

Pets and bushfire – what do we know?

Chair: Malcolm Hackett OAM

Presenter: Dr Mel Taylor



Malcolm

Unfortunately Steve Glassey who was advertised on the flyer is unable to be with us tonight. We'll begin with a presentation from Dr Mel Taylor of Macquarie University. Thanks Mel.

Mel Taylor

Thank you so much for having me tonight. It's a real pleasure to be here.

I would like to pay my respects to the Ngunnawal people on whose lands I'm coming to you from tonight and pay my respects to their elders past present and future.

Tonight we're going to talk about pets and bushfires. And I'm glad we've had the care comment at the start of this webinar because there may be some things you find a bit upsetting. I won't go into too much detail but just be aware and look after yourself if you start feeling a bit unsure about wanting to stay.

I want to start by acknowledging and introducing you to my little clan here on the top left. This is my dog Iva, my three cats and my golah who's a bit of a terrorist. But they all give me a lot of joy in my life, and also some concerns when it comes to think about emergencies and what we're going to do.

I'm a social scientist. My background is psychology. So I'm coming at this topic from the point of view of thinking about people and their behaviour more than about animal welfare and health.

Rachel as a veterinarian can pick up on those areas and I can concentrate on some of the human behaviour which is so important when it comes to planning and preparedness for bushfires.

As part of my research I have been involved with post bushfire interviews - talking to people about their experiences of bushfire whether that's to do with warnings they've received and the decisions they made, that sort of thing.

I've done quite a lot of that work. And in fact the last year I've been doing similar work but with people who've been impacted by the floods in New South Wales and Queensland. A lot of the stuff I'm going to talk about tonight is really quite agnostic when it comes to the actual hazard itself.

A lot of the planning preparedness suggestions and information here is stuff that would be useful not just for bushfires but also for floods, cyclones and indeed any kind of emergency that you might have that means you can't get back to your animals. I think anything you do here in the preparedness space will be really helpful.

I was involved with a three year project with the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC on managing animals in disasters where we were looking at a lot of best practice in the area. And I'm going to

use some of the information we got through that research in my work with the communities in the Blue Mountains and through an organization called Blue ARC which is Blue Mountains Animal Ready Community where we looked at doing what we can to include and encourage the community to plan and prepare for their animals.

This is my presentation structure tonight. I'm going to talk a little bit about research and what we know from research about people, animals and emergencies and how all these things interact.

Then I'm going to talk about some hopefully useful hints and tips and things to think about when it comes to preparing for your animals. And then at the very end I've got a couple of slides about some of the resources that are available. And I'm sure that can all be shared with you later as well.

The one thing I wanted to pick out on this slide was some of those pictures you can see on the right hand side. One of the key things for me as a psychologist, somebody's interested in human decision making behaviour, is very evident in these pictures. And that is one of emotion.

Dealing with emotional people in these sorts of situations is of course a terrific challenge for emergency responders but also for ourselves as decision makers. I know in this set of webinars you're going to be hearing from Danielle Clode next week and she will tell you a lot about this. This presentation will hopefully add to what she's going to say.

It's been acknowledged for quite a while now that animals in disasters is quite a challenge. This quote you can see here on the screen is from leaders in this area from the United States in this area. They've identified there's no other factor contributing as much to human evacuation failure in disasters that's under the control of emergency managers when a threat is imminent as pet ownership.

I'm going to talk a little bit to start with about where we've got some of this information from. I want to make a few important points clear at the outset. You may well be aware of these. But if you're not I think these are really important things to take away from tonight's presentation. The first important thing is who is responsible. When it comes to animals you are responsible. If they're your animals you are the person managing those animals. You are in charge and they're your responsibility. And they stay your responsibility throughout any bushfire experience you might have.

So whether you're in an emergency evacuation centre or whether you're on the road the animals *are your responsibility. Two other points - animals as property, and primacy of human life.* Emergency services are tasked with protecting and saving human life. That's their priority. That doesn't mean they won't care about animals. But it does mean that the priority is on people and protecting them in the first instance. What you can do best for yourself is to be as prepared and as self reliant as possible so you don't have to add to the challenges the emergency services are facing in bushfire situations.

I'll talk a bit more about the human animal bond because that's really where some of that emotion comes into play. The other thing is that in most of these cases when we're talking about being prepared with your animals the key safest behaviour that's being encouraged in all of these situations – bushfires, floods, other sorts of emergencies is the safe relocation of animals to a safer place. And ideally to do that early. And I'm quite deliberately using the word relocation rather than evacuation. Ideally the best thing to do is to get out quickly, get out early and relocate your animals so they're out of the way. They don't get into your decision making. They're not something that's going to delay you leaving or taking a good course of action. So my big message is be prepared, leave early and take your animals with you.

A lot of the research we had in this area especially 5 - 10 years ago was from the United States. And a lot of that was observations that they'd had about the sorts of things people were doing in emergencies with their animals. You can see here we've got a whole selection of different things. I think this was from Hurricane Harvey. And you can see people evacuating with their animals in eskys. You can see different types of animals. Massive tortoises. You've got people in a cohabiting emergency evacuation shelter. People with their animals alongside, people without animals inside the shelter which is unusual in Australia but it's something that is a little bit more widespread in the USA.

You've got animals that were left behind. The dogs in the boats were left behind by owners and needed rescuing later. And you've got rescuers and members of the public trying to save animals. We're seeing a lot of different behaviours in these events. The big catalyst for change in the United States in terms of preparing and planning for animals and putting that front and centre in planning was Hurricane Katrina, a massive hurricane in the New Orleans area.

In that event tens of thousands of animals that were left behind that needed to be collected up, relocated and reunited with their owners. Very few actually got reunited. Many animals were killed. There were animals that were chained up. Dogs chained up in yards that drowned. There were dogs left behind. There were people that stayed behind to look after their animals and died as a consequence. So a whole heap of experiences here that brought this to the attention of FEMA and the people in charge there. And not long after they passed this Pets Evacuation Transportation Standards Act. PETS Act. Which meant that the emergency management organizations needed to include animals in their preparedness planning if they wanted to receive federal funding for emergencies. That was a game changer in the USA.

Recently there's been some further improvements in terms of the PAW Act (Planning for Animal Wellness) which is looking at having experts come together to decide on best practice and to help implement that as well. So there's lots going on in the United States and we tend to look that way for our information.

The Black Summer bushfires in 2019/2020 in Australia. The one thing that got global attention was the impact of those fires on our wildlife in particular. And you can see from this slide I've got some information about the numbers of wildlife that were believed to be killed as part of those fires. You can also see there's some mention of livestock. So more than 80,000 livestock also perished in those fires. And at the bottom right that little bit of information has come from the South Australian Government independent review of those bushfires. You can see that I think it's around some 67 or so thousand livestock were killed in those fires alone in that total.

What's interesting here is we have no idea how many pets died as a consequence of these fires because no one collects the data. There are no numbers known for that. Of course that in itself is alarming because if we don't have the data we can't make more of a case to ensure those animals are included in plans.

One of the things that's been fun for me in the last few years working in this area is I get to talk to people and they ask me what sort of research I do and I start talking about animals. And as soon as you talk to people who've got animals or know people with animals or who've got family with animals their eyes light up. You have the best conversations. It's a fabulous way to engage with people. So a lot of what we've been doing in the Blue ARC work I mentioned in the Blue Mountains is really using that bond that people have with their animals as a way to engage with them about emergency planning - bushfire planning in this case.

We have all sorts of different relationships with animals. They're our companions. Unconditional love and those sorts of expressions get used. We have attachments to all sorts of different animals in all sorts of different ways. If you're a sports person in equestrian you've got a different relationship with your horse perhaps. And if you're someone who has show animals you go around caring about your animals in those sorts of ways. So there are lots of different relationships with animals.

In terms of Australian statistics. Again they fluctuate a little bit but generally speaking about 63% of households in Australia have got pets. Now in COVID we know that people had more dogs. And in fact those numbers went up (estimated to around 69% during COVID). And I think subsequently we've seen those numbers decline a little bit more as people have had to go back to work as we've had more financial constraints. These numbers fluctuate. But you can see a large proportion of households in Australia have got animals. And so we need to be thinking about those animals.

Most people who have animals consider them part of the family. It's something you choose to do, you choose to have animals in your life. They're around us and as I've said you've got lots of different sort of bonds with them. And they play an important role in lots of different ways. If you take dogs for example: people walk their dogs, they get some health benefits from that, they also get out and about on the street, they meet their neighbours, they meet other dog walkers, and there's a whole social connectedness that comes from that as well. Indeed, in terms of equestrian sports, shows and things like that there's a lot of social aspects that go on with people and their animals. In addition we have working animals, working dogs and service animals - a lot of different connections with people.

Why does this matter? Why do we need to plan for our animals? I'm guessing you don't really need much convincing. These are the sorts of things we find can occur during disasters, in particular bushfires. Having animals has an impact on people's decision making and their behaviour. The issues tend to be around safety. Whether it's the safety of the animals, safety of people, and the safety of emergency responders. That's the angle we're taking with a lot of the research that's gone on to date about the public safety and responder safety.

Some people are unprepared generally. They haven't considered what they're going to do with their animals. And they're making decisions on the fly in the heat of the moment when probably they're quite distracted and struggling to get on with other things. It gets in the way of the decision making and preparation to actually leave.

People risk their lives to save animals. And that's not just their own animals its other people's animals. If they see animals in trouble they'll jump in. And you'll recall the picture earlier of the lady who rescued the koala in the fires got a lot of media. Those dangerous acts happen regularly in these situations. People will refuse to evacuate if they can't take their animals with them. Some people will abandon their animals, leave them behind either deliberately or won't be able to take them for whatever reason. That has a knock on effect because it bears on their mind. They want to go back and rescue the animals often before it's safe to do so. They're hurrying to get back.

And some people will leave their animals behind because they think they're not going to be away for very long and things change. And some people have quite unrealistic ideas about what will happen if they do evacuate with their animals in terms of being able to leave them with somebody and then go off and do things. And as I've said you have to stay with your animals and look after them if you take them with you somewhere.

Emergency services get these sorts of ultimatums. You could either take them or you could leave me behind. And we get people refusing to be airlifted out and things like that because they can't

take animals with them. So in some of the research we ask people if you couldn't evacuate with your animals would you evacuate? Forty-three percent said they definitely would not evacuate and a further 42% said they might not, but they certainly would question the need to leave. I'm not suggesting that 85% necessarily would not evacuate. Because I think when you're faced with a situation it might be slightly different. But at the same time it gives you an indication of how people are feeling about their animals in terms of what they'll do.

And some of those at the bottom you can see in red we've got some quotes from people. A number of people said this would be an impossible decision. Of course it does weigh on people's minds afterwards. And the people at the bottom said they'd already lost their dog in bushfires previously and last thing they wanted to do was leave an animal behind now.

That leads us to after the event. After the event if you lose your animals or you've lost a pet the research has shown that that grief can be equated to that of a loss of a sibling. It has profound effects on people. After events like fires and when people have lost houses, maybe they've been human fatalities, we find that people who've lost animals can often struggle with what they call disenfranchised grief. People don't acknowledge the loss of animals or they themselves don't want to stay and talk about it because they feel it's frivolous in comparison with what other people have lost. That has implications for recovery for people as well.

And the picture I'm afraid is a bad photograph I took on the Blue Mountains. It's an acknowledgement of the animal losses there because the local veterinarian helped a lot with people's animals during the 2013 fires. He was aware of the impacts it had on people afterwards and how they were mourning the loss of the animals and nobody had acknowledged that. They went to quite a lot of effort to put up a memorial and have a little service. That helped the community bind together afterwards.

In the next bit of the presentation I'd like to talk a bit about how to plan and prepare for your animals and hopefully give you some pointers or additional things to think about if perhaps you've already considered your animals and hopefully give you some ideas about what you can do or where you can go for more information.

Quickly back to the Blue Mountains. We did a survey with the local community around animal ownership, what had happened during the fires and their levels of preparedness. I'm going to use some of that information along the way to give you some examples of what people were saying. And the picture that gorgeous cat is Ollie the Wonder Cat. He was one of the animals who was caught out in the fires, survived the fires but with really badly burned paws. And he was really a bit of a poster boy for pets after the fires and he went on to live to a good age. Unfortunately he's gone now but he was our poster cat for our Blue ARC group.

Tonight we're going to focus on the household animals. I know last year you had Kirrilly Thompson and others talk about horses. Horses are not going to be a focus tonight but of course they're part of the mix. It's important when we think about animals we think about all the animals not just the pets in the house. We're not going to talk about large numbers of agricultural animals and farming situations or the captive animals in zoos or shelters or even in boarding kennels and places like that. And I'm not going to talk about wildlife.

But the other thing I want to mention was don't forget the livestock. And again this was something that Kirrilly gave me, the word livestock. These are the livestock with names. In particular we've had things like pet sheep, pet goat, pet pig like you've got in the image. What we found in the Blue Mountains was about 25% of people had chickens in their backyards but hadn't considered what

they were going to do with them. They often got left out of the plans. I just want to put in a good word for chickens tonight.

I've got five questions I'm going to ask now and a few questions underneath those just to get you thinking about your own situations and what you might be able to do to help prepare. The first question is who are you going to take with you? If you've got to relocate your animals ideally early which ones are going to take with you? How are you going to do this? How complex is your mix of animals? You've seen mine, we've got the cats, the dog and the golah. Have you a number of the same types of animal? Have you got several dogs? Have you got a mix? Some animals get on well with each other. Some get on when they've got some space but if you put them in the same room or indeed in the same car it might be slightly different. So can you take your three dogs in the car with a cat for example?

What other considerations are there? What do you need to take with you for them? There's lots of guidance on the things you might need to consider. In the first instance you're normally looking at something in which to contain your animals. Whether that's a crate or tank or whatever it is, even a box in some cases. Have you got enough of those? Often people with multiple animals, like three cats in my case, might have one or two cat carriers. You often use those just to go to the vet but you usually don't take more than one animal at a time. So have you got enough carriers? Have you got enough leads? Whatever it is you need. Those are a few things to consider.

Where will you go? Now this is a big one because ideally it's best to go to family or friends. Sure, that comes out in general emergency planning for bushfires. So if you've got family and friends you can go to that's always a great benefit for you. Are you planning to go to an evacuation centre? Possibly not the best plan but in the absence of something better then definitely is something that you should consider.

But what sort of conditions are you going to find when you get there? Evacuation centres as a colleague of mine said recently they're not a cruise ship. So they're not somewhere great to go and hang out for very long. They're noisy, there's no privacy, there's a whole lot of other things there. So you need to think about what you're going to find. What you're going to need to take with you so you can actually manage.

Are you going to have to go to more than one place? It's not unusual for you to have to take the cat to one place and a dog to somewhere else. Maybe you got family and friends and the cat will get on with their children or whatever. You need to think about these other things. Think about how many journeys you're going to need to make and whether you're going to need to go to more than one place with your animals.

How are you going to get there? Again what transportation requirements do you have? If you've got four horses and a two horse float which two horses are you going to take first and why? Is it better to take the ones you can load easily? Get them out first and then come back for the others. Can you move your animals in a single trip? What contingencies are there if you need to do that? What will the timing requirement be? If you take one load of animals first will you be able to get back? Will the roads be closed? Will you be able to get back and actually get those other animals? So there are a few things to consider.

How will your animals react? I think Rachel's going to pick up on some of this so I will go very quickly here. How will they act at the time of the bushfire when you can start smelling smoke? Perhaps you're getting a bit stressed. The first thing the cat might do is scarper. So it's good to try and contain your animals as soon as you've got an idea that you might have to leave because then

you can put them to one side. You know where they're going to be and you can get them quickly and leave.

Behavioural issues. Do you have animals that are anxious to start with? Are there ones with medical needs? There's a whole heap of things you could consider there in terms of what their needs might be. Do you need a Plan B or even C, D and E? And again it's important to think about some of those considerations. So for example in the Blue Mountains we found that just over 50% of people in the Blue Mountains commute. They're not at home during the day. If you have a fire during the day a lot of people weren't at home.

This quote here is from someone who was on one of the trains trying to get back from Sydney to the Blue Mountains during the 2013 fires. She says we looked at the horror and the amount of smoke outside the train and felt powerless as we shuffled along. There was a woman on the phone desperately trying to find someone to get her horses in Wembley to safety. It was heart wrenching to listen to. And you can imagine the situation here. People panicking around what they're going to do with their animals and other things they're going to have to consider.

What things are you like to have to consider? Not being home. Not having two vehicles at home. Maybe you've got the kids and they've got friends around as well so you haven't got space in the car you thought you had. What are the likely other considerations you might have to think about? If you can't get home one of the most important things, and it's often the case I think with planning for bushfires, is have a discussion. Talk to your neighbours. Is there someone local who could help you who's usually at home if you're at work? So have that conversation. Talk to people. Have a plan and discuss that plan with the household as well as with your neighbours.

Your animal is your responsibility. Identify the risks you have and seek information so you know what you should be doing. If you can plan for all your animals. Communicate that plan with your household members and with other people like neighbours. Practise the plan. Consider your alternatives.

When something looks like it's going to start happening stay alert. Monitor conditions. Keep aware. And ideally get out early and relocate those animals so you don't have to consider them alongside everything else when you're trying to get out.

If you're looking for resources this is one place you can go. Get Ready Animals. It's hosted by New South Wales SCS but it includes bushfire planning and videos too. And then RSPCA Australia has some great resources there as well. But also check your state primary industries because they're the people who have responsibility for animals in disasters. So they will have advice for you. And your local councils and of course response agencies too. Thanks Malcolm.

Malcolm

Thanks Mel, some terrific stuff there for people to think about.