

Disaster planning and pet animals

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ABSTRACT

Disasters always happen to other people. Those involved in disaster mitigation must realise that the average person is unlikely to plan for disasters in any way. Despite the awareness of wildfire many semi-rural homes still have trees overhanging the roof and leaves filling the gutters. Most people do not have contingency plans for their families, let alone their pets. Yet there are numerous examples of children and adults who have died trying to save animals. In the event of an emergency there must be a strategy to house and care for pets or people may not cooperate with those trying to assist them. Pet planning must be considered by all authorities likely to be involved in disaster mitigation.

INTRODUCTION

Every jurisdiction around Australia has a State Disaster Plan and a Mitigation Committee. It is the role of these groups to determine the risk posed by certain events, develop contingency plans to deal with them and to ensure that the communication and other networks are in place to cope at all times. Under the plans a disaster is defined as an event of such magnitude that the available resources of the State are insufficient to deal with the problem. In these terms a disaster is a very rare event.

In South Australia the last declared disaster was the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983. However lesser incidents are still disasters to the individuals and families affected. Depending on the extent of such events these may be termed disasters, major emergency incidents, or personal tragedies. If a family dies or is injured when a small, rural bridge collapses, it is a personal tragedy, not a disaster, because the local resources would be capable of dealing with the situation. The collapse of the Westgate and Tasman bridges were major emergency incidents. In both cases the resources available were sufficient to meet the requirements but only through the coordination and cooperation of various government and community agencies. If the Sydney Harbour bridge collapsed at peak hour it could well be declared a disaster because it is unlikely that the city could deal with the situation.

A disaster can only be declared by the Premier, on the advice of the Commissioner of Police, for a period of 24 hours. The Governor can make such a declaration for up to 5 days. If such a declaration is made federal agencies, such as the Army, can be seconded to help and funding is not questioned. In disasters the police have extreme powers, such as the right to confiscate property to assist in the effort. As an example, if the Harbour Bridge collapsed, the police could simply use any boat in the harbour with or without the permission of the owner. Obviously these are extreme powers which are appropriate only in extreme circumstances.

The only real difference between a personal tragedy and a full-blown disaster is magnitude. The impact on the individual is unaffected — the injured are still injured and the dead are still dead regardless of the number of people involved. Emergency incidents such as fire, flood and toxic spills are, for the purpose of this paper, discussed whether or not the circumstance fits the criteria of a disaster.

TYPES OF DISASTERS

Disasters are generally divided into natural and man made. In Australia natural events are far more common and include disease outbreaks, wildfire, flood, drought, earthquakes and severe weather such as cyclones. Man made events include gas explosions, toxic spills, accidents, acts of terrorism and acts of war. Droughts are frequently disasters but they are not the siren sounding emergencies that fires and earthquakes present. They are gradual and insidious in onset so are not really considered in this discussion. Regardless of the cause the basic problem of people management is usually the biggest headache to those involved in the relief effort. To many people the family pet is an integral part of the definition of home. If the pet is lost or killed it is far more difficult for people to re-establish their lives and return to a sense of normality.

BEFORE THE DISASTER

People do not plan emergency responses. Most people do not even have a household evacuation plan. The number of house fires in which people do not have smoke detectors, or have them but have not replaced the battery, is frightening. Councils and other authorities that attempt to educate residents in emergency planning for pets are unlikely to be successful.

The pet is an integral part of the family and emergency planning must be an integral part of normal life. Identification is the most important factor in reuniting a pet with its owners. If councils want a simple message to improve emergency response it should be to simply identify animals.

EVACUATIONS

When people are asked to evacuate many bring their pets. Unfortunately most emergency shelters do not have the facilities to house or care for these animals so, in many cases, the animals are refused. This adds another stress to an already stressful situation. Arrangements should be in place to house the animals. A few simple factors should be considered:

- proximity — people are happier if they know they can visit their animal and see for themselves that it is all right;
- compatibility — even in emergency shelters, pets should be individually housed and fed or share facilities only with animals they know;
- cost — ensure that it is clear from the outset what the cost will be and who is going to pay for it;
- standards — ensure that the people given responsibility for the animals are familiar with the species and maintain suitable standards of care.

In an ideal world, every council would have identified emergency animal housing. In reality the identified location may be at the centre of the incident and of no use. Networks and local knowledge are essential. Possible housing includes the council pound, RSPCA, Animal Welfare League, breeders, boarding kennels and veterinarians. In their normal day to day functions animal management officers should be aware of the location and ownership of such establishments and should have developed a sufficient network to organise suitable accommodation on zero notice at any time. Networks are essential for effective emergency management.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMON PET SPECIES

The most commonly owned pets are dogs, cats, birds, horses, fish, rodents and, in some states, reptiles. The emergency shelter should have a veterinarian available to deal with injured animals. This is essential for animal welfare reasons but it is also an important people management tool. If there is no vet then paramedical personnel will be expected to deal with animals. This is neither their priority nor their area of expertise. The human welfare agencies will have enough to do. It is incumbent on animal management officers to ensure that pets do not create a whole new set of problems. To this end it is advisable to record the name, address and other details of the people in the shelter and also whether or not they have animals that are still in the emergency area. This allows animal management officers to re-enter the area as soon as practicable in an attempt to locate lost or injured animals.

DOGS

If dogs accompany their owners to shelters the immediate problem is what to do with them. The last thing an emergency shelter needs is a dog fight. To ensure the smooth running of the human emergency response, careful details of the dog and its owner should be collated and the owner informed of where the dog is going. In many cases the owner may have a friend or relative who would be prepared to look after the dog.

This should be explored as the first option because the owner would be more confident of the standard of care than they would be with an unfamiliar facility. In some cases, especially fire, dogs panic and run.

It is important that, as soon as possible, council officers try to locate lost dogs even if they are dead. The owners generally prefer to know the fate of their pet than not to know — even if the news is bad. This is where identification is essential.

CATS

Few people are sufficiently organised or have the presence of mind to find the cat, put it in a box or cage and take it to an emergency shelter. In most cases the cat will simply be missing and the owners will not know whether or not it is all right. If the cat is identified it has a good chance of being reunited with its owners. In any case animal management officers should search the incident area and surrounds as soon as practicable to find, treat and reunite cats and other lost pets with their families.

BIRDS

Usually cage birds are not a major problem. Either they will be brought to the shelter in a cage, or they will be in aviaries and simply take their chances. Few aviary birds will be injured; most will either be fine or dead. From the records taken at the shelter it will be obvious where aviaries are located. There will be numerous volunteers available to check and, if necessary, feed and water the birds as soon as it is safe. In many instances the owners will do this themselves. Cage birds simply need routine care in a relatively quiet environment. This can be easily organised. However, in general, birds do not cope well with stress, smoke and toxicity. It is important that they are checked over by a veterinarian to ensure that pneumonia and other problems are addressed before clinical signs become evident.

RODENTS

Like birds, guinea pigs, rabbits, rats and mice do not usually cope well with smoke, water or stress so need to be checked by a vet. Again, like birds, they will either be brought in with the family or they will not survive the incident. The biggest problem with such animals is that emergency workers tend not to take them seriously. Remember that a pet ferret may be more important to one family than the pet dog is to another. They need and deserve the same degree of care.

FISH

Fish do not pose a problem. It would be extremely unlikely that a person would bring a goldfish bowl to an emergency shelter and, in almost all cases, if the damage to a house is severe, the tank or bowl will crack and the fish will be dead within minutes. The only issue is to check when practicable and feed, clean or otherwise maintain any tanks which survive.

REPTILES

Snakes and lizards are remarkably resilient animals. If a cage cracks they can escape and often find corners in which to hide. Depending on the nature of the incident they have a fairly high chance of survival. In addition they do not usually require feeding on a daily basis, so can cope if the owners are missing for a few days. In outside pits they can often find shelter in, under or on cage furniture. The owners will usually be aware of the needs of reptiles and will usually organise such care themselves. It is important that the first people to enter the area are aware of any pet snakes — a large python can give a relief officer a rather nasty start.

HORSES

The bad news is that horses tend to panic in emergencies and cannot be floated anywhere. The good news is that most are branded so are easily identified. They do not cope with smoke and, although they can swim quite well, they are not likely to survive a major incident.

In general the best advice for horse owners is to simply release the animals from their paddocks or stalls and let them run for it. Horses are quick and, if not confined, have a reasonable chance of survival. This poses the problem of finding the animals when the emergency is over.

LIVESTOCK

Although not commonly kept as pets, other livestock species are frequently held on hobby farms and are considered by their owners to be somewhere between a pet and livestock.

Sheep can survive amazingly severe circumstances and injuries. Their wool acts as an insulator but can also become water logged and kill the animal. As soon as practicable, the RSPCA and stock inspectors need to enter the area, kill severely injured sheep and treat or send to abattoirs, less injured animals.

Goats do not cope as well. They tend to panic, so do not cope with stress and suffer badly from smoke inhalation and other trauma related diseases. Most goats will not survive a major incident. Like horses, the best advice is to release the animals and give them a chance to escape.

Cattle vary in their tolerance. Obviously a Jersey calf is not as resilient as an Angus heifer, which is far more agile than a Brahman bull. In general cattle tend to panic and injure themselves. It is imperative that a careful examination of the area be conducted as soon as possible.

Pigs rarely survive. They do not cope with stress, heat, or smoke and do not swim well. Most pigs die before the disaster hits through panic and suffocation.

The Department of Primary Industries is a lead agency in the state disaster plans. As soon as practicable, stock inspectors and the RSPCA should conduct a search of the area and tend to any livestock which survive.

DISEASE OUTBREAKS

Exotic diseases are amongst the greatest threats to Australian primary industries. Rinderpest decimated the wildlife and domestic stock of Africa some years ago and exactly the same could happen here. Newcastle Disease would destroy the poultry industry and be carried through to our native parrots and other birds. Numerous other diseases including Anthrax, Bluetongue, Scrapie, Rabies, Foot and Mouth and Screwworm Fly do not occur in Australia and would all be devastating if they were introduced.

If there is a suspected outbreak the first veterinarian on the scene must diagnose a condition that has not been seen here and be confident enough of that diagnosis to quarantine the entire region. No animals may be moved in or out until tests are conducted and the diagnosis confirmed. This is a big ask. The obvious problem is if a person has never seen the disease before, how can they confidently diagnose it? Vets are expected to report any disease they do not recognise or any signs that are consistent with the raft of exotic diseases. Animal management officers may be called upon to assist in handling the stock or preventing animals from moving in or out of the area. It is likely that, in most cases, the police, stock inspectors and perhaps the RSPCA would be the frontrunners in the response and councils may be called upon to provide backup.

WILDLIFE IN DISASTERS

In most cases very little can be done to assist wildlife in disasters. By the time the animals are found and are weak enough to be captured they are obviously poor candidates for survival. They are then taken into captivity, which is highly stressful, fed artificial diets and expected to recover. Usually the people who take on such tasks are animal lovers and have the usual raft of domestic pets. As the animal recovers it becomes used to people, dogs and cats. After the fire through the Royal National Park, many koalas were rescued and rehabilitated. Some were re-released but not one survived. The habitat was gone so in the absence of food, they tried to return to humans. Dogs, cats and motor vehicles finished what the fire did not complete. With time, when the habitat heals, koalas will move back into the park but the food must be there first.

This trend tends to be reflected in all wildfires. It is usually two or three days before animals are found and by then it is too late. Fire tends to be clean. Most animals either escape unscathed or are killed outright.

When the environment returns neighbouring animals re-colonise the area. There is little anyone can do to assist except euthanase injured or dying animals or take them into captivity on a permanent basis.

IN BETWEEN EMERGENCIES

The most important role of council officers is to be available at any time. The Local Government Association is represented on the State Disaster Committees because it is recognised that, in many cases, councils will have heavy equipment and other useful items close at hand if the need arises. Other resources, such as council halls, lockable compounds, trucks and manpower can all be offered by the local council. It is important that the after hours council contact knows what resources are available, who has access to them and how to get in touch with that person at all times. Alternatively one council officer should act as the repository of this information and be available if ever it is needed.

Planning is the best mitigation tool. One cannot plan for a disaster because it is not known where or what it will be. However a basic contingency plan can be developed and the likely players identified. After hours phone numbers should be available to the animal management officers and to other personnel likely to be involved. The best thing a council can do is to try to get people to identify their pets. This single factor will reduce the heartache and effort for everyone. Animal management officers should develop the networks and working relationships to ensure that veterinarians and housing facilities are both available and prepared to assist. Such networks are also important for the day to day functions of the officer and become crucial in times of disaster.

Remember, in times of emergency people are stressed out and likely to over-react to any perceived rudeness to them or ill-treatment to their pets. In such circumstances a quiet, conciliatory and compassionate approach is more likely to succeed than ordering people around.

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