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Leslie Irvine

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## Animals in Disasters: Issues for Animal Liberation Activism and Policy

Leslie Irvine, Ph.D.†\*

**Abstract:** *Non-human animals face significant risks in meteorological, geological, technological, and terrorist disasters. A large network of rescue organizations and policies has developed in response to the needs of animals. This paper examines the animal response system through four case studies, revealing issues and conflicts that can inform animal rights policy and activism. The first case examines the response to Hurricane Katrina, pointing out that emergency response plans reflect speciesist assumptions that give human lives priority, in all circumstances. The media highlighted accusations of racism during the Katrina response, but activists need to educate the public about the connections between these forms of discrimination. Second, a train derailment in which residents evacuated without their animals resulted in a bomb threat on the animals' behalf. Faced with negative publicity, responders conducted a rescue operation, proving that the government responds selectively to direct action. Third, Hurricane Charley revealed a myth about the behavior of dogs that has parallels to myths about direct action on behalf of animals. Understanding how myths function can help activists undermine them. Finally, an evacuation exercise at an animal shelter emphasized the importance of training volunteers in the handling of animals. This lesson translates well to animal liberation actions and other situations in which animal safety is paramount.*

### Introduction

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) estimates that natural or technological disasters affect two to three million Americans every year. Any incident that affects humans is likely to affect animals, as well. For example, animal welfare organizations cared for an estimated 10,000 companion animals affected by Hurricane Katrina, which was only the first of the three American hurricanes of 2005. Over three million animals (companion animals and livestock) died in Hurricane Floyd in 1999. After the Asian tsunami, the media offered stories of how some animals fled to higher ground and some performed acts of heroism. However, the reality for the majority of animals seldom made the news. One month after the tsunami, the Humane Society International estimated the stray dog population on Phuket at 17,000. Six months after the disaster, rescue workers were still trying to provide care for thousands of starving dogs, cats, livestock, marine mammals, and other animals. Other examples abound. Thirty thousand cattle died in the Colorado blizzard of 1997. In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in 1992, anecdotal reports indicate that over 1000 healthy dogs and cats were euthanized merely for lack of space in which to house them.

This paper uses four case studies to highlight issues in disaster response that have relevance for animal rights activists. The first case draws on my experience in the response to Hurricane Katrina. Although the response brought numerous issues to public attention, I focus on the speciesist assumptions inherent in disaster response policy as well as in the irresponsible keeping of companion animals. The next case uses secondary data from survey research on the evacuation of companion animals following a train derailment and chemical spill in Weyauwega, Wisconsin. The accident brought attention to the need to evacuate

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† Leslie Irvine holds a Ph.D. in sociology and teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research examines relationships between people and companion animals, animal sheltering, and animals in disasters. She is the author of *If You Tame Me: Understanding our Connection with Animals* (2004, Temple University Press). Her articles have appeared in *Anthrozoös*, *Social Problems*, *Symbolic Interaction*, and the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Issues*. Her “Animals and Society” course at the University of Colorado has been vilified by the right-wing American Council of Trustees and Alumni for bringing animal rights activism into “the undergraduate curriculum in a striking and undisguised way.” You can reach Leslie Irvine at [irvinel@colorado.edu](mailto:irvinel@colorado.edu).

companion animals along with residents and exposed conflicts between citizens and the quasi-military authority structure of the responders. The incident raises issues pertinent for animal liberators, especially concerning government justifications for keeping people out of particular areas. The third case study employs research I conducted following Hurricane Charley in 2004. The incident presented Florida's animal welfare organizations and companion animal guardians with the first major evacuation challenge since Hurricane Andrew. Although much had improved for animals in the intervening years, a new problem emerged. A "disaster myth" about dog behavior resulted in the shooting of a "dangerous" dog by police officers. The incident serves as a reminder of the justifications governments will offer for the use of violence and of the power that myths have over behavior. The fourth, and final, case study reports on a disaster exercise at an urban animal shelter. The exercise revealed problems with the use of untrained volunteers, who inadvertently pose additional risks for the welfare of the animals they intend to protect. This case offers a valuable lesson about the need for training and experience among those involved in actions on behalf of animals.

### **Providing for Animal Welfare within Disaster Response**

During the last decade, emergency response agencies have gradually begun to include animals in their disaster response plans. Following Hurricane Floyd, for example, the major public and private animal stakeholders in North Carolina developed a cooperative response plan. Other states, such as Colorado, have developed their own animal response plans based on North Carolina's model. Through memoranda and statements of understanding with FEMA and the Red Cross, various animal welfare agencies serve as the designated animal responders following disasters. National and international organizations such as the Humane Society of the United States, Humane Society International, the American Humane Association, Code 3 Associates, Noah's Wish, and Emergency Animal Rescue Services deploy their disaster programs to stricken areas at the request of an affected state. National veterinary organizations, such as the American Veterinary Medical Association, can deploy the Veterinary Medical Assistance Team (VMAT) to help restore disrupted veterinary infrastructures.<sup>1</sup> Large numbers of trained and untrained volunteers typically assist these organizations in their disaster response work.

In May 2006, the U.S. House of Representatives approved the Pets Evacuation Transportation and Standards (PETS) Act (H.R. 3858), which will require states to include companion and service animals in disaster planning. The Senate version of the Act (S. 2548; vote pending) would authorize FEMA to aid in developing such plans. However, considering the incompetence of government during Hurricane Katrina, the PETS Act is little more than a public relations strategy. Local and national activists and animal welfare agencies, as well as other animal stakeholders, will continue to carry out the work, using donations and volunteer labor. Federal legislation regarding animal welfare in disasters goes nowhere without volunteers and activists. Indeed, legislation makes the government appear responsible, but it is little more than a mandate for welfare organizations to do more of what they have long done in disasters. The advantage of the PETS Act comes through requiring that responders recognize the importance of the bond between humans and companion animals. The National Guard and other rescuers will no longer be allowed to insist that people leave their animals behind, as in Hurricane Katrina. This is indeed a positive step, but only for companion animals. Although a discussion of farmed animals lies beyond the scope

of this paper, I must mention that this legislation does nothing for the millions of animals who die when disasters strike confinement feeding operations and research labs.

Beyond mandates that acknowledge the human-animal bond, the involvement of government in the animal response following disasters raises serious concerns about effectiveness. FEMA's ineptitude following Katrina is widely recognized. Although many contributing factors are to blame, one source of the problem is the structure used in disaster response. When a disaster occurs, the response is organized through an administrative structure known as an incident command system, or ICS. The ICS, also known as the "command and control" model, has its roots in military organizations that were the model for civil defense systems, which constituted the first comprehensive emergency planning in the U.S. (see Wenger 1990; Dynes, 1994; Drabek & McEntire, 2003). The ICS model has numerous advantages that make it efficient and economical; most notably, it uses standard operating procedures and a consistent division of labor. The Incident Commander establishes a command post from which to manage the ICS hierarchy. The Incident Commander has a command staff consisting of a Liaison Officer, who coordinates the activities of the responding groups, such as police, fire, animal control, and Red Cross; a Public Information Officer, who authorizes the release of information to the public and the media; and a Safety Officer, who is responsible for the safety of responders and the public. On the next level of the ICS are the four parts of the general staff, who oversee Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Finance.

The formal structure of the disaster response system includes agencies at the local, state, and federal levels. The precise composition of these agencies can vary. Some, such as FEMA, have a core group of full-time professionals who are assisted in operations by on-call volunteers. State and local agencies usually have smaller staffs, which serve in other capacities, such as fire fighters. In addition, trained private citizens are often activated to assist local jurisdictions. During a disaster, the response begins at the bottom, with local governments mobilizing first. Local responders communicate with state governments, which then communicate with the federal government if needed. Federal agencies, such as FEMA, provide financial and technical support to state and local agencies, which remain in charge of the response (see Schneider 1992).

The command and control model operates under several assumptions about the nature of disasters, the existence of a human-animal hierarchy, and the place of experts in the response. At the policy level, animal rights activists need to understand the assumptions underlying the command and control model. Activists involved in disaster response can use their knowledge of these assumptions to inform their participation and challenge the existing system. At the grassroots, on-the-ground level, activists involved in raids, sabotage, and large-scale direct actions should understand the assumptions guiding law enforcement and emergency responses to their actions.<sup>2</sup>

The first of these assumptions concerns the failure of existing social norms and structures in disasters. The very notion of command and control "assumes that emergencies create a severe disruption in social life which lowers the effectiveness of individual behavior and reduces the capacities of social systems" (Dynes 1983, 657-8). The ICS steps in to play the role of a strong authority that can prevail over the putative chaos wrought by the disaster. In this way, the command and control model's assumption of chaos represents an example of how institutional "thinking," to use Mary Douglas's (1986) metaphor, shapes the ameliorative services that disaster response organizations deliver (see also Holstein and Miller 1993; Miller and Holstein 1989). The metaphor of institutional thinking describes how organizational activities and discourse reproduce particular definitions of and solutions to

social problems. From an organization's perspective, a solution "is only seen to be the *right* one if it sustains the institutional thinking that is already in the minds of individuals as they try to decide" (Douglas 1986:4; emphasis added).

Because institutional thinking can only frame problems selectively, the proffered solutions often fall short of addressing the problems *as experienced* by those outside the institution's purview. In other words, institutional thinking overlooks relevant aspects of the situation or circumstances that are salient for those experiencing the problem. As Loseke (2001) argues, institutional formulations may not capture the complexities of lived experience. This failure leads to "discursive disjunctions" between incompatible systems of meaning (Chase 1995, 123). An example appeared in Hurricane Katrina, when rescuers forced people to leave their companion animals. Residents faced the choice between leaving animals they considered family members and risking their own lives. Because of institutional thinking, new problems may emerge later, through the cracks of the "organizationally embedded" solutions (Gubrium 1992; see also 1987). As I explain later, disaster myths about dogs in the aftermath of Hurricane Charley offer a good illustration of this.

In addition to the pitfalls of institutional thinking, the disaster response system, at least as currently practiced through the command and control model, reveals thoroughgoing speciesism and a paternalistic attitude about the right to use force and violence. To be sure, the command and control model should not be singled out for accusations of speciesism; our entire anthropocentric culture is to blame. The point I focus on here concerns the speciesist assumptions that direct emergency responders to save human lives first, and often at the expense of animal lives. Coupled with this, the use of state-sanctioned force and the threat and reality of violence poses an intriguing paradox for animal rights activists. For example, following Hurricane Katrina, the lack of government response required subsequent animal rescuers to engage in tactics such as breaking and entering, which are denounced when engaged in by the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). For a deeper exploration of these and other issues, I turn now to the case studies.

## **Case Studies**

### *Case #1: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, Louisiana*

The unprecedented catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina highlights numerous issues related to animal liberation and welfare. Although many stages in the response could provide critical and analytical points of departure, I limit the discussion to an aspect with which I have first-hand experience: the housing of companion dogs rescued from New Orleans (see Irvine forthcoming). Along with three staff members from a local humane society at which I volunteer, I assisted for a week in the overwhelming task of caring for the more than 2000 dogs housed at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales, Louisiana (about 60 miles northwest of New Orleans).<sup>3</sup> The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) leased Lamar-Dixon as the primary staging area for the New Orleans animal response.<sup>4</sup> At that time, Lamar-Dixon was the largest functioning animal shelter in the United States. Conditions in the field were extremely taxing, and I succumbed to heat exhaustion during my stay. Among the many insights that the experience afforded me, two stand out as particularly relevant for this paper. The priority placed on human lives, a basic tenet of disaster response, essentially created a second disaster, in the form of the overwhelming numbers of homeless animals needing rescue, housing, and veterinary care. The more basic issue however, and the one that has not entered the conversation about legislating animals

into disaster response plans, is the speciesism implicit in the belief that companion animals are a basic entitlement. Having one or more dogs, cats, or both is practically a birthright, regardless of the hazards to which people might expose the animals.

### *The Event*

Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005. It is widely known that in the flooding that followed, many of the residents who evacuated New Orleans left their companion animals behind. Many people did so because they were going to motels that would not accept animals. Others, rescued in boats, helicopters, and emergency vehicles, report that responders insisted that they would only take people. Some residents were forced, under threat of arrest, to abandon their dogs and cats. Evacuees who went to emergency shelters had to find alternative arrangements for their animals, as most shelters do not accept non-human animals.<sup>5</sup> In many emergencies, some animal shelters will house companion animals temporarily. As I explain below, this practice worked well during Hurricane Charley in 2004. However, Katrina's floodwaters destroyed the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New Orleans.<sup>6</sup> Residents who managed to bring their dogs and cats to the Convention Center were forced to leave them behind when they evacuated that facility, simply because animals are not permitted on public transportation. Numerous media accounts depict National Guardsmen simply letting dogs and cats run free as their guardians watched helplessly.<sup>7</sup> One of the most famous—and heartbreaking—images from the disaster depicts the little white dog named “Snowball” being torn from a boy's arms by a police officer as the boy boarded a bus to leave the Superdome. Video showed the boy so upset that he vomited. The officer separated the dog and boy to uphold the policy that prohibits animals on public transportation. Evacuees reported being told that their animals would be rescued later, and some thought they could soon return for their animals themselves. As is now widely known, some residents have never returned.

As Katrina approached, animal response teams from all over the country were staging near Baton Rouge. However, police and military blockades prohibited animal rescuers from entering New Orleans for six days following the flood. Once rescue teams could enter the city, rescuers caught and transported animals to Lamar-Dixon, where they received veterinary examinations and treatment, decontamination baths (if needed), and 24-hour care, albeit at the most basic level. The vast majority of the animals housed at Lamar-Dixon were dogs. They received food, water, and a clean kennel every day, but walks were a luxury available only if we had additional volunteers. The minimal paperwork taped to the kennels told the location of rescue. The record of one especially sad dog described her rescue from a house where the other two dogs had died, most likely of heat, thirst, and starvation. Most of the dogs were mixed breeds, and most had nice dispositions, especially considering what they had endured. All were thin. Many were sick. Many had mange and diarrhea. Most male dogs were intact, and numerous females were in heat. For security reasons, the Lamar-Dixon management insisted that the lights remain on in the facility overnight. Consequently, the animals had no natural day and night. The relentless heat and humidity took a toll on the dogs as well as the volunteers.<sup>8</sup>

Volunteers worked around the clock, as vehicles continually arrived with rescued animals. The greatest number of animals arrived after dark, once the curfew in New Orleans forced rescue teams to leave the city. When I first arrived, the facility was terribly

overcrowded because the state veterinarian would not allow dogs to be transferred to shelters outside Louisiana. Within the week, however, dogs who had been unclaimed since the flood could be transferred out of state, while newly rescued animals had to remain within Louisiana for a designated time to allow guardians a chance to locate them. After a transfer of dogs, the newly empty kennels gave volunteers momentary false hope. Just moments after a truckload of dogs departed for other shelters, new ones arrived by the dozens from the streets and rooftops of New Orleans.

### *Discussion*

The overwhelming numbers of homeless animals after Katrina highlighted the speciesist assumptions in the disaster response. Emergency responders make human lives their first priority. Fire fighters, police officers, and other first responders will not rescue a dog or cat instead of a human being.<sup>9</sup> This policy draws a line between different kinds of life, and assumes that the lives on the human side of the line are more valuable. The debate about the relative value of lives is, I believe, misguided. The speciesism inherent in the construction of a human-animal boundary assumes that rescue cannot be reinvented in such a way that can spare the lives of animals *and* humans. The policy of putting humans first inhibits thinking about disaster response “outside the box,” as it were. If disaster response policy were examined with an eye to eliminating speciesist assumptions, small changes could improve the situation for people and animals. For example, in a conversation I had with a veterinarian volunteer about six months after Katrina, I learned that Red Cross responders are not permitted to carry dog and cat food in their vehicles. This particular veterinarian had traveled through New Orleans in Red Cross vehicles several times as part of his service, during a time early in the response when travel in the city was restricted to emergency vehicles. He pointed out the need for dog and cat food at his site, and requested that the Red Cross bring some on their next trip. The responders told him that they were prohibited from carrying animal feed or animals. The veterinarian explained that the food was human-grade, securely packaged, and unlikely to cause any contamination of any sort. The rule prevailed. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of dogs and cats starved because emergency vehicles were reserved for *human* needs. Only once animal response teams were allowed in the city could food be made available to stranded and stray animals.

In the rescue efforts, animal response teams broke into evacuated homes, smashing doors and windows and using the same tactics that the ALF uses to rescue farmed and lab animals. In both cases, the rescuers offered the same justification for their actions, claiming that the animals were suffering and that saving them trumped any rights to property. However, in the Katrina response, the state had in effect granted permission for rescuers to engage in breaking and entering. Companion animals have a different status than those confined in labs and on farms (as demonstrated by their inclusion in the PETS Acts). Moreover, the public, once aware of the plight of the abandoned dogs and cats, supported the rescue effort. The violence was state sanctioned to compensate for the government’s incompetence in the response. In contrast, ALF actions are on behalf of animals who are generally invisible to and forgotten by the public. To protect corporate interests, the government portrays ALF activists as terrorists rather than rescuers. The significant point is that the cases are similar in the most important respects, highlighting the arbitrariness of the laws that demonize liberation as terrorism. The Katrina response can potentially inform people about what liberation is and why it is necessary.

During the response to Katrina, charges of racism surfaced regularly in the media, but the Katrina response also demonstrated rampant speciesism, and the links between the two forms of discrimination became real as dogs from poor, predominantly African American parishes crowded into Lamar-Dixon. Although steps such as challenging the human-animal boundary on the response end could improve the situation for animals, there are additional speciesist assumptions at work on a more basic level in the practice of keeping dogs and cats as companions. In the interest of full disclosure, I will admit that my cat and dog companions surround me as I write this. Nevertheless, I believe that, in a morally just world, we would not reproduce other species to keep for our companionship.<sup>10</sup> Before we humans reach that stage of moral maturity, we must ask serious questions about the risks to which we expose companion animals when we keep them in our homes.

Most of the animals at Lamar-Dixon came from parishes in which heavy flooding was anticipated early on in the incident. These parishes were also mostly lower-income areas, where residents had few resources to evacuate on their own. Because the practice of keeping animals as companions is taken for granted, regardless of the hazards to which people might expose the animals, thousands of dogs and cats were abandoned when their human guardians were rescued. This raises a political minefield of a question: should people who have few resources to insure their own safety also put animals at risk? The question smacks of middle-class privilege, and I want to be clear that I am not saying the poor are incapable of caring for animals. Rather, I want to raise the issue that incorporating animals into disaster response is a positive step, but more basic steps in educating people about responsible guardianship might go further to reduce the hazards that animals face in future disasters. “Responsible” guardianship must go beyond simply providing food, water, and shelter. It must involve acknowledging a lifelong commitment, and fighting against threats to that commitment. The experience of losing a companion animal in Hurricane Katrina should have compelled New Orleans residents, particularly African-Americans, to activism on behalf of animals. However, most people seem content to believe that the government has allegedly solved the problem of animals in disasters. Time will most likely reveal that exclusively human interests once again prevail.

#### *Case #2: Chemical Spill, Weyauwega, Wisconsin*

Self-reliance on the part of the public is an essential capacity in effective disaster preparation. Emergency managers recommend that people take the initiative to have supplies on hand to provide for *all* members of the household for at least 72 hours. For small animals such as cats and dogs, this means having sufficient food, water, collars, leashes, and identification, litter, bedding, medications, and other necessities. For cats and small dogs, it also means having carriers for transportation and housing. Moreover, because Red Cross shelters that provide emergency housing for people do not allow animals, it means prearranging accommodations with friends, family, or in motels away from the disaster area. In short, considerable individual and household initiative is expected during the response to a disaster. Yet, in the event of an actual evacuation order, individuals must yield to the authority and expertise of emergency managers. In a train derailment in Wisconsin, these conflicting expectations compromised public and animal safety in ways that, if engaged in by animal liberation groups, would have been denounced and prosecuted.

#### *The Event*



At 5:30 a.m. on March 4, 1996, 35 cars of a train derailed while passing through Weyauwega, Wisconsin. Fifteen of the train's cars carried propane, and five of these caught fire. At 7:30 a.m., residents of Weyauwega's 1022 households were ordered to evacuate because of concern for an explosion, and electricity and gas were cut off to reduce further hazards. Emergency managers anticipated that the response would take several hours. The effort instead took over two weeks, reflecting the unpredictability of disaster response. Among the 241 households that included companion animals, fifty percent of the residents left their animals behind.<sup>11</sup> Residents who were not at home at the time of the order to evacuate had little choice. Shortly after the evacuation, forty-percent of companion animal guardians reentered the evacuation zone illegally to rescue their companion animals, at considerable risk to their own safety. Following protocol, emergency managers prevented residents from attempting to enter their own homes. A group of citizens made a bomb threat on behalf of the animals. As anyone familiar with animal rights actions knows, this attracted considerable media attention. Four days after the evacuation, the Emergency Operations Center organized an official companion animal rescue, supervised by the National Guard and using armored vehicles.

### *Discussion*

The Weyauwega disaster shows how institutional thinking shapes the ameliorative services that emergency responders deliver. As one disaster researcher puts it, "success and failure in disaster recovery is almost entirely a matter of public perception rather than objective reality. Private citizens cannot be expected to comprehend fully the difficulties and complexities involved in any recovery effort. At the same time, people are naturally absorbed with their own personal problems caused by the disaster" (Schneider 1992, 143). From within the paternalistic purview of emergency response, the ICS is the new social structure, put in place because existing structures will purportedly disintegrate. According to the new rules, citizens must obey orders to evacuate. The lives of residents and responders have priority over property, which includes companion animals, at least at the present. However, from the public's perspective, it is a resident's prerogative to evacuate or not, or even to decide when to reenter after leaving.

The self-reliance and initiative that facilitates successful response was put to work in the bomb threat, rather than in preparation. Only 2.5% of the companion animal-owning households indicated that they had a disaster plan prior to the train derailment, but 41% had made such a plan following the incident. More importantly, the use of the National Guard challenged resources that could have gone to other uses. The Weyauwega incident reveals that residents who do not evacuate with their companion animals could adversely affect the health and safety of many other people and animals during disasters. Hurricane Katrina provided further evidence of this, adding to the existing documentation of the importance of evacuating companion animals along with residents (Heath *et al.* 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c).

The actions of the companion animal guardians who illegally rescued their animals points out the risks of discursive disjunctions between incompatible systems of meaning. One animal response director put the disjunction this way: "The public may think the question surrounding companion animals in disasters is, 'will you risk *your life* for your companion animals?' However, the question really is 'will you risk *someone else's life* for your companion animals?'" (Kevin Dennison, personal communication). This is further illustration of the speciesist assumptions of disaster response: human lives come first. Framing disaster response in terms of whose life is more valuable makes it unlikely that

response policy will move beyond the human-animal dichotomy to create ways to meet the needs of all life.

*Case #3: Hurricane Charley, Southwest Florida*

“Disaster mythology” (Wenger *et al.* 1975) refers to the numerous misapprehensions people hold about behavior during and after a disaster (see Fischer 1988a, 1988b, 1998). One researcher explains the myths about disaster behavior in this way:

[Victims] are expected to flee in panic, suffer from psychological dependency and disaster shock. It is often believed that evacuation of these people must not be called too soon for fear of causing massive flight behavior. It is believed that shelters overflow beyond capacity with organizers unable to deal with the mob mentality. Both survivors and those converging to the scene are believed to be driven by base, depraved instincts. These individuals are commonly perceived as likely to loot property, price gouge on another, and generally behave in other selfish ways—most of which are imagined to spread from individual to individual in a contagious fashion (Fisher 1998, 13).

Disaster researchers have established that the public believes in disaster myths and the mass media facilitates their beliefs (see Fisher 1998 for a review). Although looting and price gouging do occur following disasters, instances are relatively few, and media coverage is usually based on third-party reports.<sup>12</sup> Simply put, “the perceived tendency for the depravity of mankind to emerge during disasters is not supported by the evidence” (Fischer 1998, 18).

In contrast, research reveals “very little panic or anti-social behavior during the immediate response period. Instead, there is an outpouring of concern on behalf of victims and the affected community (Drabek and McEntire 2003, 107). However, emergency responders are aware of disaster myths and must take steps to convince the public that they are safe. The National Guard is deployed to protect against looting and Incident Commanders often establish curfews. Myths affect the behavioral response to disaster. Researchers have found, for example, that significant numbers of people refuse to evacuate their homes for fear of looting (Dynes and Quarantelli 1975; Perry, Lindell, and Greene 1981). After Hurricane Charley, I saw many homes in Port Charlotte and Punta Gorda spray-painted with messages of “Don’t loot or I’ll shoot.” Alongside the myths about looting and price gouging, Hurricane Charley revealed what I call the myth of “the dangerous dog pack.” This myth has implications for the treatment of animals displaced by disasters and for direct action on behalf of animals.

*The Event*

Hurricane Charley hit southwest Florida early in the afternoon of August 13, 2004. The storm was rated category four, having winds up to 145 miles per hour. Charley made landfall in the city of Punta Gorda, in Charlotte County. Over two million people were evacuated and the damage was extensive, estimated at over three billion dollars. I conducted ethnographic research and interviews in Charlotte County, Florida, immediately following Hurricane Charley in August 2004 (Irvine 2004a). I visited the Suncoast Humane Society, which served as the primary staging area for animal response during the hurricane, and the Animal Welfare League, which sustained heavy damage during the storm. I interviewed key

members of the response team and conducted field conversations with staff members and volunteers. The objectives of the study were to describe the organizational response concerning animals and to compare the post-Charley situation for animals with that of Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

The destructive force of Hurricane Charley resulted in numerous problems for companion animals and animal stakeholders. The storm damaged or destroyed several local veterinary hospitals. Charlotte County requested assistance from the VMAT to restore the veterinary infrastructure. The storm tore the roof off the Animal Rescue League of Charlotte County. Prior to the storm, Charlotte County Animal Control (assisted by Charlotte County Volunteer Animal Rescue Committee) had evacuated all the dogs (about one hundred) from the shelter to a fire training tower east of Punta Gorda, where they were housed in kennels with three days worth of food and water. All cats had been placed in foster care, many with staff and volunteers. On August 14, the HSUS Disaster Animal Rescue Team arrived with about two dozen volunteers and immediately set up a temporary center in Punta Gorda. The HSUS facility cared for lost and injured animals and arranged transport to Suncoast Humane Society in Englewood, about fifteen miles away. On August 14, Suncoast transferred its adoptable animals (about 100 cats and 50 dogs) to other Florida shelters to make room for animals displaced by the hurricane. Suncoast also housed the dogs who had weathered the storm in the fire tower. Some residents who suffered significant losses found that they could no longer provide a home for their companion animals and had to surrender them to the Humane Society. Suncoast transferred all animals surrendered by their guardians to shelters in other areas of the state. The shelter kept animals who were lost and found during the hurricane for longer than the usual period before becoming adoptable, to facilitate reunions with guardians. Suncoast took reports of lost animals, and all facilities tried to match reports with found animals in order to reunite animals with their human families.

Alongside the myths about looting and price gouging, Hurricane Charley revealed the myth of “the dangerous dog pack.” This refers to the belief that stray dogs will band together and attack people. In Charlotte County, one woman reported being bitten by a stray dog. Coincidentally, several dogs were seen traveling together in the vicinity. The police assumed the dogs were guilty. They shot and injured one dog, who then ran off. Animal control officers later caught the dog and took him to Suncoast Humane for treatment. He awaited adoption at the time of this research (appropriately named “Bullet”). However, local officials and the public clearly believe in the power of “pack mentality.”

### *Discussion*

Like all myths, the “dangerous dog pack” contains some wisdom. Dogs and other animals can carry rabies and other zoonotic diseases. It makes good sense to avoid handling an unfamiliar dog or cat, especially one that appears frightened. But in a short-term disaster such as a hurricane, animals who were companions only two or three days earlier are not likely to have so quickly reverted to a savage state of nature. In an uncertain situation, one bite implicated all dogs, and fortunately, only one animal suffered. The fate of animals in larger scale disasters such as the tsunami is less positive. The Sri Lankan military was prepared to kill thousands of homeless dogs if even a single case of rabies occurred. Six months after the disaster, the Humane Society International team was still engaged in efforts to educate officials about the benefits of spaying, neutering, and vaccinating over eradication. In addition to being morally reprehensible, killing campaigns are also ineffective. The killers never catch all the dogs, who flee at the hint of danger. Dogs then populate other

areas, where they continue to breed. The two organizations face a discursive disjunction as they negotiate the meaning and value of homeless animals. The myth of the dangerous dog pack empowers the government to engage in public relations efforts to show members of the public that they are safe.

Disaster myths have a parallel in animal rights activism, particularly direct action. For example, similar myths shape the way the government, corporations, and the public understand direct action on behalf of animals.<sup>13</sup> Equating direct action with terrorism creates the impression that it always involves violence and intends at intimidation. The equation of the two in the media shapes public perceptions. Members of the public begin to believe that they are vulnerable to violence committed by animal rights activists. Consequently, any direct action will elicit state-sanctioned force and violence, not because the action itself was violent, but because the public, as well as the police and other responders, believe the myth. Even if the responders understand the action correctly, they will be required to take drastic action as a public relations move, to demonstrate that citizens are protected from “terrorism.”

#### *Case #4: Disaster Exercise, Aurora, Colorado*

Another common occurrence contradicts the myth that disasters bring out the worst in people. During a disaster, well-meaning but untrained volunteers, unaffiliated with any response agency, will gravitate to the site. Some people will want to help with rescue and recovery, while others will bring sandwiches or snacks. Due to insurance regulations, disease control and safety measures, response protocols, and most tellingly, due to the ICS’s inability to integrate them, untrained volunteers pose a tremendous liability in any incident. They also represent an extraordinary untapped resource. The handling of what responders refer to as “SUVs,” or “Spontaneous Untrained/Unsolicited Volunteers,” is one of the most challenging public relations issues in a disaster. It also represents an area in which the gap between institutional thinking and lived experience is wide. As one emergency manager puts it:

When disaster—natural or man-made—strikes a community, specific emergency management and nonprofit organizations automatically respond according to a pre-established plan. Each of these designated organizations has a specific role to play to ensure an effective response to and recovery from the disaster’s devastation. Yet one element within the present system continues to pose a challenge: spontaneous, untrained volunteers . . . the paradox is clear: people’s willingness to volunteer versus the system’s capacity to utilize them effectively (Gliniecki 1004).

#### *The Event*

In a dual role of volunteer on the State Animal Response Team (a non-governmental agency) and researcher, I observed an emergency training exercise at an animal shelter in Aurora, Colorado, the state’s third largest city. The exercise illustrates a potential problem with SUVs in the animal shelter context and in any situation involving the handling of animals. The facility had to relocate temporarily during construction. Thirty-eight dogs and eleven cats were housed there at the time of the exercise. The temporary facility, about five miles away, had been set up during the preceding week. The relocation provided an opportunity for a disaster training exercise. The exercise had three goals. The first was to establish a model operational structure for use in the evacuation of shelters, boarding kennels, veterinary hospitals, and similar facilities. The second was to establish the logistical

needs in such incidents. The third goal was to identify concepts and issues for incorporation into statewide protocols used by animal control officers and emergency responders. I took extensive notes about what went well or poorly and participated in the debriefing following the exercise (see Irvine, unpublished paper).

The scenario for the exercise was that an explosion had occurred at a natural gas facility within a few blocks of the shelter. The building sustained minor damage during the explosion and lost utilities, but remained structurally sound. However, the fire department and engineers ordered the evacuation of all animals during repairs. The aim was to relocate all dogs and cats while maintaining kennel records and any medications. Because the building was sound, there was no immediate time pressure to evacuate the animals. Nevertheless, the intention of the exercise was to evacuate them as quickly and safely as possible. Animal control officers and a representative from the State Animal Response Team were in command of the incident. A few of those involved in evacuating the animals were affiliated with the shelter or with the State Animal Response Team. However, some volunteers came from a local training program for veterinary technicians.

At the start of the exercise, Incident Commanders provided detailed instructions about how to handle, house, and transport animals so that correct identification remained with each animal. Volunteers evacuated all animals from the building and situated them in temporary housing in two hours and fifteen minutes. Considering that none of the volunteers had previously experienced a true emergency evacuation, and had received only a short briefing beforehand, the evacuation was notably smooth. During the debriefing after the exercise, the team discussed some minor problems that had easy solutions. However, a fight between two dogs points out a risk with SUVs.

### *Discussion*

The volunteers from the veterinary technician program had ample experience handling *companion animals*, but had no experience with *shelter animals*, for whom the handling protocols differ significantly. For instance, most shelters know little about the history, health, and temperaments of the animals in their care. Consequently, to control disease and prevent bites, fights, and injuries, shelter workers avoid having dogs encounter one another nose-to-nose. During the exercise, a bottleneck occurred at an exit station. Dogs and volunteers crowded into a narrow hallway, and two dogs began to fight. This particular fight ended quickly, but it could have resulted in serious injury to volunteers and dogs. A second incident occurred when a semi-feral cat escaped from her kennel at the temporary facility. Unaccustomed to handling unsocialized cats, the volunteer had turned away to check some paperwork and left the cage open. This, too, could have resulted in human and animal injury. Because of bite quarantine policies and the attendant re-evaluation of adoption status, a bite inflicted during the recovery of an escaped animal could even result in the animal's death. Both incidents point out the need for situation-specific training for all volunteers. This issue translates well to animal rights activism. Although screening and training are often time-consuming, the trust and confidence that come from having everyone "on the same page" can be invaluable.

### **Conclusion**

The recent attention paid to the needs of animals in disasters points out what I have elsewhere referred to as the *paradox of progression* (Irvine 2003). The phrase captures how one

social problem develops into new problems or “piggybacks” new versions onto existing ones. For example, an ongoing problem for companion animals in disasters is displacement. In Hurricanes Andrew and Katrina, abandoned and stray animals caused additional disasters. However, when animal evacuation plans succeed, as they did in Hurricane Charley, the problem is no longer displaced animals but fears about “dangerous dog packs.” The current solution to *that* problem—shooting suspicious strays—is clearly unacceptable. Thus, the new problem becomes one of disabusing law enforcement and the public of the notion that dog packs pose a serious threat. Similarly, emergency responders face the “problem” of SUVs. The solution has been to create a position within the ICS to convey information to the public about how they can help. The problem then becomes one of *what kind of information* to convey, as the potential for negative public relations is high. The SUV problem might some day be resolved, raising new concerns. At present, though, it remains a pitfall for all situations involving animal handling.

By some standards, the future for animals in disasters is improving. Hurricane Katrina brought public awareness to the need to include animals in response plans, and it is unlikely that the public will ever again be ordered to evacuate without companion animals. However, by other standards, the fate of animals has changed little, and may even have taken a step backward. Including animals in response plans means they will likely suffer from the same bungling and corruption that characterized the Gulf Coast response. The animal response will remain in the hands of welfare organizations, while these organizations and their largely volunteer staff will remain at the mercy of a quasi-military authority structure. In short, current efforts to include animals only incorporate them into a flawed system.

One solution would be to consider alternatives to the ICS. However, because the Homeland Security Act of 2002 mandated ICS as part of the national emergency response system, change is unlikely. In any case, alternatives would almost certainly incorporate the “humans first” speciesism endemic in our culture at-large. If ICS is here to stay, emergency planners must ensure that rescuers, companion animal guardians, and other animal stakeholders understand its structure and, most importantly, are included in it. One positive step would involve recognizing animal rights and welfare organizations as first responders, akin to police and fire fighters, and granting them the same access to restricted areas. Another step would involve an extensive public awareness campaign, designed to educate citizens about the emergency response system before the next disaster occurs. The most important step is for activists, educators, and others to continue to call attention to the speciesism that commodifies animals, thereby allowing us to put them at risk in disasters. At the very least, we must encourage responsible guardianship, which would include assessing the risks animals may face by living with us.

Finally, this paper has not addressed the plight of the millions of farmed animals, who are at even greater risk than are companion animals in disasters. Confinement feeding operations offer no chance for escape from flood, fire, or structural damage. The farmers who feed the animals do so by contract with large corporations who manage dozens of production facilities. Because the farmers do not own the animals, they cannot legally authorize or conduct rescue operations. In addition, the sheer numbers of birds and animals in a typical facility pose numerous logistical problems, such as transportation and re-housing. Saving the lives of farmed animals often costs more than the monetary value of the animals’ lives. The risks to farmed animals in disasters present one more reason for eliminating intensive agricultural practices.

Some researchers point out that all disasters are human-caused, because we choose to live, work, and play in disaster-prone areas. As we incorporated animals into human

society, we also exposed them to hazards. Because companion animals share our homes, they face the same risks from fire, weather, and other hazards that might cause injury, threaten lives, or require evacuation. We are therefore responsible for their welfare. However, in disaster responses, human lives have priority. Although an evaluation of the justifications for this moral decision lies beyond the scope of this paper, the decision itself implies that we cannot save animals as well as humans. The kinds of policies that would value all lives would challenge the dualistic thinking behind the simplistic categories of “humans” and “animals.” Activists must continually challenge speciesism, wherever it appears. The anthropocentric assumptions that permeate our culture are a disaster waiting to happen.

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<sup>1</sup> VMAT is deployed to areas of federally declared disasters upon request. States can request VMAT assistance in other emergencies, but have to pay the full cost of deployment. Local veterinarians perform most veterinary services in emergencies/disasters with VMAT deployments being only in the extraordinary situations.

<sup>2</sup> For additional criticisms of this approach, see Dynes 1983; Mileti 1989; Schneider 1992.

<sup>3</sup> The Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine's large animal program cared for the 350 horses also housed at Lamar-Dixon.

<sup>4</sup> The staging area for the Mississippi animal response was located in Hattiesburg.

<sup>5</sup> The exception to this was in Hattiesburg, MS, where the HSUS had established a "pet-friendly" shelter for evacuees and their companion animals.



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<sup>6</sup> The LA-SPCA provides care and basic medical services for approximately 11,000 homeless and unwanted animals each year. Before the hurricane struck, the LA-SPCA shelter staff had transferred their animals to other shelters, in accordance with its disaster response plan. The animals housed in its counterpart in Mississippi, the Humane Society of South Mississippi, in Gulfport, were rescued on September 2.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, <<http://www.la-sPCA.org/tails/lily.htm>> 3 July 2006

and

<[http://www.hsus.org/hsus\\_field/hsus\\_disaster\\_center/recent\\_activities\\_and\\_information/2005\\_disaster\\_response/hurricane\\_katrina/refusing\\_to\\_leave\\_them\\_behind\\_evacuees\\_smuggled\\_their\\_pets\\_out\\_with\\_them.html](http://www.hsus.org/hsus_field/hsus_disaster_center/recent_activities_and_information/2005_disaster_response/hurricane_katrina/refusing_to_leave_them_behind_evacuees_smuggled_their_pets_out_with_them.html)> 3 July 2006

<sup>8</sup> For additional, and similar, reports from Lamar-Dixon, see

<[http://animalliberationfront.com/News/2005\\_9/KatrinaHSUSprobs.htm](http://animalliberationfront.com/News/2005_9/KatrinaHSUSprobs.htm)> 4 July 2006

<sup>9</sup> In all fairness, many media accounts document that individual responders wanted to rescue animals, but the overall policy of disaster response is “people first.”

<sup>10</sup> For my views on this, see Irvine 2004b.

<sup>11</sup> The evacuation zone included three dairies, and all livestock animals were also left behind.

<sup>12</sup> In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, news photos showed white residents “finding” bread and food and African Americans “looting” a grocery store. See <<http://www.nowpublic.com/node/18075>> 3 July 2006

<sup>13</sup> For a list of common myths about direct action, see <<http://animalliberationfront.com/ALFront/DirectActionMyths.htm>> 6 July 2006