

Tsunami and nuclear disaster in Japan: the experiences in Fukushima

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A study was undertaken to examine how relationships between guardians (owners) and companion animals were challenged during the tsunami of March 2011 and the following nuclear disaster in Fukushima.

Japan is the only place where tsunami and nuclear disaster have occurred at the same time. Such concurrent disasters are increasing in number and present new challenges to response resources. To date, there has been little attention given to animals in disasters. This study focused on the owners of companion animals (pets) affected by the tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.¹

Ten years after a nuclear reactor meltdown, 42,000 residents are still evacuated due to the effects of radioactivity and Fukushima is an ongoing crisis area in Japan. The examination of this catastrophic disaster is crucial to understand human vulnerability. Among the survivors, pet owners faced added challenges, as they were discriminated against because of their pets.

The study commenced with 3 research questions:

1. How did guardians and their companion animals survive the large disaster?
2. Why was the relationship between guardians and their companion animals ignored during and after a disaster?
3. What structures and/or mechanisms shaped the outcomes for animals and their guardians?

Data was collected during 25 field trips to Fukushima and other areas hit by the tsunami between 2012 and 2016. Interviews were conducted with 65 individuals. The behaviour of animal guardians in Fukushima was complex relative to that of the guardians in areas hit by the tsunami. Many residents in Fukushima did not access detailed information about the nuclear meltdown and thought they could return home a few days later. As a result, an enormous number of animals was left behind.

Three major factors affected the relationship between owners and their pets. These were ‘anthropocentrism’ (the belief that human beings are the most important entity), that the government’s disaster evacuation plans were not

adequately implemented and a paradigm that prioritises the nuclear industry. In other words, that nuclear power generation is a national project promoted by the Japanese government, academics and the economics communities.

Three suggestions from this research were:

Risk – it is important to identify current and potential risks and openly discuss them. In Japan, it was considered almost taboo to examine the risk of a nuclear power plant accident prior to March 2011. If the Government of Japan had not withheld the seriousness of the situation, more companion animals would have been evacuated from the disaster areas with their guardians. Disclosure of accurate information is the responsibility of government and those who operate nuclear power plants.

Relationships – it is important to acknowledge the relationships between owners and their animals. Policy makers and the public must recognise that companion animals have been members of society from the time we have steered them into human community.

Animal value – attention could be paid to the meaning and value of the pet-owner relationship. To accomplish this, the concept of ‘bonding rights’ is put forward. That can be defined as ‘the right of the guardian and companion animal to stay together’. This concept is far from certain and requires more discussion and clarification. An example of such a right would be that owners and companion animals would receive the same level of support as non-animal owners at public shelters in a disaster.

This research contributes to understanding the outcomes for owners and their animals after the Fukushima nuclear disaster following Chernobyl. As disasters increase in frequency and severity, finding from such studies will assist to manage disaster risk and disaster response and recovery.

1. Kajiwara H 2020, *Surviving with companion animals in Japan: Life after a Tsunami and Nuclear Disaster*. Palgrave Macmillan.