

Are Animals Found in Disasters Owned vs. Stray?

Considerable confusion arises over who is responsible for pets in disasters. The main reason for this confusion is that the distinction between owned and stray pets is not made clear. A practical distinction is that owned pets are accompanied by their owners, whereas stray pets are any pets found without an owner. In many communities stray animals are simply defined as those (dogs and cats) that are not leashed or those not under the direct control of their owners. Confusion arises in disasters because of the frequent assumption that stray animals result from the inadvertent and tragic separation of pets and owners.

That this occurs in disasters is highly unlikely and inconsistent with most sociologic research in disasters, which indicates that disasters exacerbate preexisting conditions rather than create new ones. Most animals found in disasters have been abandoned or come from a population of pets that were strays before the disaster. The idea that most animals found in disasters have been abandoned or were strays at the time of the disaster is supported by our study of the Oakland firestorm. Nevertheless, many animals found after disasters are managed erroneously as owned animals.

Owned Animals

Research data indicate that owned animals are almost always cared for adequately by their owners. Most owners take their pets to stay with them at the homes of friends and family. The substantial majority of these pets and their owners do not need more than temporary (overnight) assistance after evacuations. Long-term shelter may become an issue if hurricane damage is extensive or during prolonged power outages (e.g., after ice storms). Prolonged sheltering of owners and their pets might be necessary, especially if the owners are older adults. However, there are no data indicating that long-term shelter for owners and pets is needed to improve public or animal health other than in exceptional circumstances, as discussed later in this chapter.

For the few true cases of separation that occur in disasters we have found that the pets are reunited with their owners within 3 weeks of the incident. Pets that are reunited with their owners generally come from households with responsible attitudes, with owners who take the initiative to find their lost pets. Again, this implies that the characteristics of pet owners who strive to be reunited with their pets are different from those of pet owners who do not come forth.

Stray Animals

Stray animals (any animal without an owner at its side) fall under the regulatory control of the department of animal control in the jurisdiction where they are found. This should also be true in disasters. In most communities, detailed ordinances empower animal control officers with the care and disposal of stray animals. Animal control agencies generally expect the owners to come looking for their pet, rather than animal control workers to go looking for the owner. There is no reason that this should not apply in disasters as well.

Finding foster and adoptive homes for stray pets after disasters may be a role for humane groups. Having local groups administer these efforts prevents the resentment that would arise if outside groups received undue credit and sponsorship. Fortunately, disaster-struck communities increase their rates of adoption of stray animals.

Evidence for Pet Abandonment

Pet abandonment appears to be the most common animal problem in disasters, and anecdotes about abandoned animals abound:

- After the Three Mile Island nuclear accident local shelters and veterinary practices were rapidly overwhelmed with stray animals. Animals running loose apparently created such a problem that mass euthanasia was recommended to deal with ownerless pets.
- High rates of abandonment occurred after a major flood in Tucson, Arizona, in 1983. The cost of housing captured animals was given as a reason that owners would not claim their pets from shelters.
- After the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in Washington in 1980, the Cowlitz County Humane Society, which is approximately 30 miles west of Mt. St. Helens, accepted approximately three times as many pets as usual.
- Large-scale flooding in Georgia in 1995 brought about problems similar to those described above, and the problems were exacerbated by damage to humane shelters and veterinary practices.

In addition to these reports, the uncanny coincidence that the number of animals found after the 1991 Oakland, California, firestorm was nearly identical to the number of strays that normally ran loose in the area should be considered. This coincidence is strong, albeit circumstantial, evidence that animals found after disasters are strays at the time a disaster strikes. The number of abandoned pets or animals that emerge as strays at the time of the disaster is a sad reflection of the state of animal care in this country.

In a typical community, stray cats make up approximately 30% of the cat population and stray dogs make up approximately 5% of the dog population. Many of these strays are fed every day by persons who are not their owners. In a disaster, these animals do not receive care. Because these strays are friendly and accustomed to people, they are the animals that are caught most easily after disasters and fill up the animal shelters as they wait to be adopted.

Risk factors for the relinquishment of pets in nondisaster situations include behavioral problems, the owner's moving, and the reproductive status of the pet. Recent evidence suggests that the risk factors for abandonment in disasters are similar.

A study of pet loss after the Oakland firestorm was possible because the Oakland Firestorm Pet Hotline had compiled comprehensive records on the nearly 1300 pets they received calls about after the fire. Another excellent account of the fire and how owners dealt with their pets is provided in Greg Zompolis' book *Operation Pet Rescue*.

Further empirical evidence suggests that the number of animals found after a disaster approximates the number of stray animals one would expect to find in the affected area. Although strays are not easy to count during normal times (estimates are that approximately 15% of cats and dogs in a community are strays), they become visible when people have been evacuated, and the strays usual sources of food and habitation are disrupted. Further circumstantial evidence indicating that animals found after disaster were strays at the time comes from informal surveys of animal shelters in disaster-impacted areas, where it has been found that the number of stray animals admitted to the shelter in the months after a disaster decreases proportionally to the number of animals found in affected area. In other words, animals found at disasters sites are mostly likely a reflection of the underlying problem of pet overpopulation in U.S. communities. During the response to disasters effective public service announcements (PSA) can raise awareness of this issue and drum up support for effective recovery and mitigation programs for better pet population control in the affected community.