

When humans and other animals connect: disaster narratives of fear, hope and change

Dian Fowles, Flinders University, is investigating the impact of natural disasters on human–animal relationships.

This article contains some early, indicative results from an ongoing PhD project. To date, 25 in-depth interviews have been conducted exploring the impacts of disaster events on participants' relationships with other animals: 12 discussing their experiences with their companion animals and seven discussing their involvement in animal rescue or the provision of animal related services [to animals and/or their humans] during or after a disaster event. Participants were recruited from four different Australian states, collectively leading to a recounting of experiences from five different natural disaster events.

The current discussion arises out of a preliminary data analysis and reflects certain theoretical underpinnings which will inform the final thesis report. Pragmatic concerns are, without doubt, essential when formulating approaches for the protection and management of animals in disaster events. However, recognition of underlying ideologies about the valuing of animals in human societies and how these ultimately direct actions and policies must also be considered central. Taking a more holistic approach, where philosophical as well as pragmatic perspectives are considered together, will guide management strategies toward the most effective outcomes.

A deep heritage of culturally imposed values regarding humanity's place in the natural world (DeMello 2012) has resulted in the entrenched notion of a human/nature divide. This shapes our social structures and thus, in turn, the laws and policies which specify how we accommodate animals in times of disaster. This perceived division is manifest in inconsistencies in law and policy. Domesticated animals (and in certain circumstances, non-domesticated) are still considered as possessions by law (White 2012) and will continue to be deemed of secondary importance while this persists. In disaster situations, this can ultimately lead to what can be considered the *animals-in-disaster (AID) paradox*. Non-evacuated animals suffering from injuries may have to wait several days before they can be assessed and treated (or euthanized if called for). Subjecting animals to such suffering would, in non-disaster times, amount to animal cruelty, punishable under animal welfare law. At a time when animals are most vulnerable to their physical environment they are also most vulnerable to the dictates of the society in which they are confined.

Some participants, mindful of official safety restrictions, report their distress at their lack of ability to be able to access their animals and tend to them. Others report of their denial and defying of such restrictions.

Speaking with people whose relationships with their animals have been disrupted by disaster makes certain issues clear. For some, the experience confirms the already understood importance of the relationship. For others, it can have a profoundly transformative impact on this relationship: awakening them to its strength and, in some cases, how poorly prepared they were to cater for their animals at such a time. Interviews have consistently demonstrated deep emotions despite the passage of time and have, in some cases, drawn attention to the impacts of irregularities and inconsistencies in approaches to formal evacuation strategies.

The importance of animals to societies generally, and to individuals in particular, is best served by a sharing of responsibilities: not solely left to individuals nor the domain of organisations. Distress and grief beset individuals, and ultimately social groups (Bento 1994), when their relationships with their animals are affected during disasters. When animals are left behind or not adequately catered for damage is done to both humans and non-humans. Ideally, in time, a paradigm shift will emerge in which specific actions to include and accommodate animal safety and protection or evacuation from disaster areas will ensure animals' lives are as highly prioritised as those of humans (and the elimination of the AID paradox).

References

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