

Closing the planning gap: evacuating people and animals



James Sawyer

Consultant and former Global Director of Disaster Management, World Animal Protection

With the Emergency Management Bill for New Zealand¹ currently in consultation, an opportunity exists to reflect on existing planning gaps relating to the evacuation and sheltering of people and their animals.

Since Hurricane Katrina (2005) in the US, and despite learnings from incidents such as the earthquake in Christchurch in New Zealand (2010), it remains an imperative for the New Zealand Government (and many other countries) to take the topic much more seriously to avoid costs in the event of a disaster.

Despite the clear need to consider animals in evacuation and sheltering of people, only FEMA² in the US has taken concrete strides towards managing the situation through the *Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act of 2006*³ and the *Planning for Animal Wellness Act*⁴ to create a mandate for the inclusion of animals into emergency planning. In doing so, they include direction on evacuation and sheltering, seeding a whole community of responders and coordination and resources tying in with the humanitarian effort. While far from perfect, the model is embedded and this is significant. Solutions simply don't work if they are bolted on the side of the humanitarian effort because owners of animals don't see their creatures as a 'bolt on'. Rather, they see them as an integrated part of their experience and they behave accordingly.

To assess the potential effects of not embedding animals into emergency evacuation and sheltering, we must first consider the scale, scope and consequence of the problem for legislators and planners. One could consider evacuation and sheltering of animals to simply involve people and their pets, but the scope is far broader. In certain parts of the world, people evacuate with livestock, moving stock out of harm's way before evacuating themselves. Draught-animal power is critical in certain communities, especially in post-disaster scenarios in poorer communities. Families evacuate pets, and not just cats and dogs, but everything

from lizards to spiders and snakes. People keep peri-urban livestock, either as a hobby or as a backup livelihood and people can also use animals for sport or past-times. Thus, depending on the country and the socio-economic conditions, the scope can be huge.

Outcomes are wide ranging too. Economic cost from loss or degradation of livestock is a significant post-disaster reality for farmers. The psychological effects of the loss (temporary or otherwise) of an animal is well established and can have be akin to a loss of a family member. Experience has shown that people who arrive at refugee camps in sub-Saharan Africa to find protection from insecure environments, often turn around and head back into danger if there is no provision to care for their animals. Permanent and temporary shelters have become the target of criminality for theft of dogs for resale or dogfighting and livestock rustling is not uncommon when the watchful eye of the law is otherwise occupied. We know that if the provision is not made for sheltering of animals with, or alongside people, then they will regularly re-enter danger and exclusion zones to care for their animals. Animals left behind can hinder search and rescue and pose a risk to rescuers.

What happens during a disaster event is driven by behaviours and we know that people can often exhibit extreme, irrational or unexpected behaviour when it comes to their animals. Both Glassey (2010)⁵ and Hothersall (2012)⁶ note that most animal owners would ignore official warnings and return to danger zones. This shows that irrational behaviours are consistent over geographies and disaster types. But is this behaviour really that irrational or extreme? If we were considering a child or a family member, we would act the same. This points towards the



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lines being blurred between how animal owners view their animals compared to planners and legislators. Evidence shows that farmers have closer relationships with their animals than is commonly thought; yet emergency planners simply categorise livestock as an 'asset'. How we define a companion animal is tricky. It may be simple with cats and dogs but what about horses or breeds of rare sheep? It is these connections driving the behaviour. What we do know is that people's behaviour with animals in evacuations is influenced by socio-economic status, education level, the number of animals they own, their wider support network and whether the family contains children. Beyond this knowledge, there remains a large research gap in understanding how such factors truly influence behaviour.

When we consider scale as a multiplier of scope and impact, we begin to see the size of the planning gap. Modern industrialised countries average between 60–70% pet ownership and the geography of urban areas means that these animals are not spread evenly. Hesterberg (2012)⁷ estimated the sheltering need for animals in a disaster to be approximately 20% of the total sheltered human population. Accounting for losses, abandonment or owners placing animals in support networks, this estimate could be too low and more research is required. However, Hesterberg (2012) also noted that up to 70% of animal owners considered their pets as part of the family and would attempt to take their animals with them when they evacuated. Somewhere between those percentages is a lot of animals for emergency planners to consider. Even at the lower end of the scale, this means an evacuation of 10,000 people could create a sheltering need for 2,000 animals or more; far beyond what pre-existing animal shelters cater for. When we consider that urban evacuations are often much larger than planned, the lack of attention to this issue looks even more concerning. The current conflict in Ukraine saw the movement of an estimated 2.5 million people across borders and responders reported companion animals moving with people at-scale. If we are to believe the figures for the predicted migration caused by the climate crisis in the future, we need to grapple with this issue now.

Generally, what we find are governments and municipalities being, at best, unprepared and basing plans on dangerous assumptions or, at worst, burying their heads in the sand. Many planners I have spoken to in different locations around the world, simply haven't even considered the risk, or assume that local animal shelters will carry the burden, despite a lack of discussion around capacity, resourcing, liability or contracting. The scale and effects of this issue means that, while shelter workers and non-government organisations have a role to play, their expertise needs to be integrated into part of a much wider planning and coordination landscape.

What is required is a framework to generate action in circumstances where the planning gap exists. This must start with legislation but we must become better at communicating experiences from other disasters to legislators, planners and decision-makers, and that requires us to close the research gaps and to deliver powerful case studies to learn from.

Laying the foundations

Good policy and legislation are critical to create the mandate and framework to resource, coordinate, plan and establish cross-border agreements. Without legislation, actions tend to be informally coordinated, resources are often voluntary, plans informal and authority largely non-existent. As soon as legislation and policy can activate the planners, the answers to the who, when, where, what and how can be answered. This can combine with policy to create the mandate for resourcing, which provides the tools for the job.

Coordination is critical to the success of any crisis and, historically, animals have been subject to the same management structures as disease control or have found their needs and that of their owners tacked on the side of emergency planning. This must change. Disease management models see animals often as the vector or the 'problem' and management models deal with animals accordingly. Successive disasters have shown this model to be ineffective and harmful. The whole concept of humanitarianism is to be focused on the needs of the human. Thus, if the human is an animal owner and they see their evacuation and sheltering needs as intrinsically related to their pets and see their animals as a family member, then integrating animals into the mainstream of humanitarian action is an imperative. Practice is critical to ensure animal stakeholders are present at drills and that their standards align with those of the humanitarian response to ensure coordination systems are ready for the influx of animals.

Motivating and informing

We know that behaviour can be significantly influenced if animal owners are better informed and motivated to follow guidance and if this information is aligned with their interests. It is important that animal owners are provided with risk information as early as possible and in a format that allows them to make the right decisions. Trust of information is key to owners making any decision and uniformity of information and advice across multiple media channels is critical. People are more likely to believe the information and react if they have received it from more than one trusted channel. Owners can, however, still make poor decisions and a huge influencer in preventing this is the capacity they can access and knowledge of the plans in place. This means that providing information and advice during a disaster is only half of the solution. To influence orderly, rational behaviour during a disaster, we must educate and inform owners in advance of the disaster. Providing preparatory information for owners at times and from people who they trust (e.g. at veterinary clinics) is effective.

Capacity

In the aftermath of a disaster, the correct management and resources must be in place so that animals and their owners are adequately considered. A key point is to break the pervading view that animals are an asset and move to a consideration of the sentience of animals and how their needs influence their

behaviour and that of their owners. As such, provisions for animals are largely the same as for people and based around 5 established freedoms of feed, water, shelter, medical care and the ability to express normal behaviour.

The disaster rescue phase currently poses many challenges for practitioners when in contact with animals that are often stressed and being placed in unusual circumstances. Accordingly, responders should be trained and equipped in animal handling and dealing with aggressive or difficult animals and they should have access to specialists who can assist when situations extend beyond their own skillset. Specific equipment may be required depending on the species.

Animals, once rescued, need to be sheltered to be cared for. It is unlikely that permanent animal shelters will have much additional capacity, indeed they may be damaged or staffing levels compromised. Thus, identifying available existing capacity and contracting for the costs of this is critical; beyond this, temporary sheltering and the means to build them to a range of flexible designs need to be in place. As much as possible (and especially for companion animals), it is recommended that temporary shelters be as close to human sheltering as possible so owners can care for their animals. This was achieved successfully in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

Planners need also to consider the control of zoonosis in the aftermath of disasters. Increased stray populations alongside media scares of animal-related disease outbreaks (such as rabies) can often lead to pressure by municipalities to undertake mass culling of animals, often inhumanely. While prevalent, studies show that these culls are unnecessary and ineffective (as well as costly), and a better approach is engagement with animal health professionals to assist in the correct vaccination and control programs.

Animals separated from their owners create issues in post-disaster and many animals found free roaming have been abandoned or were pre-existing strays, but many may be owned and simply separated. Often the pressure to allow groups to remove animals from the disaster zone and rehome in other areas, or even countries, is present. Harnessing the enthusiasm of local and international animal groups with the help of social media to reunite owners is far more effective. Considerations must be given to potential litigation if authorities haven't made enough effort to reunite people with their animals before undertaking rehoming activities. Planners should also consider security of animals during movement and shelter.

Coordination is a critical component of post-disaster activities and one that should involve animal practitioners and experts from the local area but that accommodate the influx of other organisations and volunteer help that will appear, especially following large disasters. Significant risks occur where these organisations or individuals are not part of the coordination mechanisms. Ensuring frameworks include animal advocates at all levels of coordination who have clear roles and responsibilities will help achieve harmony, safety and effectiveness.

Conclusion

The planning and resourcing gap for the evacuation and sheltering of animals with people is huge. Significant knowledge and research gaps exist that hinder the ability of emergency planners to establish the right provisions. Most thinking currently occurs from learnings and experimentation in the aftermath of disasters. The risk of inaction is significant. The potential scale and effects of a mass evacuation of people and their animals ought to be keeping planners awake at night based on the anecdotal evidence provided by responders to disasters such as the Christchurch earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, the Tohoku earthquake and similar events. With the forthcoming Emergency Management Bill in New Zealand, there is an opportunity for the New Zealand Government to put in place world-leading legislation that would position the country as a leader in animal care and safety.

Endnotes

1. New Zealand Emergency Management Bill, at www.civildefence.govt.nz/cdem-sector/legislation/emergency-management-bill.
2. FEMA, at www.fema.gov.
3. USA PETS Act, at www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/house-bill/3858#:~:text=Authorizes%20federal%20agencies%20to%20provide,to%20such%20pets%20and%20animals.
4. USA PAW Act, at www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/4205/text.
5. Glassey S (2010) *Pet owner emergency preparedness and perceptions survey report: Taranaki and Wellington regions*. Wellington: Mercali Disaster Management Consulting.
6. Hothersall B (2012) *Perceptions and Practices of Emergency Preparedness amongst Animal Owners*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol.
7. Hesterberg UW, Huertas G and Appelby MC (2012) *Perceptions of pet owners in urban Latin America on protection of their animals in disasters*. *Disaster Prevention and Management*, 21:37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09653561211202692>