Evacuation of Household Animals in Disasters
Developing technological solutions to keep up with on-the-ground realities

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"Saving our pets means getting to know our neighbors."
Leslie Irvine, Professor of Sociology, University of Colorado (Boulder)
Author of *Filling the Ark: Animal Welfare in Disasters*

Problem Statement

Animals in our homes are vulnerable when disasters strike or emergencies arise. Among the established reasons:

- Failure of guardians (owners) to have an evacuation plan
- Inability of guardians to return to an area under evacuation
- Weak human-animal bond

Primary Impact on Humans

The first two of these factors can lead to situations that put human lives at risk, including guardian refusals to leave pets behind and guardian attempts to illegally enter evacuation zones to rescue pets. These situations can divert the efforts of and even endanger emergency responders.

Secondary Impact on Humans

Loss of a pet can be a traumatic experience that results in high levels of psychological symptoms for adults, children, and adolescents due to emotionally laden bonds with their companion animals and companion animals being viewed as family members.

Concern for a companion animal can influence individual preparedness, response, evacuation, and willingness to work during disasters.

Concern for a pet can be reasons that people return to disaster sites, even when they are deemed unsafe.

Day, Ashleigh M (2017). Companion animals and natural disasters: A systematic review of literature, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction.* 24,7: 81-90. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2017.05.015.

Pet loss predicts post-disaster distress, pre- and post-disaster perceived social support, disaster-related stressors, and human bereavement.

Lowe, S.R., Rhodes, J.E., Zwiebach, L. and Chan, C.S. (2009), The impact of pet loss on the perceived social support and psychological distress of hurricane.

My Experience: The Marshall Fire

On the morning of December 30, 2021, two unrelated fires ignited just west of expansive open space in Boulder County, Colorado. The fires merged and – driven by hurricane force straight-line winds – spread rapidly to the east, across parched grasslands, quickly reaching heavily populated areas in nearby Superior and Louisville.

I was home that morning, in Original Town Superior. I had seen a column of smoke just to the north, running horizontal to the ground, when a neighbor told me that homes in the Sagamore subdivision just a half mile upwind were catching fire. I got my cats into a carrier and grabbed a few keepsakes and then did a quick drive around the block, knocking on the doors of a few neighbors to be sure they knew about the fire. At one home, my knock was met with barking, from a juvenile German shepherd named Chief. But the homeowner didn't answer. As I tried to reach him (by phone, text and social media), I arranged with my neighbor Mike, who was still saving art from his home and who had an SUV, to rescue Chief if need be. With no word having come in from the homeowner, Mike kicked in the door of the house and got Chief to safety.

What I didn't know as I drove around that block was that a cockatiel in one house, a turtle and tortoise in another, two dogs and a cat in another and two cats in two others, were awaiting rescue that would never come. That was in one square block, and those are only the ones I know about.

To add to the tragedy, I found out later that the owner of the home with two dogs and a cat was trying to reach me that morning, but couldn't get through, due to the chaos of calls and texts and emails on my phone.

Still from video: Mike rescues a happy Chief.

See Chief's rescue at 2:00.

Solutions

Here are some evacuation-related solutions being developed in the for- and non-profit sectors:

- WOOF – designed to rescue your pet if something unexpectedly happens to you (eg car accident, heart attack, etc.).
- Colorado Horse Rescue – community-based emergency response tool that connects people with horses to be evacuated with drivers who can help.
- Evac-U-Pet – social media platform that connects volunteers with those in need during emergencies, assistance with animal retrieval following emergency rescues.
- Pet Help & Rescue – neighbors-based disaster preparedness and evacuation communications app for animals who share our homes.

Pet Help & Rescue

The nonprofit Animal Help Now (AHNow) lost its headquarters in the Marshall Fire. The organization maintains its namesake app, which connects people who need help with injured or orphaned wildlife with experts who can help. The app's Wildlife Emergency service was accessed more than 125,000 times in 2023.

I direct AHNow. We took the lessons learned from the Marshall Fire to create Pet Help & Rescue (PHaR), a neighbors-based messaging app for evacuating household animals when disasters threaten or strike.

The app is easy to set up and use. Users enter info on themselves and their pets (including likely locations, likely hiding places, location of meds and go bags, etc.), and then make a few trusted contacts in their neighborhood.
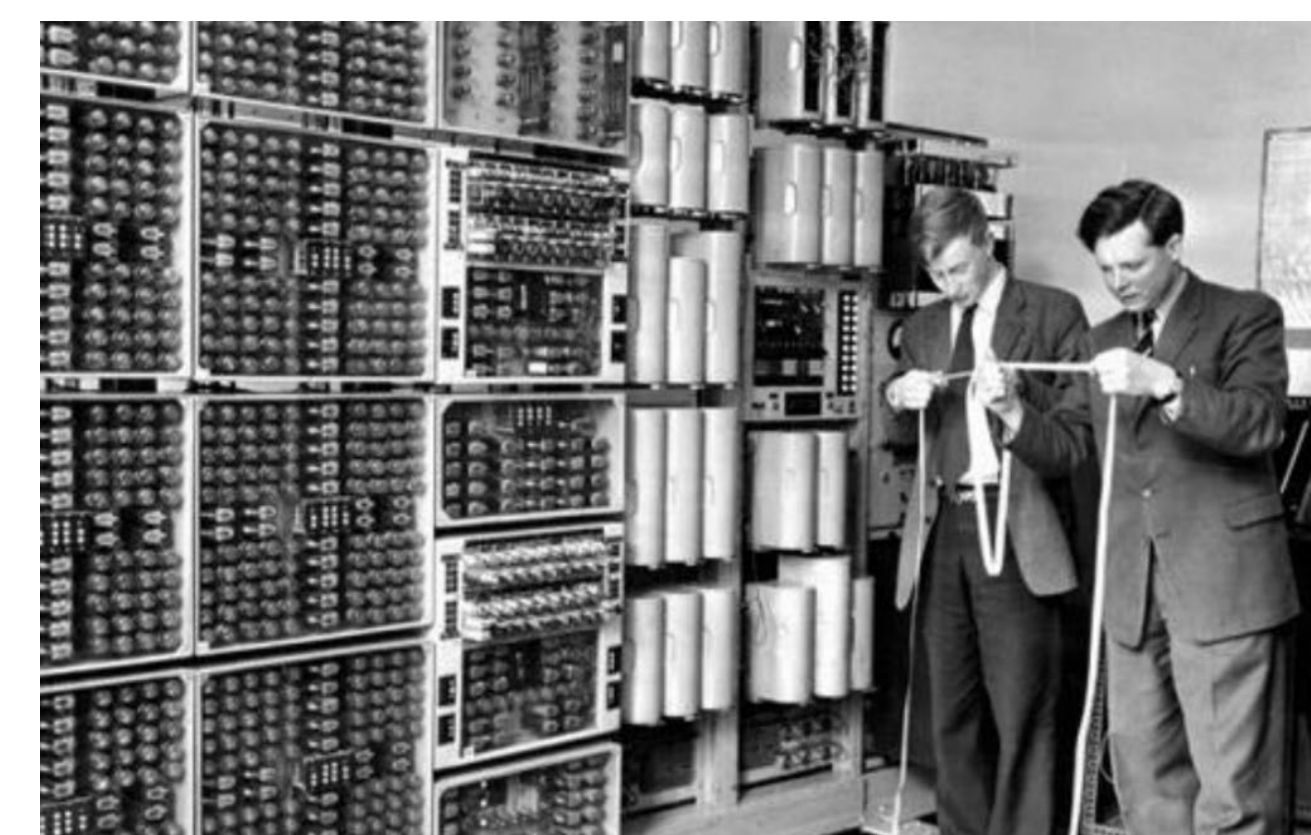
Then, if disasters threaten or strike and the user isn't home, they can quickly and easily ask their neighbors to evacuate their pets. Emergency communications happen within the Pet Help & Rescue app, allowing users to avoid the chaos of calls and texts and emails and focus on what matters most – saving their beloved animal companions.

Conclusions

A conservative estimate is that a thousand dogs and cats and other dependent animals lost their lives during the Marshall Fire. We failed those animals, and we will continue to fail animals if we do not develop better approaches to evacuation. My experience in the Marshall Fire demonstrated what researchers have already ascertained – when disasters strike, neighbors who are home are the best chance of saving neighborhood animals who are home alone.

Come to think of it, why didn't we come to think of it before!

Download the FREE Pet Help & Rescue App
iPhone ← → Android

"As a veterinarian working in the disaster space, I am grateful to see this app come online. PHaR will save lives. And it arrives at a crucial time, as disaster preparedness, response, and recovery increasingly encompass pets and other animals. Neighbors helping neighbors can help keep all our pets safe."

Casara Andre, DVM

Front Range Veterinary Medical Reserve Corps, Colorado

PHaR Home Page
Contains options to send and view requests for help (alerts) and provides access to your profile, your pets' profiles and your contacts.

Request for Help/Rescue
Requesting help is easy, whether for an emergency/evacuation or a non-emergency. All of your PHaR contacts and pets are automatically selected.

Request for Help/Rescue
Preset messaging (animal info, address and home access info) saves time and stress. You can add text to the message, as was done here (first paragraph).

Responding to Alerts
Works like standard messaging apps. If need be, the helper/rescuer can get more info on the request by tapping the "view" links at the top.