Do no harm: a challenging conversation about how we prepare and respond to animal disasters

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Abstract

What if people responded to disasters to help animals, but their responses created unintended negative animal welfare outcomes or unnecessary barriers for future responses? The axiom of 'do no harm' is well established within the humanitarian aid community, however, it is an approach that is not well articulated in the emerging discipline of animal disaster response. This paper discusses the challenges for responding to animals affected by disaster events, the delegitimisation of animal rescue and how some response actions can have long-term negative effects on animal welfare. Recommendations are provided to create credible and sustainable responses into the future.

Introduction

The emerging field of animal disaster science continues to expand in both interest and research. Societal attitudes have changed in recent times with animals afforded more consideration given the human-animal bond that has been well established (Heath 1999, Irvine 2009, Sawyer & Huertas 2018). However, this growth has also given rise to the number of individuals and organisations wanting to help animals affected by disasters, which, though morally applaudable, may have unintended negative consequences for animal welfare (Green 2019). The aim of this paper is to highlight current practices that may contribute to undermining the role that animal disaster response organisations play. As such, corrective actions can be taken to improve coordination and emergency management organisations can maintain operational confidence that should lead to better human and animal welfare outcomes.

Do no harm

The paradigm of responding to emergencies and disasters to help but actually causing harm is well understood in the humanitarian sector. In 1999, Mary Anderson, a globally respected expert in humanitarian interventions, published *Do No Harm: How aid can support peace or war,* which has become the founding text for this approach (Anderson 1999). This followed the 1999 United Nation's General Assembly Resolution 46/182 that created the first 3 core humanitarian principles, being humanity, impartiality and neutrality. In 1992, the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* was drafted and in 1994 it was adopted. In 2004, the fourth core principle of independence was added by the United Nations General Assembly. The 4 core humanitarian principles were solidified as humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Since it was launched, more than 600 organisations have signed the code, including a few animal disaster response organisations such as World Animal Protection, the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad and Animal Evac New Zealand (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2020). The code provides globally accepted ground rules for humanitarian responses, both in disasters and complex emergencies. The voluntary code enshrines the 4 core humanitarian principles as well as providing further expectations of:

- building disaster response on local capacities
- involving program beneficiaries in the management of aid
- reducing vulnerabilities to future disasters as well as meeting basic needs
- accepting accountability
- recognising disaster 'victims' as dignified human beings and not hopeless objects.

The humanitarian system is largely guided by the standards established by Sphere (formerly the Sphere Project). The Sphere handbook includes universally accepted minimum standards for humanitarian response, a Humanitarian Charter that is based on the Code of Conduct, protection principles and 4 technical chapters (Sphere Association 2018). Through the recognition that livestock play an important role in livelihoods of communities, a companion document to the Sphere handbook—the Livestock Emergency Guidelines & Standards (LEGS)—provides international guidelines and standards for the design, implementation and assessment of livestock interventions to assist people affected by humanitarian crises (Sphere Association 2018). However, LEGS focuses on livestock protection in less-developed countries and is not generally suitable for other disaster situations involving commercial farms, wildlife or companion animals.

The humanitarian imperative to 'do no harm' in an emergency context is often defined as 'to avoid exposing people to additional risks through our actions' (Charancle & Lucchi 2018, p.16). This definition is anthropomorphic and fails to consider the needs and sentience of animals. Bekoff and Pierce (2016) link the axiom of 'do no harm' to animal sentience and argued the 'need to shift from welfarism to a more compassionate moral framework' (p.3). However, no literature could be found that applied the 'do no harm' axiom to the context of animal disaster management. In contrast to the lessons learnt in the humanitarian space, the animal disaster management space lacks any equivalent code of conduct nor similar principles at a global level. To provide some context, the do-no-harm approach includes 4 categories namely: negative effects on the rights of beneficiaries, negative effects on the function of communities and relationships between local and national actors, negative effects on the local economy and livelihoods and the negative effects on the environment.

Examples of negative affects covered by the do-no-harm approach in the context of animal disaster response include:

- oversupply of imported milk powder as part of foreign aid decimating against the local diary providers (J Thomas, personal communication, 2021)
- restocking of buffalo in Myanmar following Cyclone Nargis without adequate health checks leading to animal disease outbreaks and stock losses (Sawyer & Huertas 2018, p.7)
- providing temporary animal-only shelters using volunteers rather than animal owners taking responsibility that lead to animal stress, reduced enrichment and reinforced unscalable or sustainable approaches (Glassey & Anderson 2019) as well as taking away economic recovery opportunities from affected local businesses
- absolving responsibility from mandated organisations by undertaking their functions and leaving them less accountable (Glassey & Anderson 2019)
- creating dependency and expectation of future response that reduces community-led resilience
- providing response interventions that are not scalable and sustainable causing future vulnerabilities

- failing to document and share lessons from responses so that future responses can improve animal welfare outcomes (Glassey, King & Rodriguez Ferrer 2020)
- failing to reduce vulnerabilities to future disasters such as providing interventions that address a 'weak animal health infrastructure' as referred to by Heath and Linnabary (2015) as the root cause to animal disasters
- displacing local capacity with external resources leading to resentment and disempowerment
- delegitimising animal disaster response.

Delegitimisation of animal rescue

The delegitimsation of animal rescue can be defined as the:

Sub-optimal response by animal interest groups who respond to assist animals in emergencies or disasters in an unsafe or illegal manner, which consequently makes it more difficult for bona-fide emergency animal rescue groups to be accepted and used by authorities and the community in future interventions.

Aside from potentially putting human lives at risk, delegitimisation has negative effects for animal welfare through eroding trust between the animal response community and emergency services organisations. Ultimately, this loss of trust and confidence may lead to animal protection in disasters being considered a hinderance rather than an opportunity to improve human and animal safety. Studies have shown that humans do place themselves at risk for the needs of animals, such as breaching cordons to attend to their animals or failing to evacuate if they are unable to take their animals (Heath 1999; Heath *et al.* 2001; Irvine 2009; Glassey 2010, 2019; Glassey & Wilson 2011; Potts & Gadenne 2014; Taylor *et al.* 2015; Travers, Degeling & Rock 2017; Sawyer & Huertas 2018; Green 2019).

During the bushfires in Australia in the summer of 2019–20, the loss of 3 billion animals (World Wildlife Fund 2020) gained global attention, as well as responses from domestic and international animal interest groups. Such groups, formally or informally, identify as 'animal rescue', however, in the disaster response context, this is confusing and misleading to emergency service organisations. These groups use the term 'animal rescue' whereas it might be more appropriate if 'animal care', 'welfare' or 'rehoming' were used. The use of 'animal rescue' undermines the credibility of emergency services organisations that rescue animals and may regard the term 'rescue' as an embellishment of capability.

Although community resilience includes building community capacity and self-reliance, there needs to be a setting of standards for training and equipment to safeguard those working in and around disasters. Craig Fugate, former Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), acknowledges the need for the emergency management sector to see and to value the public as being part of the solution and not the problem (Fugate 2019). Communities can and should be encouraged to create formal and semi-formal networks or response capability as part of developing disaster-resilient communities.

Unfortunately, the lack of animal-inclusive emergency management planning results in animal interest groups responding to disasters without appropriate authority, training or equipment as observed by Glassey and Anderson (2019) in the Nelson fires. Even animal interest groups that have a focus on animal disaster response have been found wanting, such as during the summer bushfires where promotional videos showed personnel working with flames and smoke around them (Humane Society of the United States 2020a) and also without basic protective equipment (Humane Society of the United States 2020b, 2020c). The wearing of flame-retardant apparel, safety boots, helmets, googles and gloves is a rudimentary requirement for working on firegrounds as, even days and weeks after the fire has gone through, vegetation and underground fires are common and create a risk for personnel to step or fall into (KPTV Fox 12 Oregon 2020). The risk of branches and trees falling during and after fires remains a risk and requires helmets to be worn. The use of videos or pictures showing people from animal interest groups not adhering to basic safety requirements delegitimises animal rescue and reduces the level of confidence and trust in emergency services organisations.

Another aspect of delegitimsation of animal rescue occurs where animal interest groups respond to an emergency and purport pre-existing animal-welfare issues as being caused by or related to the event. This could include taking footage of stray animals in a damaged city and suggesting the animal was in need of rescue when it was, at that time and prior to the disaster, a stray animal, or showing dogs without kennels or being chained up following floods when the dogs were in these conditions prior to the flood. The flooding exposed these vulnerabilities but was not the cause of animal welfare issues. It is argued that prevention is better than post-event response and animal interest groups wanting to reduce animal vulnerability to disasters could focus efforts on mitigation and strengthening weak animal health infrastructure to make a sustainable impact on improving animal welfare.

Legitimising animal rescue

Despite the many observations of delegitimisation, there are also examples of activities that have legitimised animal disaster management activities including rescue. It is reasonable to assume that these activities strengthen public confidence and build trust and credibility with emergency services organisations. This enables animal disaster response organisations to be deployed and undertake safe and competent animal rescue, which results in improved animal welfare outcomes and community safety. Before a response phase, a number of legitimising actions can be taken, for example:

- working with emergency services managers to be listed as a formal partner in emergency management plans (McCarthy & Taylor 2018) as done by South Australian Veterinary Emergency Management
- improving rescue standards such as seen in the USA with the addition of NFPA 1670 Standard on Operations and Training for Technical Search and Rescue Incidents (National Fire Protection Association 2014)

- developing and appointing incident management tactical (United Kingdom) and technical advisers (New South Wales) for animal and wildlife rescue
- classification of response assets (teams, equipment and training) also known as resource typing for animal rescue as developed by FEMA (Green 2019, p.171)
- ensuring all animal disaster responders are trained in and apply the locally prescribed incident command system (Sawyer & Huertas 2018, p.44; Green 2019, p.13).

In effect, legitimisation of animal rescue includes adopting and using the same terminology, training and systems as the human rescue framework where possible. This builds recognition and confidence in emergency services organisations, which gives authority to effect animal rescue and delivers associated improved animal welfare outcomes.

The actions of emergency services personnel helping animals during disasters are often met with overwhelming public interest and support. There is increased acceptance that where there is no direct risk to human life rescue efforts should include animals. In the USA, it is common for FEMA urban search and rescue task forces to bring out companion animals from disaster-struck areas, and they are funded for such tasks (Fugate 2019). While the USA has learnt through catastrophic events such as Hurricane Harvey and has put in place federal law (*Pet Emergency Transportation and Standards Act*) to allow companion and service animals to be rescued during disaster, the same cannot be said for other countries. In Australia and New Zealand, emergency services organisations often use images of their personnel saving animals in their publicity that appears to legitimise animal rescue. However, such commendable actions do not reflect that the organisation has little to no responsibility for animal rescue. Often, other government entities are responsible but are under resourced and not integrated sufficiently to provide timely responses (M Taylor, personal communication, 2021).

Good practice emergency management extends to the post-incident actions of response agencies including debriefing, after-action reporting and corrective action planning, which form part of a lessons management process. However, there is little obligation to debrief nor to produce after-action reports. Where reports are written, they are usually not shared or are centrally located, which means those lessons are lost (Glassey 2011). The lack of after-action reporting means the lessons from one event may not prevent future negative consequences. In a comparative analysis of the 2017 Edgecumbe flood and 2018 Nelson fires by Glassey, King and Rodriguez Ferrer (2020), only 7 per cent of lessons identified were indeed learnt from one event to the next. As a result, the Global Animal Disaster Management Conference plans to establish the Global Lessons from Animals in Disasters Information System (GLADIS) to allow after-action reports to be shared online and internationally.

Recommendations

This paper explored the concept of 'do no harm' in the animal disaster management context. This highlights the potential

divide between this evolving discipline and the humanitarian and disaster management frameworks. To improve integration and acceptability, it is recommended the legitimisation of animal rescue be reinforced. More work is needed to mainstream animal disaster management within existing arrangements where possible, rather than create new or duplicate systems:

1. Traditionally human-centric emergency management entities such as fire and rescue services be encouraged to lead and coordinate animal rescue as a core function, with the support of agricultural, wildlife, veterinary and animal interest groups. This could lead to entities such as the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council creating an Animal Disaster Management Working Group to build inter-operable response capacities, and having the United Nations International Search and Rescue Advisory Group consider technical animal rescue within the team typing and search marking systems (Glassey & Thompson 2020). The function of animal disaster rescue is an operational role and should be coordinated by those managing the operations of the event to permit coordination, improve response efficiency, reduce duplication of effort and use credentialled animal disaster responders as a force multiplier to human-centric rescue capacities (Glassey & Thompson 2020).

2. The Code of Conduct (IFRC 2020) should be revised to be inclusive of animal disaster response organisations and recognise the importance of animals to communities. This would be consistent to their progressive efforts in pushing animal welfare as a core component of humanitarian and development actions (Sawyer & Huertas 2018, p.29). Animal interest groups should be signatories to a revised animal-inclusive code of conduct.

3. Creating a global framework for accountability across animal disaster response including animal interest groups and government. A global index could be developed with animal disaster management metrics to allow for useful comparison of country performance in this area. This comparative tool could be similar to that of the World Animal Protection Animal Protection Index and state-level assessments carried out by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals 'National Capabilities for Animal Response in Emergencies' program (Spain *et al.* 2017).

4. Animal interest groups working in disaster response should actively pursue mainstream emergency management training and qualifications such as incident management, bushfire safety, flood safety, urban search and rescue awareness and first aid. Additionally, legitimacy could be evident with professional qualifications such as the Certified Emergency Manager (CEM®) and graduate qualifications in emergency management rather than relying on animal or veterinary qualifications that seldom have disaster management syllabus or recognition.

5. Awareness within the animal disaster response sector needs to be raised of the concept of 'do no harm' and how actions may unintentionally lead to negative animal welfare outcomes and that actions need to be evidence-based.

Limitations and further research

The challenge of managing international and self-deploying animal response organisations has been highlighted from recent events such as bushfires in Australian and the massive explosion in Beirut. Although studies have shown that international disaster rescue deployments are characterised by limited outcomes in terms of (human) lives saved (Bartolucci, Walter & Redmond 2019; Rom & Kelman 2020) the effectiveness of international animal disaster response is less known and warrants research.

Conclusion

To date, the literature has positioned 'do no harm' as a principle of humanitarian action, however, that should be widened to include the emerging discipline of animal disaster management. There is an increasing body of research that shows that well-intended responses by animal interest groups may create unintended negative outcomes for animal welfare in the long-term through the delegitimisation of animal rescue. Where such groups lose legitimacy is through a lack of competency, equipment and authority and they also lose access to assist affected animals. If animal disaster management was recognised within the public safety sector, significant work is required to integrate this within traditional human-centric response systems. The success of this collaboration to create animal-inclusive resilient communities requires the public safety sector to encourage genuine engagement and collaboration with animal interest groups.

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