

Human-animal bonds in disasters

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The recognition of the bond between people and pets is stronger than ever before, but what happens to the human-animal relationship when disaster strikes?

As part of a Flinders University PhD, Dian Fowles is investigating the impact of [natural disasters](#) on human-animal relations, with the information used to shape and inform [disaster management](#) policies and disaster services.

Focusing on pet owners and animal rescuers, Ms Fowles has started documenting participants' experiences during and after several major [disasters](#) in Australia, including the 2010-2011 Queensland floods and the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria (2009).

With a background in environmental philosophy and pet loss counselling, Ms Fowles will consider various factors influencing human-animal relations in disasters, including the logistics of evacuation, the impact of rehousing and the physical and emotional side-effects of disasters.

"There's been a shift in the way we treat animals, particularly in the past couple of decades – pets are no longer beings in the backyard that are there for occasional entertainment or protection, they have now stepped through the doors as valued family members," Ms Fowles, who is in the second year of her PhD in the School of Social and Policy Studies, said.

"As the recognition of the human-animal connection grows stronger, it's important to understand how these relationships can be tested during

times of disaster," she said.

"For example, respondents will be asked whether they took animals with them during an evacuation or whether they were forced to leave them behind, and the impact that had on individuals or families.

"I'll also be gathering peoples' experiences with the logistics of evacuation; were they allowed to take their pets on public transport, and were they allowed to stay at shelters or with family or friends during the disaster?

"Like humans, it's not uncommon for animals to experience physical symptoms of stress so I'll be asking animal owners about the long-term ramifications and whether they were offered any services to support/accommodate their human-animal relationship."

Ms Fowles said that while it can be difficult to talk about grief and loss, she hopes the research will be used to improve the human-animal experience in times of disaster.

"Some people are quite open to talking about how their situation impacts them while others are very guarded, especially if people have died or been seriously injured in the event.

"However, for some people, the relationship with their animals is the single most important relationship in their life, or even the only remnant of their pre-disaster life."

With predictions of increasing climate destabilisation, Ms Fowles said is not unreasonable to expect more severe natural events leading to an increase in demand for evacuations and evacuation shelters.

She said it is therefore imperative to explore ways to inform and equip

services, such as evacuation shelters, with the resources to better support the human-animal bond.

"Research shows that having an animal by your side through a traumatic experience is reassuring and it helps with disaster resilience.

"This connection has also been shown to reduce the demand on services post-disaster, which is why we need to do more work on the types of disaster preparedness and responses that will cater to the human-animal bond in a more considerate way."

More information: Volunteers may participate in the study by completing the online survey: www.surveymonkey.com/s/animaldisaster

Provided by Flinders University

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