

# Shelter from the storm: The social landscape of pets in disasters

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Most researchers can draw a line from their current field of study to something in their past that first lit the spark—an engineer who had a

knack for fixing things, an economics professor who was always good with numbers.

For Sarah DeYoung, a core faculty member in the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center and assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice, that moment came at a very early age and developed into a very specific area of research that mirrored her experiences.

Her family lived near a landfill in western North Carolina where people would dump off [animals](#) that they no longer wanted, leaving them stranded at the end of a dirt road.

"My parents would take the cats or dogs and bring them to the shelter. It kind of became almost routine for us. So [animal welfare](#) has always been a part of my life," DeYoung said.

Over the years she became a full-blown animal lover, taking part in animal advocacy efforts like spay and neuter events and had many pets of her own.

But it wasn't until DeYoung was working on her postdoc at UD with Ashley Farmer, then a graduate student, that it all came together.



Sarah DeYoung, a UD professor, is co-author of a new book that examines how pets are managed during disasters and provides tips for keeping them safe.

"We were both analyzing some open-ended hurricane data from a project," DeYoung said. "At the end of the survey, a lot of the respondents were saying, "One thing you forgot to ask me about was my pets." There were questions about health and income and all of these other factors, but a lot of people were indicating that their decisions about the hurricane in that particular research setting were led by their animals. We thought that was really interesting. We kind of kept it in the back of our mind. And then when Hurricane Irma and Harvey happened, we were both faculty members by then and we launched our research."

That research gets a comprehensive look in "[All Creatures Safe and Sound: The Social Landscape of Pets in Disasters](#)," a new book co-

authored by DeYoung and Farmer (now a professor at Illinois State University), due to be published June 21.

The book is the result of years of research that was launched by a National Science Foundation grant that allowed DeYoung and Farmer to deploy and gather data for seven different major [disasters](#) in the United States from 2017 through 2019. Those disasters included multiple hurricanes, a Hawaii lava flow, multiple wildfires in California and the geographic range spanning from the Carolinas to Florida and Texas and California and Hawaii.

DeYoung recently answered a few questions about the book and her study of pet management during disasters.

### **Q: What was the impetus for the book?**

DeYoung: During Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma, my co-author, Ashley Farmer and I were watching and reading a lot of news stories about people who either purposefully or inadvertently left their animals behind in floodwaters. There were dogs tied to trees or lampposts or just left in floodwaters. Even though the Pets Act [which authorized FEMA to provide rescue, care, shelter and essential needs for individuals with household pets and service animals] was passed in 2006, after Hurricane Katrina, this still remained a very visible and urgent problem. We decided to write a grant proposal to the National Science Foundation to collect additional data.

**Q: For many humans, pets are practically on the same level with children and a family. It seems odd that we would even need plans for pet management during a disaster. Why do you think there's this blind spot?**



DeYoung: A lot of people do view pets as family, but there is, of course, a variation in the levels of attachment and bonding that people have with companion animals, and that varies from household to household. There's also a disconnect because emergency managers or other decision makers that are planning for and responding to disasters don't always necessarily view pets as essential or members of the household. It's really up to the people in charge of that particular disaster or sheltering scenario to make sure that there are arrangements for evacuation and sheltering of people with companion animals.

### **Q: How would pet evacuation and management differ during a fire or hurricane or an earthquake?**

DeYoung: That has a lot to do with the timing of the event and how quickly the disaster arrives in a community, as it would with a wildfire. Obviously, the decision making has to be compressed into a very short timeframe. People have minutes or even just a matter of seconds to decide how they're going to evacuate and what they're going to bring with them. And, in a hurricane, people usually have sometimes up to a week of advance notice, because of meteorological models and forecasting. But there are still cases where, even in a hurricane, someone didn't realize that their neighborhood was in a flood zone. And so they would go to work, or they would go to a friend's house, and while they were away, the flooding would happen. And unfortunately, there were instances in which an animal wouldn't make it. Of course, the owner of the animal would be devastated in those cases. So the speed of onset as well as the flood zone was really important.

### **Q: What was something that surprised you while you were doing the field work for this book?**

DeYoung: Something that surprised me was the degree and the extent to

which people go to engage in heroic acts to save animals. Sometimes even animals that aren't their own. People will stay behind in a hurricane to feed a colony of feral or wild cats, or sometimes people will rescue their neighbor's dogs during flooding. There were instances of people spending hours in the burn zone after the major wildfires to trap cats that were displaced from their neighborhoods. A lot of people engaged in heroic activities, which shouldn't be surprising because we know that people tend to help each other in disasters and crisis events, but it was still rather moving for us to document and to observe.

**Q: What are some of the things people can do before a disaster to get prepared and mitigate the risks to themselves and their pets?**

DeYoung: I think it's really important for people to be aware of how complicated it can be, and try to do everything they can to increase the chance of reunification. Things like microchipping, having a current photo of the animal or having things that you would need for evacuation in a very obvious spot—cat carriers in a closet by the door, or leashes and dog kennels in a very accessible place, like next to the car in the garage so that when the evacuation happens it is nearby. This way, you're not asking yourself, "Where did I put those things?" That actually ended up being a really big problem that we saw time and time again.

**Q: Obviously, having lodging options that will allow pets is crucial to the safety and survival of both owner and pet. Is there anything that can encourage these businesses to allow pets when a disaster occurs?**

DeYoung: We saw a lot of rumors on social media, during every disaster. There would be false information spread that shelters or hotels have to

accept pets. And that's simply not the case. But we do recommend that it would be good for hotel PR to temporarily waive some of their restrictions during an emergency scenario. We believe it will be better for their business. We realize that there are additional costs associated with that, such as cleaning. But we feel that the benefit far outweighs any losses incurred. Because, again, it's great for public relations for businesses that decide to waive the pet fees or to loosen the restrictions during mandatory evacuation or disaster event. There should be more incentives for renters or landlords specifically to allow renters to bring pets or to change those restrictions in an area or a state that's had a major disaster. Long-term housing recovery was a really big issue in Hawaii and California, because a lot of the properties available for renters after disasters have very specific pet restrictions. That prevented people from finding housing and then they had to surrender the animal after the disaster.

## **Q: What did you find in your research related to the positive role of social media in animal rescue efforts?**

DeYoung: In the book we talk about how social media really empowers people to organize. So we met a group of women in Hawaii, it was just four or five women who came together and organized an entire mass response and rescue operation, helping the 2,000 families that evacuated from the Leilani estates after the lava flow. And they helped mobilize resources for all of the animals that needed placement or needed fencing for goats, chickens, cows, horses, cats and dogs, etc. And social media was their main way of coordinating and mobilizing, and organizing and collaborating to get the resources where they needed to be and linking up people who had needs. Social media can be a powerful tool in that way. Overall, we saw social media being used by volunteers and organizations for providing information, collaborating and coordinating. There was a hurricane in North Carolina where one animal rescue organization put

out a call for people to foster dogs before the hurricane made landfall. A record number of people and families showed up to foster dogs over the weekend. A lot of those dogs that were fostered ended up being permanently adopted. That was a social media initiative. A lot of the organizations that we interviewed used the power of [social media](#) to make lives better for pets.

**Q: How does privilege and power play into this? Does socioeconomic status have any impact on how people respond?**

DeYoung: We connect the way in which pets are managed in disasters to the well-being of the people in those communities. If someone doesn't have the tangible resources to evacuate and pay for a hotel for two to three nights, then they're more likely to sleep in their car with the cat or the dog, and the cat and the dog can overheat in the car, just like a human can overheat in the car. We saw a lot of that after Hurricane Irma: people sleeping in their cars, because they couldn't bring their pets to a hotel. There were people who had jobs as food service workers that weren't allowed to leave work until their shift was over. By the time that they got home, their dog was in floodwater. Luckily, they made it in time, but they had to walk through waist-high floodwater to get to their dog.

The ways that humans can be supported through better social policies, and making sure that people have access to resources they need to thrive, can also improve the lives of animals.

Pet overpopulation is also a really big issue in some communities, so when the disaster happens the shelters are more likely to be at full capacity. That can increase rates of euthanasia. This is why the pre-disaster education and outreach, and mobilizing resources for spay and



neuter and aggressive outreach campaigns, are important before the disaster happens instead of waiting until after it hits. It's thinking strategically about the best way to get those resources to folks and to animals that need it.

There are some issues with race and gender in disasters. We saw a lot of things unfold in terms of more power being allocated to people in animal rescue, which is very white female dominated, and how that impacts the decisions that people make about reunification, resources, and outreach. Another theme we identified was that wealthier households and communities have more time and social connections to find their animals after disasters.

**Q: As an animal lover, seeing these tragedies again and again has to be very difficult.**

DeYoung: You're right and, unfortunately, a lot of the disasters that we deployed for had a lot of animal losses. One example was the campfire of 2018 in Paradise, California. A lot of the respondents that we interviewed also were impacted by observed human fatalities. That was also difficult to process. It became a part of our debriefing. Our training taught us that if we had students on the [field work](#) with us, emotional well being and reflexivity and researcher training and some of the issues that we encounter. That definitely taught me a lot as a researcher, how to handle that, and how to mentor my students when we came across those sorts of issues. But we're disaster researchers. It's part of what we know to be true. And the landscape of human suffering, and animal suffering, they're also linked. A lot of the more challenging stories that we heard were luckily sometimes balanced with happy endings, or hopeful stories. So we tried to keep that in mind and maintain that perspective that, while we heard a lot of horrible stories, we heard a lot of really inspiring and moving stories as well.

## Tips for natural-disaster pet care

Here are some tips for people with companion animals to keep in mind as we approach hurricane and wildfire season, according to DeYoung.

(1) Make sure the supplies you would need for evacuating with your pet are ready now. If you wait until a hurricane is approaching to get a cat carrier or other supplies, other people may be doing the same thing and stores might not have the supplies you need. Stock up early, even if it means saving small supplies over time (i.e. buying extra cans of cat or dog food with each regular grocery trip to put in your hurricane kit).

(2) Have a current picture of your pets on your phone or on a cloud file. When people are separated from their animals in disasters, an updated photo increases the chances of being reunited. Microchip your pets and make sure that the microchip registration information is up to date.

(3) If you must evacuate, do not assume that you will be able to return to retrieve your animals. This means you should make every effort to evacuate with your animals. Many people unfortunately assume that they will be able to retrieve their pets later and this is often not the case.

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