

"NATURAL DISASTERS IN AUSTRALIA – ARE ANIMALS CONSIDERED?"

Tania Duratovic
International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW)
tduratovic@ifaw.org or philandtania@moose-mail.com

Australia is a country well known for its droughts and flooding rains, as immortalised by Dorothea Mackellar. We have always experienced natural hazards such as floods, bushfires, cyclones and so on. Each of these phenomena may result in a significant economic, social, environmental and political impact on the community. Many of these losses are intangible hence an economic framework is often used to calculate the cost of a natural disaster through insured losses. These, however, only represent a small proportion of total loss and of course, do not at all capture losses of animals (other than livestock when this is factored in).

Emergencies such as natural disasters can directly affect or put at risk the welfare, behaviour and health of domestic animals, farm animals, wildlife, and captive animals in zoos/fauna parks. Animal casualties will almost always be higher than human yet there is very little in place to deal with this. Up until recently, animals, other than farm animals (livestock), were not officially considered in disaster management in Australia. Following the Black Saturday Victorian bushfires in February 2009 and the Queensland floods in 2011 and their subsequent Commissions of Inquiry, some changes have been made, although much more still needs to be done.

FARM ANIMALS

As livestock is considered an asset to farmers, governments and agricultural organisations like the Farmers Federation, will generally provide some sort of assistance. Food is often air dropped by the landholder or with Government assistance. Farmers also are given warnings to move their animals to higher ground during floods.

Yet many farm animals still perish during these events. Large animals, like horses, are vulnerable because fences cut off any potential escape from the disaster. Farmers can underestimate the height of flood waters and may not move their animals to higher ground. Others animals die because there is not enough help to get food or treatment to them (pers. obs.).

COMPANION ANIMALS

Companion animals (including working dogs) also become victims, particularly if their owners cannot take them with them when evacuating. Many pet owners will not leave their homes if their animals cannot accompany them. There were even reports during the floods in Queensland in 2011 that some owners took to shooting their animals so as not to leave them at the mercy of the rising waters (pers. obs.).

Animals generally are not allowed into evacuation centres for people although this attitude is slowly changing with the flooding in Queensland in 2011 bringing this issue to the forefront. In some instances, the RSPCA as well as the Australian Veterinary Association, local vets, local Councils, and pet rescue organisations will help with companion animals.

WILDLIFE

People generally presume that wildlife have the ability to survive most disasters. That somehow they can survive on their own. Whilst the wildlife of Australia is well adapted to the environments they inhabit, they still often become victims during disasters, either directly through injury or indirectly through loss of food and shelter. Wildlife, like ourselves, is as prone to the winds of a cyclone and to the flames of a bushfire as any other animal and perhaps even more so because the habitat upon which they rely for food and shelter is also often destroyed.

The media often run stories of people and their pets during floods but that concern is less commonly directed towards wildlife. We do sometimes see news images of wildlife in dire situations, such as kangaroos stranded on a small piece of land above the surrounding floodwaters. But even here many people consider their plight as a natural occurrence. Yet without food, these animals will starve to death or succumb to other conditions they may have, such as injuries. Many animals are washed away or become so exhausted by constantly struggling in water that they die from hypothermia, shock or exhaustion.

During bushfires and cyclones there are similar challenges. For those who do survive, there is often no food or shelter remaining. Smaller or injured animals are easy prey in this exposed environment. Many simply die a slow death from lack of food, from injuries or from the constant struggle to find shelter. During cyclones, species such as bats and fruit doves may have survived the first impact, but subsequently die from a lack of food as often cyclones coincide with the fruiting of important feed trees that are destroyed. Other arboreal creatures die because all the vegetation has been stripped bare. Local vets in affected areas often have little experience or inclination to deal with wildlife.

Unless the species is a threatened species with a high local profile such as koala or cassowary (and even that is often not enough), little is done for wildlife during disasters by anyone other than struggling local wildlife carers who themselves are often directly affected by the disaster (eg, losing aviaries).

MORE TO BE DONE

There is still clearly much to be done for all animals not just during a disaster but before and after disasters. Disaster management plans are in place to deal with human safety and, to a large degree, property but up until very recently they lacked plans for the management of animals in these situations. It is clear that animal management needs to be a component of all disaster management plans.

Between 2000 and 2004, Prof Adrian Franklin from the University of Tasmania conducted research into the relationship between Australians and animals (Franklin, 2006). His results found that dogs, cats, birds and fish were the most commonly kept pets with around 50% of Australian households having a dog, 33% a cat, 15% having birds and 13% having fish. Very small percentages of households have other animals that might be characterised as companions, such as horses, guinea pigs, and rabbits. Franklin found that the keeping of animals is similar across all income groups, except for those on very low incomes who were less likely to keep animals.

This can be translated as saying that during a disaster, a large percentage of households affected will have animals.

Companion animals receive the strongest level of animal welfare protection of all categories of animal, both in terms of formal legal protection and in terms of the enforcement of this protection, including through investigation and prosecution. If there are valid concerns that can be raised about how well the needs of companion animals are being addressed in disaster management, and there are, then it is certain that these concerns will be magnified for other animals, especially wildlife.

GOVERNMENT AND LEGISLATIVE STRUCTURE

ANIMAL WELFARE AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Each State and Territory has its own legislation regarding disasters and a disaster management plan to deal with the hazards. It might, therefore, be expected that the management of animal welfare in disasters would be addressed in these state and territory disaster management legislation. However, this is generally not the case.

COMMONWEALTH EMERGENCY ARRANGEMENTS

The Commonwealth's emergency arrangements are set out in a number of documents, the most relevant to this report being the Australian Emergency Management Arrangements and the Australian Government Disaster Response Plan (COMDISPLAN).

The Arrangements provide an overview of how Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments collectively approach the management of emergencies, including catastrophic disaster events. The aim of COMDISPLAN is to describe the coordination arrangements for the provision of Australian Government physical assistance to states or territories or offshore territories in the event of a disaster. The plan can be activated for any disaster regardless of the cause.

There is no Commonwealth disaster legislation or any process for the declaration of a national emergency. The Commonwealth arrangements envisage that the management of an emergency on Australian territory, regardless of its scale, will be a matter for State and Territory authorities. The Commonwealth's role is to provide Commonwealth resources, primarily the military, to assist the State agencies. The Commonwealth can also take on a role coordinating offers of, or requests for, international assistance. The plans do not envisage a role for the Commonwealth in managing a response regardless of its scale or impact.

STATE AND TERRITORY ARRANGEMENTS

The Australian States and Territories have the primary responsibility for managing the response to any natural disaster. International assistance from other national governments would be expected to accept the authority of the State agency in command of the emergency response and will form part of that State response. Non-government organizations generally operate independent of Government agencies so their response may well be separate from the official response. This may lead to duplication, inefficiency and raise the need for appropriate coordination and control of the response, as was the case during the Black Saturday Victorian bushfires in 2009 in relation to the rescue of animals (pers. obs).

The arrangements for disaster response are relatively similar across Australian jurisdictions. Each State and Territory has detailed disaster management legislation that provides for disaster planning provision for a declaration of a State of Alert,

Emergency or Disaster (the terms vary across jurisdictions) (outlined in the Commonwealth Arrangements).

Once a formal declaration has been made, the functions and powers to be exercised by the emergency controllers charged with the responsibility of managing the response to a disaster are set out. When an emergency reaches the level of a State of Disaster or Emergency, a whole of government approach is required. This means that a relevant Minister or the State counter-disaster controller is given broad powers to control access to the disaster site and to commandeer either private or State-owned resources and direct them to the relief effort. (NB this has implications for NGOs such as wildlife rehabilitation/rescue groups wanting to help during a disaster).

STATE	LEGISLATION & PLAN	COMMENTS
QLD	<i>Disaster Management Act 2003</i> State Disaster Management Plan (current June 2011)	RSPCA member of State Disaster Coord. Gp. Some provision for livestock, discussion in 2008 & 2011 flood COI re pets. Nothing for wildlife.
NSW	<i>State Emergency and Rescue Management Act 1989</i> State Disaster Plan (Displan) (current July 2010)	Provision for all animals but on the ground translates as very little. (though on a local level can be different). Participating Organisations in the Plan include several animal NGOs including wildlife groups.
VIC	<i>Emergency Management Act, 1986</i> Emergency Management Manual Victoria contains: Victorian Emergency Animal Welfare Plan	Post 2009 fires, Emergency Animal Welfare Plan – includes farm animals, pets, and wildlife. Protocols for volunteers involved in wildlife rescue operations.
TAS	<i>Emergency Management Act 2006</i> Tasmanian Emergency Management Plan (March 2009)	Lists Council as responsible for pets with the support of RSPCA. Lists DPIW as responsible for livestock & DEPHA as responsible for wildlife care during emergencies.
SA	<i>Emergency Management Act 2004</i> State Emergency Management Plan (current is December 2011)	RSPCA included as a “Participating Organisation”. Livestock considered. Recognition that evacuated persons need to have their pets considered. Vets formulated “SAVEM” group to assist during disasters incl. wildlife. Not yet tested.
WA	<i>Emergency Management Act 2005</i> Various State level plans for different hazards	Some mention of evacuation of pets though largely discretionary and currently prohibited from evacuation centres.
NT	<i>Northern Territory Disaster Act 1982</i> NT All Hazards Emergency Management Arrangements	Most shelters do not allow animals.

DISCUSSION

Although some progress is being made in regards to animals in disasters, particularly following the 2009 Victorian fires and the recent years of severe flooding in Queensland and the subsequent Commissions of Inquiries, there is still evidently not enough being done to alleviate the suffering many animals undergo during and following a disaster. This is particularly the case with wildlife.

Whilst the responsibility for the safety of pets seems to largely rest with their owners and occasionally help from Councils and the RSPCA, and there is some assistance from State governments for livestock, wildlife seems to be by and large left out of the equation (other than in oil spills). Any help that is given to wildlife usually takes the form of local rescuers and wildlife carers taking it upon themselves to do something although they themselves are often victims of disasters and when not, often face great hurdles to try and do something. On a localised level, some wildlife carer groups have formed good relationships with their local Department of Environment/National Parks rangers and often manage to operate at this level.

Clearly, more needs to be done at a State level to include all animals (companion, farm, and wildlife) in State Disaster Management Plans with clearly defined roles and accountabilities for those involved. Without being written into these plans at this level, it is very difficult on the ground during a disaster to do anything with any effectiveness. And if something is being done, it is very uncoordinated and confusing for all involved.

At the moment the emphasis appears to be directed towards the planning for and rescuing of domestic and farm animals. Perhaps this is because most people don't know how to help wildlife in trouble and presume they can fend for themselves. As wildlife rehabilitators/rescuers, we can change this view.

We need to build better partnerships with local, State and Federal authorities, volunteer agencies, business and industry, and amongst each other. We need to work together to ensure we are identified as part of the overall preparedness and response network.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that the Government cannot manage all this on it's own and needs the help of NGOs and the community. And in the case of wildlife, a specialist area, this is even more so. Each of us has a role in emergency management because disasters can affect everyone and every animal. The need is there even if it is not recognised yet by everyone.

REFERENCES

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TANIA DURATOVIC: Campaigns Officer, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) Asia Pacific, 8 Belmore Street. SURRY HILLS NSW 2010, Australia

Tania has been involved in most Emergency Response Teams sent out by IFAW in the Asia Pacific region and has had a lot of experience in major wildlife rescue operations.