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# Remembering The Pets of Hurricane Katrina

# 10 YEARS LATER

A SPECIAL REPORT FROM

*petful*



This female pit bull was found hiding under a house after the hurricane hit. Top photo: Alex Chernavsky; cover photo: Jocelyn Augustino/FEMA

# 10 Years Later: Remembering The Pets of Hurricane Katrina

When disaster struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, rescuing pets was not part of the official evacuation plan. Thousands of pets died.

By **Dr. Stanley Coren**

**I**n the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, with virtually all of the humans who actually wanted to leave the city of New Orleans either rescued or evacuated, we began to see pictures of other victims of the disaster.

Television screens now carried images of dogs stranded on rooftops. One video clip showed a dog swimming through the foul water desperately trying to reach a rescue boat after his caretakers were forced to abandon him

Other scenes showed sad, starving animals on balconies or staring out of windows. Such mournful sights stirred the emotions of many who saw them, and questions began to be asked.

In one news conference, a reporter asked Michael Brown, then director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), “What about the dogs and cats that have been stranded?” His response began, “They are not our concern...”

## Pets Make a Difference in Times of Crisis

A short while before Katrina hit, FEMA had gone through a disaster preparedness exercise that involved a mythical hurricane, “Pam,” hitting the U.S. Gulf Coast. Extensive computer simulations and hands-on practice by search and rescue, police, military and civil authorities, engineers and medical experts were involved.

When Ivor Van Heerden, a hurricane researcher from Louisiana State University who helped direct the simulation exercise, was asked about preparations to save pets, he answered, “They were not part of our plans because they are not considered to be important.”

The actual disaster that followed would prove such planners to be wrong. Many people who live with animals consider them important enough to risk their own safety to keep their pets from harm.

The rescue planners had forgotten that saving the human body is not enough. People need affection, comfort, family (or something that serves as family) as well as a feeling of being needed. These emotional needs often must be met before people can motivate themselves to try to survive physically.

For many people, such requirements are filled by the companionship of an animal. Pets are part of their family, and such people would no sooner think of abandoning them than abandoning a child.

One exhausted National Guard officer explained to General Russel Honore, who was coordinating the rescue efforts, “We estimate that 30 to 40 percent of the people who refuse to leave the affected areas are staying because they want to take care of their pets.”

## Separation From Pets by Force

In the early days of the rescue effort, some authorities showed an incredible degree of callousness. Since no

planning had been done to take care of pets, people were simply ordered to abandon them.

A heart-rending example involved one young boy among the thousands who ended up sheltered at the Superdome. When he tried to board a bus to Houston while carrying a small white dog, a police officer snatched the dog from the boy.

This little animal would not have taken away any space needed by a human survivor. As the dog was carried away,

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One woman, with no other possessions left, offered her rescuer the wedding ring off her finger to save her dog, but to no avail. There were even stories of local authorities in St. Bernard Parish, who, rather than argue with survivors about saving their dogs, simply shot their pets.

This is one of the thousands of cats rescued after surviving Hurricane Katrina. By: Alex Chernavsky

Some rescuers, however, found room in their hearts for compassion and some means of helping. Many of the National Guard personnel left water and food for stranded dogs in the hopes they would survive long enough to be saved.

Louisiana State Treasurer John Kennedy was helping people board buses near Baton Rouge and found himself intervening when some evacuees resisted because they had been ordered to leave their pets behind. One woman pleaded, “I’ve lost my house, my job, my car, and I am not turning my dog loose to starve.”

Kennedy joined other volunteers in taking down the names of those leaving on the buses and asked the Louisiana SPCA to come out and collect the animals. Soon it became standard practice for representatives of the Humane Society of the United States and the ASPCA to meet people brought in from the flood, taking their animals to a shelter while recording information so that people could later be reunited with their pets.

Shortly after leaving the bus loading area, Kennedy found a mixed-breed dog tethered near the road with a unopened can of dog food next to him. With the dog was a plaintive note that read, "Please take care of my dog, his name is Chucky." Kennedy said, "What else could I do? I am taking care of Chucky."

## Extreme Measures to Save Pets

There are many stories of disaster victims resorting to extreme measures to save their dogs. Take the case of Dohnn Moret Williams. His former home was under water, his possessions gone, and his elderly father, who also lived in the city, presumed dead.

Still, sitting outside of the Houston Astrodome, Moret's temporary shelter, there was relief in his face. "I spent most of the morning crying when I knew I could come get him," he said as he reached down to pat Sebastian, a large black cocker spaniel with red markings above his brown eyes. Sebastian had just been reclaimed from the Houston SPCA. "I got no children. This here's my baby."

Their exit from New Orleans was treacherous and exhausting. Surrounded by the polluted, sometimes neck-deep floodwater, Moret knew that the dog would not be able to swim the whole way to safety. So he found an air mattress, and although Sebastian didn't like it because it tipped when he moved, it gave Moret something that he could tow.

Ultimately, they made their way to an elevated portion of Interstate 10 from which people were being evacuated by helicopter. Unfortunately, the rescuers were under orders to prevent pets from boarding.

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"There was no way I was leaving without him, and I figured I would do whatever I had to in order to keep him with me," Moret said. "I got a big black trash bag and put Sebastian in it. Then I whispered to him not to make noise."

Surprisingly, the dog seemed to understand. There was, however, one moment when the whole scheme looked as if it was going to fall apart. Squeezed up near the front of the helicopter on Moret's lap, the dog started squirming. Moret said, "He bumped against the pilot, and I thought it was over, but the pilot just goes, 'I didn't see nothing.'"

Their subterfuge was not yet done. Moret was given a ride to Houston on a bus that also was under

orders not to accept animals. This time, safely seated toward the back of the bus, Sebastian made the whole trip with his nose sticking out the top of the bag.

When they arrived at the Astrodome, volunteers from the SPCA were waiting. Sebastian was one of many stowaways on the buses. Some dogs were carried in bags or suitcases, and some even hidden under flouncy blouses or stuffed down baggy pants. All were given temporary shelter until their caretakers reclaimed them.

Sebastian and Moret were lucky. Many other dogs would not make it through this tragedy. Numerous pets were left behind during the initial evacuation of the city. Many of these were left with food and water, since people hoped they would be away for only a few days.

## Emergency Preparedness Tips

These events point out an important set of guidelines for people who live with pets but are facing an emergency situation.

1. At a minimum, each animal should wear identification, such as a small metal cylinder that hooks onto a collar and holds a slip of paper. On the paper you should record the dog's name, your name, address, telephone number and email address. A cell phone number or an out-of-town contact is also helpful in case your city or neighborhood is devastated to the degree that local contacts are unreliable.
2. If at all possible, do not leave your pets behind in an evacuation. You don't know when you'll be able to return to your home and when, or even if, humane agencies will be allowed to rescue your pets, presuming that they survive the initial emergency.

Simply put, if you have the means to evacuate, your dogs are safest with you, even if it means you have to camp out. Traveling with your dog in times of crisis may slow your progress, and you may have to make compromises to keep your pet with you.

## Recognizing the Importance of Pets

Fortunately, there are usually people among the rescuers who understand that pets are not just property to be abandoned like extra baggage. They understand that pets fulfill an important psychological function



This is one of the thousands of cats rescued after surviving Hurricane Katrina. By: Alex Chernavsky

and may be a survivor's only link to affection and the life they used to live.

At one stage in the rescue efforts, an elderly woman was getting ready to board a helicopter to be evacuated out of New Orleans. Against her breast, she hugged a little Yorkshire terrier. At the door, an enlisted man took the dog and said, "Sorry, ma'am, but orders are 'No animals.'"

The woman's weary eyes filled with tears. "I got nothing and no one. He's all I got left!" The soldier stood there holding the dog and repeated, "Orders are 'No animals.'"

At that moment, an officer, wearing captain's bars and a medical corps insignia appeared at the door.

His name tag read Anderson. He reached over to the enlisted man and took the little animal. "That's not a dog," he said, "that's medicine."

"Medicine?" asked the puzzled soldier.

"Medicine for the mind," said Captain Anderson as he handed the dog back to the woman and helped her through the door. ■

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Dr. Stanley Coren is a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia and author of many books on dog behavior, including "How to Speak Dog and How Dogs Think." The article was written by Dr. Stanley Coren for Modern Dog and has been edited and republished here with permission.



Would-be rescuers marked where they found pets who didn't survive. By: infoqramation

# After Hurricane Katrina, a Better Awareness of Pet Safety

The lessons we've learned since 2005 are a big step forward for those of us who would do anything for our pets.

By **Allison Gray**

**H**urricane Katrina dealt a tragic blow to the country 10 years ago, displacing thousands and killing more than 1,800 people. Among the victims were the many pets left behind during a chaotic evacuation.

The emotional damage suffered by Hurricane Katrina's victims from the loss of pets became clear. Even further, it magnified the problem of not having a well-constructed evacuation plan for companion animals during a disaster.

In a tragedy most of us can hardly imagine, an estimated:

- 104,000 pets were abandoned, often unwillingly
- 70,000–150,000 pets died
- 15,500 pets were rescued
- 88,700 pets were unaccounted for

Heartrending stories of separation and loss circulated around the world, and the animal-loving community was horrified. We saw the role of pets as family members clash with their treatment by aid workers and officials who were instructed to forbid evacuees from bringing their animals.

## Why Weren't More Pets Saved?

Ivor Van Heerden, a hurricane researcher who helps direct disaster preparedness, says pets weren't a part of the simulated evacuations because "they are not considered to be important."

New Orleans was evacuated 10 years ago, leaving behind dogs, cats, rabbits, ferrets, livestock and more.

## PETS Act

Our bond with animals has evolved to a point where they are more than just companions — they are family. It didn't go unnoticed when so many families were torn apart in the aftermath of the deadly hurricane.

"Amid the chaos emerged one of the most enduring bonds — the human/animal bond," says Louisiana SPCA CEO Ana Zorrilla.

The overwhelming response to the injustice led to the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards (PETS) Act, signed into law by President Bush on October 6, 2006.

What you should know about the PETS Act:

- It includes household pets and service animals in state and local disaster preparedness plans.
- It accounts for the needs of pets during all stages of disaster relief, including sheltering after evacuation.
- It gives authority to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to fund efforts to create facilities for evacuees with animals.

In the past decade, "Government agencies and animal welfare groups have improved coordination efforts," according to a recent article from the Associated Press, which added: "The lessons from Katrina

helped prevent Hurricane Sandy, which devastated the Jersey shore in 2012, from becoming catastrophic for pets."

These developments are a big step forward for those of us who would do anything for our pets, including choosing to remain after a natural disaster rather than abandon our pets. Families are no longer having to make that impossible decision.

## Evacuating With Pets

The PETS Act may guarantee your pet's right to accompany you during an official evacuation, but being personally prepared before disaster strikes is a necessity.

### Do:

- Prepare supplies before disaster strikes.
- Have an escape plan to get everyone (pets included) safely out of the house.
- Try to remain calm.
- Stick together.
- Find shelter that is pet-safe (consider nearby motels).
- Contact friends/family only after you are safe.

### Don't:

- Don't separate from the rest of your household.
- Don't leave without supplies for pets and people.
- Don't leave your pets behind.
- Don't refuse to evacuate.
- Don't ignore warnings or directions from evacuation authorities.
- What's most important in a natural disaster is to be prepared ahead of time. Do your research today and always include your pets in your plans.

## From Disaster, a Better Awareness

The damage and emotional trauma caused by Hurricane Katrina is a hard way to learn from our mistakes. But in the aftermath, a better understanding of the importance of pets and the need to keep families (pets included) together during an emergency will keep this type of loss from happening again.

Let's hope none of us will ever find ourselves in a disaster on the scale of Hurricane Katrina, but planning today for evacuation is the safest way to keep your family safe and together should disaster strike. ■



Photo: Jocelyn Augustino/FEMA

# Animal Rescuers Describe “Apocalyptic” Scene

Ten years ago, 1,000 volunteers descended on a city in ruins. Their one goal: Rescue as many animals as possible in New Orleans.

By **Kristine Lacoste**

**I**t was the smell of the place that first struck Eric Durcinka as he stepped out of the air-conditioned SUV. A chemically, oily stench overwhelmed the senses. All around him, everything was caked in a putrid gray mud.

Durcinka, then executive director of a humane society in Indiana, peered out at a motionless street littered with furniture, toys, entire houses. What stood out the most, though, was something that couldn't be seen. It was the silence of New Orleans. The only sound in that moment was the banging of a piece of metal slowly hitting the side of a house, blown by the breeze.

He felt empty and alone.



“That very moment, I stood there for the first time and it really finally hit me — that New Orleans, a major U.S. city, was gone,” recalls Durcinka.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, an estimated 1,000 veterinary professionals and volunteer rescuers descended on New Orleans from around the country. They had one primary goal: Rescue as many animals as possible.

Over the next few weeks and months, they searched the devastated city for strays and pets — and ended up saving more than 10,000 animals.

The impact that the experience had on rescuers would stay with them long after their mission ended.

## A Surreal Scene

Hurricane Katrina was the first time Durcinka had responded to a major disaster to search for animals. When he arrived, he was assigned to specific neighborhoods.

He was walking down one of the residential streets when a friend pointed out a dog on a roof.

“As we got closer, 2 more dogs crested the peak of the roof, and there stood 3 emaciated pit bulls,” says

Durcinka. “The house was abandoned and locked with security gates over the doors, preventing us from easily getting the dogs out. Luckily, at the same time ... a massive military vehicle was driving down the road.”

The military vehicle was so large that when it drove up next to the house, Durcinka and his friend were able to walk onto the roof and scoop up the dogs one by one. It was hot and sunny that day, but the heat didn’t seem to bother the dogs; they were happy to finally see people again.

## New to Animal Rescue

Helen Hester was working in the hospitality and tourism industry when the hurricane hit. Beyond feeding stray cats and getting them spayed and neutered, she had no idea what animal rescue entailed.

She had gathered her pets to evacuate ahead of the storm. One cat was missing, so Hester had no choice but to leave plenty of food and water before rolling out of town with her mother, a pair of friends, 5 cats and a dog. They expected to return in 2 to 3 days, but their plans changed when they watched

news of the levee breaks from Atlanta.

The group wasn't able to travel back to the area for 5 weeks. Upon their return, Hester's missing cat was found safe. However, Hester knew many other pets would not be so lucky. Armed with determination, she drove to the Louisiana SPCA to see how she could help.

"The temporary shelter was in a coffee warehouse in the unflooded West Bank neighborhood of Algiers," says Hester. "It was a huge, cavernous space, row upon row of cages for dogs, a small separate room for cats, a small separate section for the clinic. When we first arrived as volunteers, I remember the vet was performing life-saving surgery on an injured dog. Her operating room was isolated from the rest of the shelter only by a wall of blue tarps and her will to save a life."

In the weeks that followed, Hester helped rescue and take care of the animals, including a fearful dog named Spice (now named Chaz), who had been found running loose on the West Bank. He was so fearful that he had to be caught with 2 catch poles.

The shelter had a "Rehab Tent" where the most terrified dogs were placed. Volunteers took turns reading to the dogs to get them accustomed to people again. Chaz improved, and a few months later Hester adopted him. Chaz is now a therapy dog and accompanies Hester to schools and camps through the LA SPCA's Show & Tail program.

While Hester was fortunate to have found her missing cat and adopt Chaz, she says she can only imagine the heartbreak experienced by people who weren't able to take their pets with them.

"My heart goes out to you. I know this was not a casual or irresponsible choice," she says. "It was a horrible decision forced on you by a horrible situation."

## Not Just Dogs and Cats

Alex Chernavsky was an assistant volunteer coordinator in an upstate New York animal shelter when the hurricane hit. He didn't know what to expect.

What he found when he arrived in New Orleans was a silent wasteland. "It was so strange to be in a big city with almost no one in it," says Chernavsky. "There was no electricity, no traffic lights. It was also odd to enter other people's homes — sometimes by breaking in using sledgehammers and crowbars — and then walk around inside their houses looking for animals. The experience was like something out of an apocalyptic movie."

He spent days searching for and collecting animals to be returned to the temporary shelter set up at the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales.

Dogs and cats weren't the only pets needing to be saved. At one house, Chernavsky and his group found a turtle floating in a swimming pool. A rescuer with reptile experience recognized the turtle as a species that was not native to Louisiana. It, too, was taken to the shelter.

The rescuer ended up flying home with the turtle to California, where it went to a reptile organization.

Chernavsky hasn't participated in such a large-scale rescue effort since, but he says the experience will stay with him for a long time. For those who weren't able to take their pets with them, he says, "Sorry if we missed your animals, but we did the best we could."

## "This Is a Huge Responsibility"

Veterinary students were also hard at work after Hurricane Katrina.

An arena at Louisiana State University was transformed into a makeshift shelter where people who weren't allowed to take their pets with them were able to drop them off.

Dr. Alissa Whitney, DVM, then a senior in veterinary school, recalls the experience: "Having people hand over their animals to you and telling you that 'All I have left in this world is what I'm wearing and this animal,' all you can think is, 'This is a huge responsibility.'"

## "Hope for the Best, Plan for the Worst"

Because of Hurricane Katrina, pets are now part of emergency planning. We can't control nature, so unfortunately another disaster on this scale could happen to the nation again.

However, we can be better prepared in the future using the advice of our rescuers. "I wish more people would microchip their dogs and cats," says Durcinka, who now works for the Louisiana SPCA. "Unfortunately, most of the problems that came after the storm were getting animals reunited with their owners."

And if you plan on volunteering as a rescuer, Hester stresses an important preparation: "Hope for the best, and plan for the worst. And plan to bring more than 2 changes of clothing. In fact, bring all your underwear just in case." ■