

The burning question – What can we learn from the Victorian bushfires? Experiences from a shelter on the frontline

Presenter: Linda Marston, Research Fellow, Monash University

Email: linda.marston@med.monash.edu.au

Although Australia is already a land of extremes, climate change is likely to exacerbate these extremes and increase the risk and severity of future bushfire events. Already the unprecedented heat and speed of the 'Black Saturday' conflagration has caused us to rethink much of what we thought we 'knew' about bushfires. The risk of this event, on the existing scale of 0-100, was estimated at over 300! As more than 60% of Australian homes contain at least one pet, the management of these animals during times of crisis is a significant challenge particularly as they may have important psychological effects on their owners' well-being post-disaster. It is imperative therefore, that we learn from this experience and improve our response to future such events.

Being located at the mouth of the Yarra Valley and situated on the major access roads into the Black Saturday fire-zone, Animal Aid (AA) was the first port of call for many people in the fire affected areas who needed help with their animals. In fact, the shelter was so close to the fire-zone that the shelter's own fire plan was enacted several times during the emergency and a number of staff residences were affected by the fires. The shelter's response to the bushfire began at about 5pm on Black Saturday, when the shelter fire plan was enacted for the first time in response to ember threat. Staff and a member of the Shire of Yarra Ranges Animal Management team, remained onsite to protect the facility and process emergency evacuations. The first affected animal arrived at 1am the next morning (Sunday). Over the next three weeks, the shelter was staffed from 0800 to 2300 to accept animals. Extra staff and volunteers were rostered throughout this period to care for the extra animals.

As the shelter could not meet the requirements of the community by itself, a series of radio appeals was made and a daily update of events and requirements was posted on the AA website. The response to these appeals was enormously gratifying but overwhelming, creating its own problems including traffic control at the shelter and jammed phone lines. Storage and labour to handle, store and distribute the donated goods also required significant coordination and manpower.

Initially these appeals focused primarily on the needs of dogs and cats. However, apart from special appeals for crates, which were required as new relief centres were established, the emphasis of later appeals was almost exclusively focused on large animal requirements including feed, hay, water containers (including bath tubs), rugs, lead ropes and temporary fencing. Large animal supplies are very bulky creating a significant storage challenge requiring a large storage area with good truck access and located close to major roads. The storage also needed to be undercover due to the highly combustible nature of hay and proximity to the fires. The owner of a nearby equestrian

centre offered AA the temporary use of his indoor arena for storage. AA also acquired the use of a large storage shed and an unused service station to provide off-site storage. In order to manage these materials, the shelter had to hire equipment including a forklift to load and unload stores and a 5-ton truck. This vehicle, plus others supplied by volunteers, delivered supplies to the affected areas. Several storage containers were also used to provide secure on-site storage. Supply dumps were established in association with the CFA in Glenburn; the Community Relief Centre at Flowerdale, the public houses at Narbethong, Alexandra, Buxton and Yea, the community hall at Toolangi, several sites around Kinglake plus at a number of private properties where shedding remained intact. Volunteers from relief centres then distributed the supplies to those in need throughout their community.

During the initial response, supplies had to be delivered into the affected areas because many residents had lost their vehicles. Even if vehicles were usable, fuel was problematic because service stations were destroyed. Additionally, many people could not communicate with the outside world because the phone lines were down, mobile phone towers destroyed and mobile phone batteries had run down and could not be recharged without a generator.

Supplies required in different localities differed significantly, depending upon the farming activities and lifestyles undertaken in the area. AA adopted a standard practice whereby the first run into an area carried a mixed load of small, large animal and poultry supplies, with at least 100 bales of hay included. Depending upon knowledge gained from the initial run, subsequent loads were modified to specifically supply the needs of the chicken, dairy, goat, alpaca, hobby and horse farms.

Due to the geography of the area and road closures, some areas did not have access to veterinary services, resulting in many injured livestock being untreated for a number of days. To service this need, AA established a temporary veterinary clinic at Toolangi which remained open for eight days. It was staffed by two veterinarians (catering for both large and small animals) and a veterinary nurse. Animals were treated both at the clinic and at owners' properties. The majority of animals requiring treatment at this clinic were livestock, presenting with a variety of injuries including burns and abrasions from fences.

After the initial fires, when people evacuated because their homes were lost, threatened or damaged, many residents of Healesville, Chum Creek and the Warburton valley evacuated as a precautionary measure during subsequent high-risk periods. AA managed to accommodate most of the animals from these homes, except on Friday the 20th of February, when the shelter was overwhelmed by mass evacuations from Warburton and Healesville.

The Pet Industry Association of Australia had compiled a list of boarding catteries and kennels offering emergency boarding for bushfire victims. The most local of these were contacted and they accommodated the 'overflow' of animals at this time. This was even more heart-warming because many of these facilities had themselves been under fire attack or extreme threat just days before. To quote one of the proprietors *'there's nothing left that can burn around us, we're probably the safest place in Victoria right now'*.

With so many agencies responding to the animal victims of the bushfire (including Local Government, the Department of Primary Industries, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Melbourne Zoo, Healesville Sanctuary, and a multitude of wildlife, veterinary and welfare organisations) the lack of a centrally coordinated Animal Disaster Response resulted in duplication of effort. The management of any future emergency response would be greatly enhanced by the creation/appointment of a non-partisan coordinating body/officer, who actively allocates available resources and direct efforts. The presence of an Animal Disaster Response body would also streamline liaison with key individuals in affected areas, providing a structured method to disseminate relevant information such as road status to identified organisations and facilitate liaison between organisations working in areas, eliminating obstructions that slowed the deployment of resources. For example, the veterinary response for large animals was unacceptably slow in some areas, with animals waiting for many days for humane euthanasia whilst suffering from burns and smoke inhalation. This must be addressed in future by allocating sufficient numbers of personnel authorised to perform euthanasia in the initial days of the response. Also, the plight of "feral" animals such as foxes, deer, birds etc need to be considered, as these animals do not seem to be the clear responsibility of any particular agency, yet were affected in large numbers by this disaster.

During this emergency, personnel such as ambulance paramedics were required to deal with cats and dogs, that had been left behind by their owners, and with injured wildlife, even though not trained to do so. Not only did these activities distract them from their main tasks, but exposed them to the risk of being bitten, scratched or kicked. As animals are likely to be extremely fearful after such an experience, particularly if injured, it is far better that such animals be approached by individuals who are trained to understand and deal with animal behaviour. Trained animal professionals should be an integral component of any emergency response and could include council Animal Management Officers (AMOs), shelter personnel, behaviourists and veterinarians.

In order to achieve the optimal use of resources, it is suggested that a number of key animal welfare agencies, located in strategic locations around Melbourne and Victoria, be designated as primary emergency response facilities to ensure the most rapid possible response in future disasters. These organisations may need assistance to obtain emergency mobile veterinary clinics and emergency response units which can then be deployed in future disasters in Victoria or possibly elsewhere in Australia, if required. The establishment of emergency stores of essential supplies such as non-perishable food, temporary

fencing (including horse yards), portable electric fencing materials, humane cat and dog traps, dog and cat crates, other animal transport containers, first aid supplies and medications, bedding, bowls, litter trays, cages leads, collars, microchip scanners (to identify lost animals) and temporary shelter should also be considered, as this would facilitate the rapid deployment of essential supplies into relief centres. These stores would form the initial response to any emergency and could be supplemented by public appeal and donations, as occurred during this disaster. These supplies would be the property of the Emergency Management Australia agency and could only be used for emergencies.

During this crisis, it became apparent that many private citizens did not plan adequately for their animals during the emergency. Cats arrived at the shelter in printer boxes held together with tape or in pillowcases. Many people did not include food or water for their pets in their evacuation plans. Disaster planning training, such as that provided by the CFA, needs to be enhanced to include detailed planning for pet and livestock animals during a disaster, including confining them when a disaster is imminent. Livestock owners need to plan for the survival of their animals by supplying them with ploughed refuges, installing internal gates between paddocks to allow movement away from the fire and utilise various other strategies to protect their animals.

Fortunately, this disaster occurred outside peak holiday season, therefore shelters, catteries and kennels had capacity to house evacuees. Should an emergency occur during a peak holiday period, then these facilities would have limited ability to provide emergency accommodation. This would increase the pressure on council established relief centres. It seems essential therefore, that owners should be encouraged to provide for their pets in their personal disaster/fire plans, with dog owners encouraged to keep their dogs with them and cats (due to containment difficulties) placed into emergency accommodation. After recent disasters in the United States of America, disaster planners are required to include animals in their planning (Nolen 2006) and animals are included in disaster planning documents produced by Emergency Management Australia (EMA). As a method of raising awareness and educating residents in disaster prone areas perhaps councils could distribute these documents to residents and encourage emergency planning by providing a discount on registration fees or rates, upon submission of a valid disaster plan.

As some relief centres were established in buildings that did not allow animals, this created some problems for animal evacuees. Owners were given a choice of going elsewhere or abandoning their animals. Most people regard their pet as part of the family (Salmon & Salmon 1983). It is inhuman to expect people to abandon their non-human family members, especially after having evacuated them from their home. Some people delayed leaving their homes or placed their own lives in danger to rescue their pets from the fire; they would certainly not abandon them afterwards. This behaviour is consistent with responses in other emergency situations such as Hurricane Katrina, where 44% of the people who did not evacuate because they could not take their pet with them

(Maloney 2009). Black Saturday animal evacuees included a wide variety of species including, cats and dogs, caged birds, lizards, chickens, ducks, horses, ponies, goats and sheep. Planning therefore needs to include provision for these species and should not be limited to cats and dogs.

For reasons of safety or veterinary care many animals were displaced or removed from properties without their owners' knowledge. Some of these animals were moved a considerable distance. It was often exceedingly difficult for owners to find these animals, resulting in many distressed calls to assorted agencies. The creation of a state-wide lost and found register would have minimised such distress for individuals already traumatised by the bushfires. The ability to record lost and found animals would have accelerated reunions between pets and their owners during this crisis, reducing pressure on animal care agencies. Such a register would also be exceedingly useful at other times by enabling owners to post details of lost or found animals in an easily accessible database which could be regularly reviewed by welfare organisations for potential matches. These organisations could also post details of lost and stray animals admitted by them. Ideally the registry would be administered by a central body such as the Department of Primary Industries, which is the regulating authority responsible for the impoundment of dogs, cats and livestock. This would ensure equitable access to the registry by all organisations. The ability to use a single point of contact, such as this, would make finding a lost/relocated animal much simpler for owners. Ideally, person's removing an animal from a property, without the owners' knowledge, should post relevant information at the site when removing the animals, however that did not always occur. A state-wide lost and found database would facilitate tracking animals, particularly those that are taken into care by various organisations or "Good Samaritans".

Shelters, pounds and boarding facilities are governed by Codes of Practice (COPs) designed to ensure the wellbeing of the animals. In Victoria, it is a requirement of the *Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994* that any person who finds a dog or cat, hand it to a Council Officer or agent (such as a pound or shelter) as soon as reasonably possible. Shelters and pounds also have expertise at reuniting lost animals and owners. Therefore, from a legal and welfare perspective, during disasters, animals should be preferentially accommodated by organisations that comply with the COP for the Management of Dogs and Cats in Shelters.

Although AA received thousands of offers to accommodate dogs and cats in private homes, a policy decision was made by shelter management to refer individuals only to registered boarding facilities that had offered their assistance. As these organisations comply with a COP, it was felt that this would best guarantee the welfare of the animals involved. In the case of evacuated livestock, owners were put into direct contact with people offering appropriate accommodation in suitable areas and asked to make their own arrangements.

With the evacuation of affected areas, many large animals were left unattended in paddocks and some companion animals were left locked in homes. A systematic monitoring

system is required to ensure that the welfare of these animals is not compromised. Paddocks should be checked as soon as it is safe to do so. After an exceedingly hot week preceding the bushfires, many animals were already dehydrated which was exacerbated by the fire. After the fire, many animals were left without food and water for several days. In some cases, this occurred because their owners had died in the fire or had been evacuated and were prevented from returning to the property by authorities. House to house door knocks, that were conducted to identify the presence of people, could also identify animals that had been left behind. The utilisation of a ribbon system, similar to that used to by the forensic identification teams, would visually identify the properties with unattended animals and enable Animal Response Teams to target their efforts in the most efficient manner.

Many animals took fright in the face of the approaching fire-front and ran away from their owners who were in the process of evacuating. If these animals survived the fires, they often returned home over the next few days. Vacated properties need to be monitored to identify when this occurs, so that trapping, husbandry or veterinary care can be provided for the animals. Liaison between the agencies working in the disaster zone would ensure that the presence of an animal at a vacant property would trigger an intervention by a welfare agency or council AMO.

Cats are remarkably resilient animals. Having found shelter somewhere during the fire, many returned to their burnt out homes over subsequent weeks. Staff residing in the Kinglake area trapped a number of cats at burned out houses in the first days after the fires and took the cats into care. Four weeks after the fires, residents of Marysville petitioned Police to allow AA to commence a cat-trapping program. These cats had been living without human care and attention since the fires. Some were injured and required veterinary care. It is quite possible that a number of cats died from injuries sustained during the fire that could have been saved, if they had been trapped earlier. Ideally, cat trapping should have commenced within two days of the fire, or as soon as it was safe to access the area. AA continued to trap cats in Marysville up to seven weeks after the fire. Importantly, all of the cats that were trapped were subsequently reunited with their owners. Sadly, the shelter has the details of 39 owners who are still hoping to be reunited with cats missing from the Marysville area.

What did we learn?

- 1) Central coordination of information and resources (both human and supplies) is essential to meet the rapidly and dynamically changing needs of animals in disaster areas.
- 2) Increased planning is required to meet the needs of large animals in the initial emergency response. As soon as human supplies can be moved into an area, then so should livestock supplies.
- 3) The rapid deployment of people qualified to perform euthanasia must be factored into the initial response.
- 4) There needs to be increased recognition of the importance of animals to people in the provision of emergency accommodation. Also, recognition that

companion animals include a wide variety of species.

- 5) Skilled animal professionals must be included in disaster planning and ideally emergency personnel should receive animal behaviour training.
- 6) Introduction of a standard system to identify when animals are left unattended, or return home after a disaster, would improve welfare for the animals concerned.
- 7) Improved tracking of animals removed from their owner's property using a state-wide lost and found database would increase reunions and reduce owner distress.
- 8) Increased public awareness and education regarding disaster planning to better prepare for future crises.
- 9) Recognition that the Australian public is extraordinarily generous during disasters but that this can be overwhelming. We need a better way to manage offers of help and supplies. For example, a central database of offers of assistance would prevent telephone lines being jammed and allow shelter personnel to focus on responding to the animals in need.

Undoubtedly, this was a disaster without precedent but our response to animals involved in disasters needs to be improved. The manager of a Canadian shelter has been quoted in a recent publication (Wittnich & Belanger 2008) '*As the manager of a small, rural humane society, I was feeling quite overwhelmed and nearing a state of panic after the first four sessions of the Caring During Crisis symposium. Knowing that our territory spans five different municipalities, the magnitude of my responsibilities became frightening. Not only would we have companion animals to potentially rescue and shelter, there are all the farm animals to consider as well. Taking into account the staff and volunteer base I have to work with, I was convinced of one thing—we're screwed!*'.

Perhaps if we'd had time to think about Black Saturday, we'd have felt the same way. As it was, we were just too busy dealing with it! Under the circumstances the response of the welfare and wider community to the animals and owners affected by the fires was outstanding and heart-warming. However, we can and must do better in future.

AA gratefully acknowledges the assistance of everyone who volunteered time or goods to assist us in during this disaster but particularly the management and staff of Carlton Lodge equestrian Centre and the Pet Industry Association of Australia whose members not only donated goods, but provided emergency accommodation when the shelter filled to capacity.

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About the author

Linda Marston is a Research Fellow with the Anthrozoology Research Group at Monash University. She completed her PhD in 2006, investigating ways to improve the success of dog adoptions from animal welfare shelters. This research has resulted in the development of many strategies to improve the well-being of dogs in shelters and has been recognised by the International Fund for Animal Welfare. Over the past four years Linda has worked with many Australian state governments to inform policy related to the management of dogs and cats in the community and to improve reporting from the shelters and pounds in their jurisdiction.

She has published widely in the scientific literature, writes occasionally for the print media, contributes to the review panels of a number of scientific journals and presents her research regularly at local and international conferences. Linda has designed and delivers courses on animal behaviour and handling for AMOs and pound employees, is currently involved in developing animal welfare education for children with Animal Aid. She works closely with urban planners to promote the positive incorporation of dogs and cats into the urban landscape.

Her research is focused on the human-companion-animal relationship in all its forms including; the welfare of companion animals, the effects of companion animals on human health and well-being and cultural differences in pet ownership.