

# Why Study Animals in Disasters?

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The welfare of animals in disasters has only recently received serious scholarly attention. Both the academic literature and the media have long defined disasters as solely affecting human property and human lives. For example, in 1969, a catastrophic oil spill occurred off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. It was the largest spill in U.S. waters at the time, and the oil killed thousands of birds and countless marine mammals. Yet, the president of Union Oil Company, whose well was responsible for the spill, said in a U.S. Senate hearing, “I don’t like to call it a disaster because there has been no loss of human life. I am amazed at the publicity for the loss of a few birds” (Clark and Hemphill 2002:159). Similarly, when millions of animals raised for food died in southern United States during the 2005 hurricane season, the media reported the “losses” suffered by the producers rather than the deaths of sentient beings. As animal activist Miyun Park wrote, “A typical press report reads: ‘According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, farmers in southwestern Louisiana were hurt most by Hurricane Rita, which has resulted in the loss of 30,000 cattle and seriously harmed rice fields and the harvest of sugar cane.’ The farmers were hurt, but the cattle were merely ‘lost.’ Serious harm was reserved for the rice fields” (Park 2005). Fortunately, as the articles in this Special Issue indicate, this anthropocentric perspective no longer dominates. The research, which examines topics including Military Working Dogs, wildlife, companion animals, and animals raised for food, attests to a greater awareness that disasters are more-than-human events. Moreover, the research shows that what constitutes a “disaster” has also evolved. It now extends beyond natural hazards to include the consequences of war, climate change, industrialized animal agriculture, and other events and situations.

Although the scholarly literature now recognizes that the impact of disasters goes well beyond the human realm, human lives remain the priority in disaster planning, response, and recovery. This raises the question of why scholars should devote time and effort to studying animal welfare in disasters. I offer two responses to this question. First, we should study animals in disasters because human lives and animal lives are closely connected emotionally, economically, and morally. We rely on animals as companions, commodities, workers, and more. In bringing them into our homes, institutions, and social settings, we make animals vulnerable to various hazards. In what is known as the *vulnerability paradigm*, researchers distinguish hazards, such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and attack, from disasters, which result from the coupling of a hazard with other factors, such as the physical setting and the capacity of the population to avoid, respond to, and cope with the

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incident's effects (Bolin and Stanford 1998; Tierney 2006). Among human populations, those with the fewest choices are the most vulnerable to disasters. The poor, minorities, women, the disabled, and the elderly face institutionalized practices of domination and marginalization that restrict their options when faced with natural or technological hazards. Like humans, different categories of animals face different exposure to hazards and are differentially provided opportunities for rescue or escape (Irvine 2009). Although animals are vulnerable in different ways, most have no control over their living conditions. Companion animals are vulnerable to abandonment, injury, and death following disasters, but they are less vulnerable than animals raised in industrialized farms and used in research laboratories. Animals who are locked into cages and dependent on automated systems for food, water, and ventilation, face great risk posed by numerous hazards and have no chance of escape. The lives of chickens, hogs, and cattle only have value if they end in slaughter. Because animals' vulnerability varies by the ways that humans have categorized them, it makes little sense to talk about "animals in disasters" as if they all face the same risk. To assert that animals are vulnerable, one must ask which animals are vulnerable, to what, and how. Thus, scholars who study animals in disasters can understand the risks that exist within the specific context and use that knowledge to make them less vulnerable.

A second response to the question of why it is important to study animal welfare in disasters is related to the first: animal problems are people problems. For example, consider the research on companion animals and evacuation following disasters (DeYoung and Farmer 2021; Farmer, DeYoung, and Wachtendorf 2016; Irvine 2009; Zottarelli 2010). Evacuation saves lives and reduces injuries, and researchers have long investigated how to encourage people to comply with evacuation orders prior to an event (Perry 1979; Perry et al. 2001). Research finds that providing for pets ranks highly on the list of reasons why people choose not to evacuate (Baker 1991; see also Drabek 2001; Whitehead et al. 2000). In one survey, 62 percent of respondents said they would defy orders to evacuate if they could not locate a place that would accommodate their pets (American Kennel Club 2006). Of course, some owners might choose to leave their pets behind or be required—or even forced—to do so (Blendon et al. 2007; Irvine 2009; Petrolia and Bhattacharjee 2010). But leaving animals behind can not only jeopardize animal health (Heath, Voeks, and Glickman 2000; Kajiwara 2020; Mattes 2016); it can also affect human mental health and emotional well-being (Glasse and Wilson 2011; Heath 1999; Trigg et al. 2015; Thompson et al. 2014). Because most pet owners in the United States consider their animals members of the family, losing a pet in a disaster can result in significant psychological distress and trauma (Hunt et al. 2008; Irvine and Andre 2023; Kajiwara 2020). The experience can have considerable impact on children (Travis 2014).

In addition, animals must be evacuated along with people for public safety reasons. Research documents that leaving animals behind creates additional risks to human and animal life (Irvine 2009). Residents will often put themselves at risk by re-entering evacuated areas to rescue their animals. For example, at 5:30 a.m. on March 4, 1996, a train derailed while passing through Weyauwega, Wisconsin (Heath, Voeks, and Glickman 2001). Fifteen of the train's cars carried propane, and five of these cars caught fire. At 7:30 a.m., concerns about potential explosion prompted emergency responders to order the evacuation of Weyauwega's 1022 households. Emergency personnel expected the response to take several hours. Consequently, half of the pet-owning households left their pets behind, believing they would soon return home. However, disasters are unpredictable, and the response took much longer. Shortly after the evacuation, forty percent of pet owners reentered the evacuation zone illegally to rescue their pets. Following protocol, emergency managers prevented residents

from entering their own homes. A group of citizens made a bomb threat on behalf of the animals, which directed negative media attention at the response. Four days after the evacuation, the Emergency Operations Center organized an official pet rescue, supervised by the National Guard using armored vehicles. Thus, “pet ownership can be a significant threat to public and animal safety during disasters” (Heath et al. 2001:664).

In sum, the study of animals in disasters is prompted by the recognition that humans and animals share the built and the natural environment, as well as the accompanying risks. Learning how to reduce the vulnerability of animals is a moral, economic, and emotional imperative. Moreover, reducing the risks animals face can reduce the risks to human lives. We have brought billions of animals into existence to satisfy our pleasures, our needs, and our appetites. It was once inconceivable for people to step outside our position of dominance and ask what moral obligations we have to those animals. However, the tide has begun to turn. Increasingly, animals are no longer regarded as the “other.” The articles included in this Special Issue reflect that change and will surely spark further transformations in thought and action.

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