Caring During Crisis: Animal Welfare During Pandemics and Natural Disasters

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INTRODUCTION

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From April 29 to May 1, 2007, the University of Guelph hosted a symposium, Caring During Crisis: Animal Welfare During Pandemics and Natural Disasters, with the objectives (a) of raising awareness about how nonhuman animals and the people who care for them are affected during emergencies and (b) of sharing knowledge about how animal welfare may be addressed during these situations. The symposium attracted 150 participants, representing 71 organizations from across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Chile, and the Cayman Islands. The audience also brought a range of perspectives to the issues—from individuals representing animal protection and commodity organizations to municipal government officials responsible for community safety and correctional services; many of these individuals had little or no animal experience. To take advantage of this diverse audience and range of interests, the symposium was structured with formal presentations by internationally recognized experts, followed by panel discussions at the end of each session to facilitate contributions by the audience. At the conclusion of the 3 days, it was clear that our emotional, economic, and ecological relationships with animals require thoughtful integration of animal care within formal policy and planning for emergency response.

This special issue of Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science brings together select articles from the symposium as well as transcripts from two of the panel
discussions. Presentation slides and panel transcripts for the entire program may be accessed from the Web site for the Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare at the University of Guelph (http://www.uoguelph.ca/csaw/index.htm)

PUBLIC SESSION: EXPLORING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMANS AND NONHUMAN ANIMALS DURING DISEASES AND NATURAL DISASTERS

The conference began with a session that was open to the general public, with the goal of illustrating the breadth of emergency response in terms of impacts on both humans and nonhuman animals. The first presentation explored the question, “Why Would We Care About Animals During Times of Crisis?” in which Michael C. Appleby and Tonya Stokes from the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) discussed public attitudes about animal welfare; human dependence on animals for economic, cultural, and emotional support; and the consequent moral obligation to address animal needs during disasters. Their article on this topic is included in this issue. In the second presentation, “Weighing in Public Health and Safety Factors for Humans During Times of Crisis,” James G. Young, special adviser to the Canadian Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, shared his experiences managing human relief efforts during the ice storms of 1998 in eastern Canada, during the tsunami relief effort in Sri Lanka and Indonesia in 2004, and during avian influenza. These two presentations set themes of animal welfare and human welfare that were followed throughout the conference.

SESSION 1: FRONT-LINE EXPERIENCES WITH ANIMAL WELFARE, NATURAL DISASTERS, AND DISEASE OUTBREAKS

The second day of the conference began an exploration titled “What Do We Know About What Animals Need During Disasters and Disease Outbreaks?” in which Ian Duncan provided an overview of the scientific and ethical components of animal welfare. In the following presentation, “Decision Making During Disasters: Lessons Learned From Hurricanes Katrina and Floyd,” Kelli Ferris shared her experiences as one of the original founders of the U.S. State Animal Response Team concept, directing the North Carolina Emergency Field Office. Victoria Bowes, a key player in the 2004 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza outbreak in British Columbia, Canada, explained the progression of the emergency response to the outbreak and the animal and human impacts in her presentation “Responding to Issues Under Disease Conditions: The BC Experi-
ence With Avian Influenza.” A transcript from the panel discussion with these three speakers is included in this issue.

SESSION 2: EFFECTS ON ANIMAL WELFARE IN THE BROADER COMMUNITY

In the second session, the broader effects of disasters on society were explored. Sebastian E. Heath presented “Animal Management in Disasters: An International Perspective of Impacts on Livelihoods.” His article in this issue discusses the complex relationships between policies that are intended to control or eradicate animal diseases and effects on sustainability and food security. In his presentation “Disaster Planning for Laboratory Animal Facilities: Lessons Learned From Hurricane Katrina,” William Stokes discussed the legislation and logistics relating to animal welfare, public safety, and intellectual property during emergency response in animal-research laboratories. Finally, Terry L. Whiting broadened the discussion of animal welfare during disease outbreaks by exploring animal welfare issues of overcrowding and mass slaughter of healthy animals when animal movements are restricted due to foreign animal disease-eradication policies. Whiting’s article, “Special Welfare Concerns in Countries Dependent on Live Animal Trade: The Real Foreign Animal Disease Emergency for Canada” is included in this issue and highlights the vulnerability of animal agriculture to closure of export markets and the need to include welfare slaughter within emergency preparedness.

SESSION 3: ADDRESSING ANIMAL WELFARE IN EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLANNING

The final session focused on logistics for addressing animal welfare in emergency planning. Drawing from his fundamental and practical expertise, Mohan Raj discussed “Humane Killing of Nonhuman Animals for Disease Control Purposes.” In his article in this issue, Raj provides a synopsis of the various methods proposed for depopulating large numbers of agricultural animals and the animal welfare implications when methods are tested empirically.

The important effects of mass killing of livestock on human welfare has received limited attention, and Maggie Mort’s article in this issue discusses thought-provoking results from an 18-month study in “Animal Disease and Human Trauma: The Psycho-social Implications of the 2001 UK Foot and Mouth Disease Disaster.” Brian Evans, chief veterinary officer for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, answered the question “How Is Animal Welfare Addressed Within International Frameworks?” Carin Wittnich brought these issues home to
the local audience in the terms of “How Is Animal Welfare Addressed in Canada’s Emergency Response Plans?” Wittnich’s article in this issue discusses a possible role for the newly formed Canadian Veterinary Reserve in responding to animal welfare during disaster relief. The final speaker, Randy Covey, director for Disaster Services at The Humane Society of the United States, shared his expertise on “How Can Animal Welfare Be Addressed in Community Planning for Emergency Response?” and provided practical suggestions for developing coordinated disaster planning at the grassroots level. Transcripts from the final panel discussion, included in this issue, explore these topics in more depth with thoughtful exchanges between the audience and the speakers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

News stories about heroism, successes, and losses during animal rescue efforts associated with Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters have raised public awareness about risks to animals during a crisis. Furthermore, there are increasing expectations about what should be done to protect animals during these catastrophes. It appears that brainstorming, planning, and addressing animal welfare during emergency response are being conducted—but in isolation rather than as a coordinated response. Planning associated with less predictable natural disasters, such as ice storms, wildfires, and tornadoes, appears to receive less attention but can cause significant suffering when concentrated populations of animals are affected.

One outcome of the conference was the development of a provincial e-mail listserve for networking by municipal workers, animal sheltering organizations, and veterinarians. Lessons learned from previous disasters indicate that communication and networking are vital components for rapid response at the local level. This integrated human and animal response is recognized in the emergence of organizations such as the International Working Group on Animals in Disasters, with involvement of groups primarily focused on human welfare (such as the Red Cross, Red Crescent, and World Health Organization) together with those focused on animal welfare (such as WSPA and the World Organization for Animal Health).

At the conclusion of the conference, the need to include animals in emergency planning was clearly articulated. Animal suffering is important in its own right but is also a significant factor for managing human welfare both during and after a crisis. Continued efforts to consider all animals during emergency planning, together with frank discussions about logistics involved, will strengthen future emergency response efforts for addressing the needs of animals and the people who care for them.
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