

REPORT: Animal attachment and disaster resilience in vulnerable communities

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In 2013, World Animal Protection commissioned the first report into the ways in which animal attachment could be used to increase the disaster resilience of vulnerable communities in Australia (Thompson *et al.* 2014a). This addressed a call in the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* for greater emphasis on community engagement and a better understanding of the diversity, needs, strengths and vulnerabilities within communities (Councils of Australian Governments 2011).

The report was prompted by an emerging body of evidence demonstrating that the bond between humans and their animals can influence human behaviour in disasters. This can be both a risk and an asset: people can put themselves at risk to save animals in disasters, but conversely, people can be encouraged to plan for animals ahead of disasters. The latter scenario can aid resilience by encouraging people to take steps to secure their own safety as well as that of their animals ahead of disasters.

The report investigated the potential of drawing on the human-animal bond to encourage disaster preparedness among vulnerable groups of people for whom traditional community engagement strategies may have met with limited success to date.

To determine the ways in which animal attachment could be leveraged to increase the disaster resilience of vulnerable groups, the researchers needed to understand what makes these groups vulnerable and how animals figure in their lives.

To address this, a team of academic experts searched English language academic and lay literature from October to December 2013. They conducted a review of the literature in relation to seven vulnerable groups identified in the then Standing Council on Police and Emergency Management forward work plan on disaster resilience. These groups were Indigenous Australians, culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD), children and youth, older people, people with disabilities, the homeless, and people with mental health issues (*Communiqué* 4–5 July 2013).

Attachment theory was used to conceptualise the importance of the human-animal bond. This theory assumes that individuals seek proximity to an “attachment figure” (Bowlby 1999 in Thompson *et al.* 2014b). There are four criteria an attachment figure is thought to fulfil:

1. ‘proximity maintenance: the attachment figure is sought out and available in times of need.
2. safe haven: the attachment figure offers protection and support to relieve distress.

3. secure base: the attachment figure acts as a reliable presence that facilitates and permits risk-taking and exploration.
4. separation distress: prompted by separation from or actual loss of the attachment figure.’ (Mikulincer & Shaver 2007 in Thompson *et al.* 2014a: p. 217)

Attachment theory was found to be relevant for investigation of the human-animal bond for vulnerable groups, with the role of animals in people’s lives ranging from provision of companionship and security, to warmth, and practical service in the case of seeing-eye dogs. Despite the researchers finding that there was a sound evidence base recognising the psychological, emotional, health, wellbeing and practical benefits that animals provide to the vulnerable, they found there had been no systematic investigation to date of the impact of animals on the disaster resilience of those in the community who have been identified as vulnerable.

In disaster situations where there is a risk of losing the attachment figure, attachment strategies come into play. Where the figure is an animal such as a pet, the person will seek to reinforce the above criteria by, for example, seeking to be close to the animal or refusing to abandon an animal even in the face of danger to the person. In disaster situations, this might mean that ‘people may be reluctant to evacuate without their animals’ or they may ‘decline emergency accommodation if their animal is unwelcome’ (Thompson *et al.* 2014a).

The literature also demonstrated that animal attachment is critical during disaster recovery. If animals are lost this can negatively impact recovery and result in significant trauma and stress. A strong relationship with an animal following a disaster can aid recovery.

Based on these findings, the report made 25 recommendations for government, emergency services, and animal owners.

The main recommendations for government to consider included:

- Reading, referring to, and endorsing the *National Planning Principles for Animals in Disasters* established by the interim National Advisory Committee for Animals in Emergencies.
- Integrating consideration for animals into disaster planning at all levels of government, as per the *National Planning Principles for Animals in Disasters*.
- Establishing a co-ordinated, whole-of-government national approach to integrate animals into emergency planning (consistent with the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*).

- Consulting with vulnerable groups in the development of policy and procedure in relation to animals in disasters in line with the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience Community Engagement Framework.

Additional recommendations for government to consider included:

- Reading and reviewing the 'Recommendations to enhance companion animal emergency management in New Zealand' to identify relevance for the Australian context.
- Including pets and animals explicitly in definitions of assets and livelihoods that require protection, for example, alongside 'homes and possessions, cultural heritage and economic capital' within the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*. This recommendation is consistent with the 'need to obtain more consistent information ... beyond examination of life and property and simple economic assessments to cover the full scope of the social, built, economic and natural environments' outlined in the strategy.
- Including 'having an animal that an owner could risk their life to save' as an additional factor 'when considering a person's personal or community support networks' within the Victorian Vulnerable Persons Register.
- Requiring more specific information about pets on vulnerable persons registers (how many, what kind, dangerous etc.) in the free text box.
- Promoting a culture of mutual assistance whereby responders and community strive to help one another. That is, community can assist responders by taking all the necessary precautions to avoid the need for evacuation, or to facilitate evacuation with their pets and animals. Responders can assist the community by respecting their desire to save animals.

Recommendations for animal owners to consider included:

- Be informed that they are ultimately responsible for their animals in disasters.
- Be encouraged to include animals in their emergency plans.
- Assist responders by taking all the necessary precautions to avoid the need for evacuation, or to facilitate evacuation with their pets and animals.
- Ensure that their animals can be safely handled by strangers.
- Maintain a high standard of health care for their animals to minimise biosecurity concerns in shelters.
- Be educated about the roles and responsibilities of councils, government and responders.
- Be educated about the best means for preparing their animals for evacuation or on-site shelter.

Recommendations for emergency services personnel to consider training in:

- The human-animal bond and animal attachment.
- Interacting with vulnerable people during times of stress such as disasters.

- Ways to effectively evacuate vulnerable people with their animals.
- Ways to reasonably avoid having to leave animals behind.
- Ways to effectively evacuate vulnerable people when animals may need to be left behind.

Recommendations for disaster resilience information and engagement strategies:

- Information and engagement strategies could be embedded within animal-related media, information and communication, and as a basic unit of courses, training and information on animal care, as is consistent with the priority outcome that 'risk reduction knowledge is included in relevant education and training programs...' within the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*.
- Use pet-related social networks (vets, clubs, dog parks) etc. as a means of communicating disaster information, as the use of existing community networks and structures to prepare for and respond to disasters is one characteristic of a resilient community.
- Not be reliant on written information alone, and be translated into common languages spoken by culturally and linguistically diverse populations, as well as the various languages of Indigenous Australians.

Recommendations for evacuation shelters to consider:

- Integrating consideration for animals in their plans and practice.

The report concluded that a focus on animals and animal attachment is a unique approach that may be successful in increasing the engagement of vulnerable groups in disaster resilience community strategies. Further, because animal lives are interwoven with human lives, the benefits of increasing the resilience of vulnerable communities through animal attachment is twofold: 'human and animal lives can be saved together' (Thompson *et al.* 2014a).

The report, *Animal attachment and disaster resilience in vulnerable communities in Australia/A literature review*, can be obtained from World Animal Protection.

References

- Bowlby 1999, *Attachment: Attachment and loss, 2nd edition, Basic Books, New York, NY, USA*
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- Thompson K, Every D, Rainbird S, Cornell V, Smith B & Trigg J 2014a, *Animal attachment and disaster resilience in vulnerable communities in Australia / A literature review, prepared for World Animal Protection*.
- Thompson K, Every D, Rainbird S, Cornell V, Smith B & Trigg J 2014b, *No pet or their person left behind: Increasing the disaster resilience of vulnerable groups through animal attachment, activities and networks, Animals, 4, pp. 214-240*.