," Misotti said. "Who wants to come out here and clean up monkey poop? Think about it."

But Kate Wasylyk, 45, of Pioneer, a Talkin' Monkeys volunteer for three years, loves the work.

"You get attached to the animals," she said. "They're sweethearts. They hug you. They slap your hand - give you a high five. It's something to get up in the morning for."

FAU sophomore anthropology major Lauren Peppers, who has been a volunteer for about four months, said her experience has helped her in school.

"It's the experience of working hands-on with these magnificent creatures," said Peppers, whose focus is primatology. "I get to play with monkeys, work with them, all day long. I love looking at them and seeing human behaviors come out. These creatures have distinct features so connected with humans."

ENRICHING LIVES

One of the most important elements at Talkin' Monkeys is "enrichment," which is required under the sanctuary's licenses.

"These guys are extremely intelligent, and they require something to keep their minds moving," Misotti said. "At some some facilities, two animals being together is enrichment. We go farther."

Among the many enrichment activities are "browse bags," food and crepe paper or shredded office paper closed in zippered closet storage bags: To get the food, the animal must unzip the bag and sift through the paper.

In addition to being time consuming, a primate sanctuary is expensive: In an average year, Talkin' Monkeys costs about \$40,000, which includes \$300 to \$400 a week for food.

If cages need to be built and there are other unusual expenses, the Misottis can spend up to \$100,000 a year.

The Talkin' Monkeys budget comes from donations, Debbie Misotti's part-time job as a bookkeeper and Tom Misotti's job as a project manager for Owen-Ames-Kimball Co.

Primates are the center of the Misottis' lives, but as much as Debbie Misotti loves them, she wouldn't advise others to have them as pets.

"When you bring one of these guys into your home, it becomes his home, and he lets you live there," she said. "And your stuff becomes his stuff, until he decides to break it."
