

# Rescuing responsibly or the 'art' of dealing with unauthorised responders

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## Abstract

During every disaster, unaffiliated but well-meaning and often inexperienced individuals show up to help. It is the responsibility of emergency managers, law enforcement and like authorities to do the best we can to ensure that this help does not exacerbate problems caused by the disaster.

## Introduction

In 2005, I was part of the US government response to Hurricane Katrina. I arrived outside New Orleans shortly after the storm had abated and, initially, there was a small group of responders from a handful of agencies. However, given the evacuation of most of the city of New Orleans and the fact that rescuers were not allowing pets into rescue boats, the scope of the disaster quickly outgrew the small number of responders.

Animal control agencies and humane societies in the US ultimately sent teams in to assist. However, of the teams that responded, some became frustrated and broke away from the official response. Also, well-meaning individuals started showing up to help. Access to the city was controlled by law enforcement agencies that had shown up to assist. Because there were so many agencies, the Louisiana SPCA<sup>1</sup> (the agency in charge of animal rescue) instructed us to write 'LASPCA' across the windshield of our vehicles to gain access to the city. The unofficial rescuers quickly caught on to this and wrote on their own vehicles to gain access to the city. The result of this caused confusion and mayhem. Within the city, animals were taken without investigation as to whether or not the people living in the location had been evacuated (there was a list of addresses called in by owners that the official response was

working from). I also met a resident who went to the store and came back and his dogs had been 'rescued'. Residents erected signs in their yards saying their animals were not abandoned. For the animals rescued by these independent responders, there was often no information left at the address to advise the owner how to find or reclaim their animal. Hundreds of animals were transported out of Louisiana without being registered in any way that would enable their owners to reclaim them. Interactions with many of these independent rescuers indicated that they judged the people who left their animals behind and decided they did not deserve to keep their animals. It took months for people to track down their animals and, in some cases, they never saw their animal again. These independent rescuers were also moving throughout the city without keeping any record and this presented a safety risk for them and responders.

After Hurricane Katrina, subsequent responses in the US made varying degrees of effort to establish better controls over access to disaster-affected areas. However, controlling access to cities with hundreds of ways in and out is an impossible task. Since Hurricane Katrina, I have responded to many disasters all around the globe. Unfortunately, dealing with unauthorised rescuers has become an increasing and common problem. People have also started to raise money on social media platforms to help fund their own 'response'. While well-meaning people can play important roles in response, their activities must be undertaken responsibly and preferably in conjunction with any official response.

After Hurricane Dorian on Abaco Island in 2019, I saw groups of people with access to planes fly in from the US, gather up dogs, load them onto the plane and fly them back to the US. This was often done with no investigation as to whether or not there was a caretaker for the animal. This was despite the fact that there was an official response and teams were sending animals to Nassau where

1. Louisiana SPCA, at <https://www.louisianasPCA.org/#/>.

they were housed in the hopes of owners reclaiming them. I found, in responding on the island, that dogs were being cared for by one individual who lived in that location who had stayed back in the residential area and who had agreed to care for the animals until the owners could return. Also, on Abaco as in many places around the world, companion animals are free to roam and are not locked up in a home or yard. So, in this case, many dogs caught as 'stray' because they were roaming were likely not stray at all.

## What happens after 'rescue'

Another issue that can result from unauthorised and inexperienced rescuers is the fate of the animals after rescue. Emotions can drive people to help and to rescue animals without putting plans in place as to who will care for the rescued animals and where. I have seen this result in 'rescued' animals being left in already overburdened local shelters or makeshift shelters where the conditions are questionable. 'Rescuing' animals in the traditional sense of pulling them out of the affected area is, in my opinion, the easy part of the rescue. Providing for their care, returning them to owners or rehoming animals is a much more labour and resource intensive part of the process. No one should engage in the first part without a plan for the latter part.

This issue is compounded with wildlife. During the wildfires on Kangaroo Island in South Australia, the initial response was quite small. As the media's attention turned to the response, many people came to volunteer. There was a lot of great work done by these volunteers, particularly the vets who helped at the makeshift animal hospital. However, other well-meaning individuals entered forested areas to rescue koalas. With little experience with wildlife, many people began gathering up every koala they could find, even climbing high into the trees to pull them out. There was no assessment of whether or not those koalas had access to feed and were in good condition or not. Fortunately, koalas seem to weather the stress of capture fairly well, however, this is not always the case with wildlife and can lead to the death of the animal.

Trying to shut down unauthorised response activities is unlikely to be successful. These responders are well-meaning and want to contribute in a positive way. Directing their energy to other productive avenues of assistance can provide much-needed people power and allow them to have a fulfilling experience. There will always be people who insist on continuing their activities and because of this, it is important for jurisdictions to secure response areas and limit 'unofficial' responders. This helps those who are responsible for recovery efforts and curtails irresponsible activities. It is difficult to control the actions of others, but we can determine who we partner with and whose activities are prioritised. Unfortunately, unofficial responders can get the most social media attention and public support because they are seemingly actively rescuing animals. But no matter how popular they are and how much linking up with them could widen the audience for responder work, it would be unwise to legitimise activities that are irresponsible.

We have seen in situations like conflict and disaster that there are people willing to help bring supplies and food to animal shelters and pet owners. For example, in Ukraine, informal distribution networks were set up and these provided a lifeline for people who did not have access to food for their animals. There has been a push to move animals out of Ukraine especially once the European Union relaxed entry requirements. This relaxation was done to allow families to flee Ukraine with their pets. However, there was concern that animals with unknown vaccine histories were being moved out of Ukraine (a high-risk rabies country) into other countries. Although shelters in the European Union absorbed many of these animals, many went to overcrowded shelters in Romania and Poland or were left in hastily constructed shelters without proper resources to care for them.

I believe that a core tenet should be to make every effort to keep animals in-place (with the exception of animals evacuating with their owners). There are always exceptions such as flooded areas with no safe place for animals. But animals should remain as close to their communities as possible. Even street animals are often cared for and valued by their communities and would be missed if removed. It is important to understand the relationship people have with their animals. It may not be what we are used to seeing, but it needs to be respected.

## Directing effort

If people want to help, they could be directed to known areas where help is needed. This could be restocking food and water stations for animals or delivering food to communities. Many times, these people have particular skills or equipment such as drone operators and can work with official responding agencies to provide a service that would not exist without them.

An example is the Cajun Navy that started out as a group of boat owners who would take their boats out in flooded areas to rescue people. They did this outside of the official response. However, this caused concern among official rescuers as they recognised a safety risk to the boat owners and that they may not know the area they are trying to navigate. However, when flood waters are high and people are trapped on rooftops, having a ready fleet of boats is helpful. So, over time, local jurisdictions worked with the Cajun Navy to incorporate them into the official response. Teams were established and given areas to search, thus reducing duplication of effort. They were also registered so if someone didn't report back, there was a record of where to look for them. They were also paired with official responders or locals with knowledge of the area. While such partnerships are not present in all disaster responses, they have helped to rescue thousands of people.

Animal response is still an afterthought, and this has left the door open for people to mount their own responses. If animals are to be humanely treated, their communities respected and animal response treated as the specialist field, we need everyone who comes to help to act responsibly. In the end, it benefits all efforts to have animals and animal response considered a part of any official response so that humans and animals are safe.