Shooting them isn’t the answer…

Why pets matter in disasters.

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Abstract

With over 44% of those failing to evacuate during Hurricane Katrina doing so in part because they were unable to take their pets, the issue of pets in disasters has become a major issue and focus for emergency managers worldwide. The academic consensus is that pets are seen as part of the human family and that leaving them behind in an evacuation is contrary to public safety. This paper explores the human-animal bond and the implications of this for emergency managers and responders through an assortment of literature and media articles, providing the basis for taking an evidence based approach to companion animal emergency planning. Finally, a short commentary is offered on the development of the Civil Defence Disability Assist Dog tag in New Zealand and its benefits for the community and emergency response organisations.

Keywords      Pet, animal, disaster, evacuation, emergency management, disability, tag.

With most Australians and New Zealanders owning pets, it is no wonder we find the issue of pets in disasters highly emotive and topical. The human-animal is extremely powerful in an emergency management context, both in creating opportunities to enhance public safety, but also a major risk if pets are not included in emergency management arrangements.
The human-animal bond is frequently illustrated in the media and by the examples in our day to day lives. Most emergency responders are pet owners too and can understand that companion animals are seen as family members, with confirmatory surveys finding close to 100% of pet owners seeing their animals as part of their family (Irvine, 2009; Glassey, 2010).

But even the most hardened hero’s are found to be compassionate toward animals, even in major disasters and crises. In Australia, who can forget the photograph of David Tree, a County Fire Authority Firefighter giving a drink of water to an injured Koala bear during the 2009 bushfires? That same year in New Zealand a gunman took the lives of two police officers in a crisis known as the Napier Siege. Despite the uncertainty that the offender, Jan Molenaar was still alive, armed police re-entered the hot zone to retrieve police drug dog “Fi” who was thought to be dead from her handler’s vehicle outside the gunman’s address. Armed police during the operation also undertook covert missions to feed the pets of surrounding properties after evacuated pet owners raised their concern (TVNZ reporter, personal communication, 2010).

But it has taken some time and some hard lessons for the emergency management sector to take the issue of pets in disasters seriously. Many of the best practices in companion animal emergency management stem from Hurricane Katrina. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States of America. In its wake, it left US$110 billion in damage and 1,836 people dead making it the third deadliest disaster in US history. This disaster also highlighted the importance of companion animal emergency management with over 50,000 pets being left behind during the evacuation of New Orleans and 80-90% of these pets perishing (Anderson & Anderson, 2006; Shiley, 2006). What was anticipated to be over within a few days turned into a disaster beyond comprehension and triggered the largest animal rescue operation in US history — an operation that rescued approximately 15,000 pets supported by some 5,000 volunteers (Shiley, 2006). Prior to 2005, it was FEMA policy that pets should be left behind during evacuations — this has now been completely changed with the introduction of Pets Evacuation & Transportation Standards (PETS) Act. The single most compelling fact for emergency managers to learn from Katrina was that approximately 44% of the people who did not evacuate for Hurricane Katrina stayed, at least in part, because they did not want to leave their pets behind (Fritz Institute, 2006).
Though there may be a legal power to evacuate people without their pets, from an evidence based approach to emergency management, let alone a moral obligation – pets need to be evacuated along with their other family members. Even Oprah Winfrey typifies the public opinion that owners will generally not evacuate if unable to take their pets (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2011) and according to the classic works of Auf der Heide (1989), emergency planning should be based on “likely behaviours” not “correct behaviours” – that is we should plan on how communities are likely to act, not how we want them to act.

If we take a vulnerability approach to animal emergency management emergency management, companion animals are the least vulnerable when contrasted to laboratory animals and intensively farmed animals (Irvine, 2009). In the 2010 Darfield (Canterbury) earthquake over 3,000 animals were killed (Glassey & Wilson, 2011). In September 2000, several tornados destroyed twelve battery farming sheds outside of Croton, Ohio. Over one million birds were trapped in mangled cages (Irvine, 2009). So despite pets being the least zoologically vulnerable, specific legislation namely the PETS Act was passed in the US following Hurricane Katrina. Pets are an emotive issue because of the human-animal bond, in effect each pet is bonded to a voter – pets in disasters is political, hence the landslide passage of the PETS Act with 349 to 29 votes in the US House of Representatives.

The PETS Act has specific provisions that mandate emergency planning to incorporate the rescue and care of pets and service animals, it creates funding mechanisms to assist with such planning and response, and obligates the rescue and care of pets and service animals in an emergency. No such specific legislation exists in New Zealand or Australia. We can learn the lessons the easy way or the hard way from Hurricane Katrina – there are many reasons why the PETS Act was passed and related programmes resourced. Simplistically put, saving pets equals saving people.

Do we really apply an evidence based approach to emergency management in Australasia, or do we only do so when it suits? So what is the evidence behind companion animal emergency management? And how can it convince ourselves, our peers and community leaders to take this issue seriously?

There is academic consensus that pet owners are more likely to refuse to evacuate if they are required to leave their pets, placing them and public safety personnel at risk (Anderson & Anderson,
2006; Basler, 2006; Edmonds & Cutter, 2008; Health 1999, Irvine, 2009; Leonard & Scammon, 2007; Shiley, 2006). Locally, the Queensland Times (2010) ran an online poll and found that 60% of Queenslanders would not evacuate if they could not take their pets.

Even if pet owners are forced to leave their pets behind (as in Hurricane Katrina, Napier Siege and many other emergencies), pet owners are likely to become determined to re-enter evacuated areas to reclaim their pets, despite advice of public officials – putting themselves and public safety personnel at risk (Heath, 1999; Irvine, 2009; Nolen & Rezendes, 2006; Williams, 2006). In a survey of New Zealand pet owners, 58% of respondents indicated they would likely return to rescue their pets if left behind, despite advice from public safety officials (Glassey, 2010). In the 1997 Yubba County Flood event, 80% of those who re-entered the evacuation zone without authorisation, did so to reclaim their pet (Heath, 2001).

And when pet owners do evacuate with their pets, they provide a pre-existing and strong psychosocial support mechanism with over 63% of surveyed pet owners identifying their pets as an important coping tool during times of stress (Glassey, 2010). By forcing pet owners to leave their pets in a disaster, pet owners are more likely to be psychologically impacted (Edmonds & Cutter, 2008; Hunt et al, 2008; Heath, 1999; Gerwolls & Labott, 1994). So we are actually harming our communities by not evacuating pets and putting their safety, along with the safety of our front line personnel at risk.

Many emergency management organisations have key performance indicators to reach around public preparedness. Being pro-active with companion animal emergency management is likely to improve community preparedness levels with pet owners being more likely to take preparedness measures that will benefit their pets than they are to protect themselves. (Leonard & Scammon, 2007; Selbert, 2002).

Pre-planning should address the issue of response capacity including spontaneous volunteers. Spontaneous animal rescue volunteers can both impact positively and negatively on response and recovery operation (Anderson & Anderson, 2006; Shiley, 2006). In Hurricane Katrina over 5,000 volunteers from across the country deployed (including self-deployed) to the disaster affected area. Some of these volunteers were well trained, part of formal emergency response systems with
specific training in animal and disaster response. Others were not so well prepared logistically, psychologically or physically. In the Mike Shiley film *Dark Water Rising* (2006), spontaneous volunteers are shown looting, drinking excessively and psychologically exhausted. Anderson and Anderson (2006) also provide evidence of some spontaneous volunteers removing dog collars and identification in the belief that the animal’s owners did not deserve to have the animal back after abandoning it. Accredited animal rescue teams are required, just as animal control officers are not Firefighters, rescue professionals are generally not animal specialists. An accredited capacity is needed and through the work of John Haven from the University of Florida, the National Fire Protection Association has added a new chapter on animal rescue to the NFPA Standard on Technical Rescue Operations and Training (NFPA1670. 2014 edition).

In a propane carriage derailment in Weyauwega, Wisconsin (1996), the entire town population of 1,700 people were evacuated and pets were not. Within 4-5 days 50% of owners had attempted to illegally re-enter the evacuation zone to rescue their pets and frustrated with the lack of action by local emergency services, a bomb threat was made to the Emergency Operations Centre (Irvine, 2009). The take away from this conference is that leaving pets behind during an evacuation is not okay. Pet owners feel strongly toward their pets. Don’t under estimate what lengths they will go to, to save their pet. A bomb threat to an EOC will ruin any emergency managers day.

Finally, I take the opportunity to share some good news arising from lessons learned from the Canterbury earthquakes. Traditionally, there has been only a few and quite distinctive disability assist dogs such as for those assigned to the blind as guide dogs. Today, there are genuine disability assist dogs for those members of our communities who are impaired with deafness, autism, epilepsy and anxiety disorders – these dogs come in all shapes and sizes now. The unfortunate by-product though is a loss of identity for disability assist dogs making it easier for pet owners to purport or impersonate that their dogs is service animal so they can enjoy access rights to public places and transportation, when in fact it is just a much loved pet. Certainly the in USA, there is a growing problem of fake service dogs, with identification vests available without question on the internet (Warren, 2014). In New Zealand, this has also happened, but not to the same extent – yet. However, in my previous role as the Chair of the National Welfare Coordination Group (General Manager, Emergency Management, Ministry of Social Development), I led a project based on the research undertaken by myself and Dr Thomas Wilson (2011) which highlighted the need for bona-fide
Disability Assist Dogs to be easily identified in an emergency. The result was the development of the Civil Defence Disability Assist Dog tag (figure 1), which by using the Civil Defence logo became nationally recognised and protected from misuse under the Civil Defence Emergency Management Regulations 2003 (as the logo has statutory protection). Over 200 disability assist dogs in New Zealand are now eligible for the world’s first disaster identification tag for service animals which will result in rapid reunification of disability assist dogs should they become separated from their handler, as well as making it easier for evacuation centre and emergency service personnel to identify legitimate service dogs in future emergencies. The dog exemplifies how research and taking an evidence based approach to companion animal emergency management can save the lives of people, through protecting pets and service dogs.

![Figure 1: Disability Assist Dog Civil Defence tag. (Source: Ministry of Civil Defence & Emergency Management).](image)

By applying the evidence and lessons from this presentation emergency managers can save shooting themselves in the foot, by taking a positive and grounded approach to companion animal emergency management.
Bibliography


