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COMMUNITY TAKING LEAD IN EMERGENCY PLANNING FOR THEIR ANIMALS

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This research was conducted as part of the *Managing animals in disasters* project. The project has identified best practice approaches to animal emergency management that result in improved outcomes for community members, emergency responders and animals.

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SUMMARY

During a disaster, animal owners are responsible for their animals. However, owners are often ill-prepared to protect both themselves and their animals. This can endanger the lives of both if, for example, owners evacuate too late or not at all. As noted by United States' experts in emergency management: "There is no other factor contributing as much to human evacuation failure in disasters, that is under the control of emergency management when a threat is imminent, as pet ownership." (Heath and Linnabary, 2015.)

Australia's National Strategy for Disaster Resilience states that communities should be empowered to share responsibility for disaster resilience. Animals provide an avenue



▲ **Above:** 63% OF AUSTRALIAN HOUSEHOLDS OWN PETS AND 90% OF OWNERS CONSIDER THEIR PETS TO BE FAMILY MEMBERS. THIS HAS SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS DURING AN EMERGENCY.

to connect communities, and to enable community members to work together in disaster preparedness and planning. To explore this further, the *Managing animals in disasters* (MAiD) project has teamed with a newly formed community-led group in the New South Wales Blue Mountains called Blue Mountains Animal Ready Community (Blue ARC). The project takes a novel approach, which is believed to be an Australian first, by focusing on animal owners and community groups. It explores a 'community-

to-community' approach to enhancing awareness, preparedness, and planning for animals in emergencies; identifying key activities, outputs, and processes that can be translated for use by other communities; and providing emergency response agencies with another route to community engagement.

By highlighting the impact of animals on the behaviours of people in natural hazards, this project has reinforced the need to support communities to be prepared and to plan for animals.

CONTEXT

This study focuses on a bushfire-prone area, engaging and working with community members to develop local resources to support planning and preparedness for animals in emergencies. The outputs will be transferable to other communities and natural hazard contexts, such as floods and cyclones, and will provide opportunities for individuals, communities, and emergency response organisations to work collaboratively.

BACKGROUND

In recent years there has been increasing recognition that animals need to be considered and integrated into emergency management and disaster preparedness, response and recovery. In the domestic context alone, this recognition is reinforced by the pervasiveness of pet ownership: 63% of Australian households own pets and 90% of owners consider their pets to be family members.

The consideration of animals in emergency management poses more challenges for traditional responding. It demands extra preparation, knowledge and skills to ensure the safety of animals, their owners, and responders. In this context, animal emergency management has emerged as a relatively new area, with a more complex and often less experienced set of stakeholders who require integration and coordination

into emergency management policy and planning.

Most research in animal emergency management has emerged from the United States following extensive and widely reported animal-related challenges associated with Hurricane Katrina and subsequent natural hazards. Although animal owners in the US and Australia have much in common, emergency management and the typical scale of disasters are quite different, making translation of US research to Australia difficult.

The MAiD project has addressed the lack of Australian research by identifying challenges for end-users, studying the disaster experiences of animal owners and responders, and identified best practice approaches.

BUSHFIRE AND NATURAL HAZARDS CRC RESEARCH

The MAiD team proposes animal emergency management as a novel way to engage animal owners to prepare for emergencies, to improve response compliance with official direction, and to improve the psychosocial outcomes for people after disasters. The Blue ARC study detailed in this *Hazard Note* identifies routes for engagement with, and within, communities to promote emergency planning and preparedness for animals (and their owners) and reinforce a community culture of shared responsibility.

This research builds on previous studies completed during the project that have revealed that emergency response organisations and other stakeholder groups face challenges and uncertainty in animal emergency management. These challenges include their responsibilities and role in the management and rescue of animals and in their interactions with, and management of, animal owners (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). Working with Blue ARC takes a novel approach to consider the perspectives and experiences of animal owners and community groups, and the role they can play in supporting themselves before, during and after an event. Different perspectives were explored within the Blue Mountains community, including individuals, animal interest groups, community groups (for example, neighbourhood centres), veterinarians and official response organisations.

The researchers conducted an online survey to understand the experiences and needs of the local community. The survey targeted:

- Residents living in or around the Blue Mountains, who either own, care for,



▲ **Above:** THIS RESEARCH HAS REINFORCED THE NEED TO SUPPORT COMMUNITIES TO BE PREPARED AND TO PLAN FOR ANIMALS WHEN CONSIDERING THEIR EMERGENCY ARRANGEMENTS.

END-USER STATEMENT

This research has allowed us to map animal ownership, and to survey animal owners about their response arrangements in a disaster. We are seeing some more tailored tools and products for the industry as a result of this research, which will be a real blessing for what has been a bit of a wicked problem for emergency services in the past.

– **Andrew Richards, Manager
Community Engagement, NSW State
Emergency Service**

and/or work with companion animals, livestock, and/or wildlife

- Previous residents of the Blue Mountains and surrounding areas who experienced an emergency event that impacted the animals in their care, and
- Anyone who was employed, or had a voluntary role, helping animals and/or their owners during a previous emergency event in or around the Blue Mountains.

The survey was completed by 386 people between February and May 2017. It collected information that aimed to:

- Assess local community emergency preparedness for animals
- Learn about experiences and identify

issues that have occurred in previous emergencies regarding animals, and

- Identify local needs and gaps in preparing and planning for animals.

The researchers also interviewed representatives of emergency services, NGOs, and local stakeholders to discuss previous emergency events and local issues. As of June 2017, an audit of local veterinary services was also underway.

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

General preparedness

The survey revealed that most respondents (82%) had considered what they would do in an emergency situation and of those, 70% had considered their animals in their emergency planning. However, combined, this only amounted to 57% of the sample overall being prepared in planning for their animals. Most planning was low level, that is, restricted to thinking about and discussing what to do in an emergency. Only one fifth of respondents felt 'very prepared' and had a written or well-rehearsed emergency plan. Only 47% knew with certainty where they would take their animals if they had to evacuate, and only 20% had asked a neighbour, nearby friend or family member if they would help evacuate their animals in their absence. As more than 50% of employed residents in the Blue Mountains commute away from the mountains for work, having this back-up support is extremely important.

Forty-nine per cent reported that they needed more information to be able to prepare and plan for their animals and 62% expected that emergency services would provide that information. Respondents relied more on emergency services for information than any other groups, including local veterinarians (58%), RSPCA (40%), social media (46%) or family and friends (44%). This reinforces why it is essential that emergency services engage with local communities in this area.

Evacuees' experiences

Those who evacuated with animals in a previous emergency reported a low level of planning beforehand. Emergency preparedness for animals is important as it can be time consuming and stressful for owners to search for items, such as a cat carrier, or consider where they can evacuate to with animals. As one respondent recalled during an evacuation: "*We could not access two cat carriers as they were in storage in garage. Police escorted us out and we had to leave immediately so we just put cats in the*



▲ Above: SES PERSONNEL TRAINING FOR A HORSE RESCUE.

car.” In contrast, another respondent valued being prepared for her animals: *“I always keep an emergency bag next to the door with food, water, bowls and blankets – reduced the stress enormously on the day knowing we could just scoop up the cat and go.”*

Not all animals are equal. Residents reported having many animals with special needs, for example, behavioural or health issues. Residents also keep multiple animals of different species, which makes evacuation more complex. Although most respondents reported taking animals with them, some reported leaving a person behind to look after the animals, and others had to choose which animals to leave. This points to a need for advice on how to prepare for specific types of animals. As one resident who evacuated during the October 2013 bushfires reported: *“Worrying about the animals was one of the most stressful parts of the entire process for me.”*

On reflection, many of those who experienced a disaster suggest that planning be done within the community, and include neighbours, family, and veterinarians. Being prepared and having community support can also assist with recovery. Seven per cent reported that their animals went missing or died, and reported that it had a significant impact on their recovery from the fires.

HOW COULD THE RESEARCH BE USED?

This research will inform the production of a community guide to establishing an Animal Ready Community (ARC; see Future Directions below).

The MAiD project has addressed gaps in evidence in Australian animal emergency management, moving from anecdotal knowledge to targeted studies. The project’s audit of animal emergency management has provided a national overview of its status. The provision of an up-to-date evidence base enables end-users and stakeholders to make better informed decisions on planning and targeting of resources.

By highlighting the impact of animals on the behaviours of people in natural hazard emergencies, this project has reinforced the need to support communities to be prepared and to plan for animals. The researchers have identified the issues owners have encountered in a range of jurisdictional operational contexts and natural hazard events. By identifying the concerns and problems faced in preparedness, response, and recovery, this project has been providing emergency services and other stakeholders with information on priority community issues that can be addressed for the greatest

BLUE MOUNTAINS EVACUEES’ EXPERIENCES WITH ANIMALS

“The first time [we evacuated] I just took the dogs out and sat in the park with them. The second time we took the dogs and the cat and took the dogs to our daughters and the cat we temporarily put into board with a vet in Sydney. We had no options for the chickens, we had to leave them.”

“I took two horses to a neighbour’s house, around the corner. I then came home, loaded the other two horses and then went back to the neighbours where someone else offered to take the first two to the showground so we could get there in one trip. I left my dog at home with my husband.”

“Rang Lithgow Vets and they found room for the cats. Did not know of anybody else that I could contact – information is scarce if you don’t know where to get it from.”

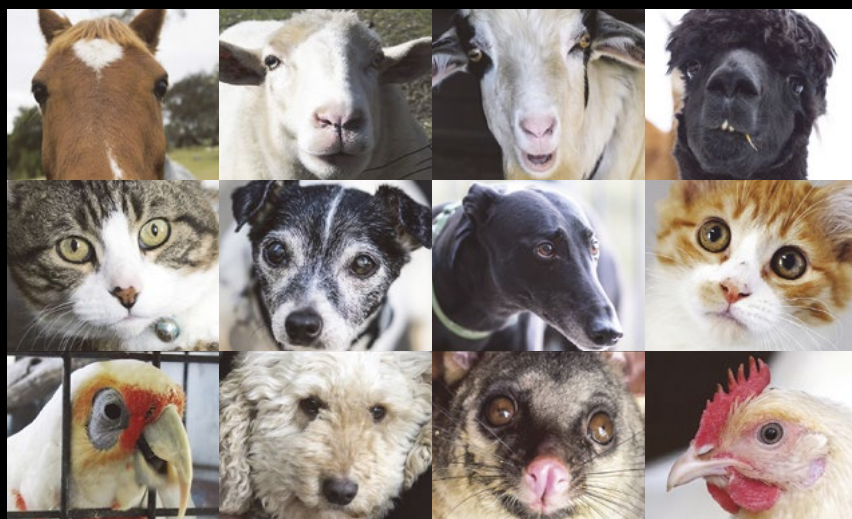
gains in public and responder safety. These areas also provide pointers for emergency services as potential routes to engagement with communities.

In a high risk, fire-prone area such as the Blue Mountains, it is critical that the community is engaged in emergency preparedness and has a strong sense of shared responsibility for preparedness and planning. The MAiD collaboration with Blue ARC is providing a proof-of-concept approach to addressing animal emergency management with similar at-risk communities.

The benefits to CRC end-users of having a self-organised community in this area have been documented in case studies by another CRC project (Out of uniform: building community resilience through non-traditional emergency volunteering). In animal emergency management specifically, such initiatives can provide extra capacity and reach for emergency services. Such groups, with their broader community networks, can harness additional community capacity, including access to those with animal-specific handling skills.

The community is the end-user for the outputs from the collaboration with Blue ARC. Identified local barriers to community planning and preparedness for animals are now being discussed with local emergency

Your voice, their lives.



Animals in Emergencies Survey Blue Mountains & surrounding areas

Community emergency preparedness & planning for animals.
Issues from previous emergencies. Local needs and gaps.
Help give animals a voice by filling in the survey.

Complete the survey online at

www.surveymonkey.com/r/animals-in-emergencies-survey

Request a printed copy from

The Turning Page Bookshop, Springwood Ph: 02 4751 5171 or
Blue ARC: www.facebook.com/BlueMountainsARC/ Blue_ARC@yahoo.com

For all other enquiries contact:

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Blue ARC is auspiced by Springwood Neighbourhood Centre Co-operative Ltd.



▲ Above: A POSTER ADVERTISING THE RESEARCH IN THE BLUE MOUNTAINS AREA.

management groups, including the local councils, NSW Rural Fire Service, NGOs, and neighbourhood centres. The mapping and availability of local resources for veterinary services and animal boarding facilities will enable community members to plan ahead. The 'community-to-community' activities of Blue ARC ensure that local solutions to

identified problems are communicated back to the community.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The experience of observing and supporting a community-led group, such as Blue ARC, provides the opportunity to learn from the group start-up process in

FURTHER READING

Heath SE, and Linnabary RD (2015), Challenges of Managing Animals in Disasters in the U.S. *Animals*, **5**, pp.173-192; doi, 10.3390/ani5020173 www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/5/2/173/pdf

Taylor M, Eustace G and McCarthy M (2015), *Animal Emergency Management in Australia: an audit of current legislation, plans, policy, community engagement resources, initiatives, needs, and research dissemination*, Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC <http://www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-2217>.

Taylor M, McCarthy M, Burns P, Thompson K, Smith B and Eustace G (2015), The challenges of managing animals and their owners in disasters: the perspectives of Australian response organisations and stakeholders, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, **30**(2), pp. 31-37. <https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-30-02>

Taylor M, Lynch E, Burns P, Eustace G (2015), The preparedness and evacuation behaviour of Australian pet owners in emergencies and natural disasters, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, **30**(2), pp. 18-23. <https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-30-02>

this area of emergency management. A future goal is to create a 'how to' guide and resource pack, that would be available for other communities. This guide could be used to promote emergency preparedness and planning through a focus on animals. Its advice could include the networks and collaborations required, how to identify the needs of local animal owners, and suggestions for community activities. The resource pack will include materials developed as part of the current project, including a question bank for surveys, templates for posters and fact sheets and plans for low-cost community training.

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Hazard Notes are prepared from available research at the time of publication to encourage discussion and debate. The contents of *Hazard Notes* do not necessarily represent the views, policies, practises or positions of any of the individual agencies or organisations who are stakeholders of the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

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