

# The Cat's Cradle of Responsibility: Assigning and Taking Responsibility for Companion Animals in Natural Disasters

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## Abstract

*Responsibility is often regarded as a unified concept. However in everyday language, the term refers to a cat's cradle of related ideas and perceptions. Although there might be consensus that individuals should be ultimately responsible for their own animals during crises, individuals and groups may disagree about the norms and obligations we ought to adopt and what we owe to animals that are dependent on our care. A coherent account of responsibility for companion animals, or pets, in disasters is yet to be articulated. At the same time, there is good evidence showing that individuals and communities cope better during and after natural disasters when companion animals receive protection alongside their human families. Against this backdrop, the concept of responsibility is increasingly invoked in public communication as a motivation for pet owners to comply with emergency management plans. While top-level emergency managers seem clear on their responsibilities, studies have shown that operational-level emergency responders and service providers are less likely to know who is responsible for pets and in what ways. In this paper, we undertake a structured examination of how different concepts of responsibility are enacted around human-companion animal relationships in the context of natural disasters. Case examples from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission are used to examine issues and*

*challenges in the effective translation of the concept of responsibility into operational practice. We explore how a more structured approach, with sensitivity to both human and non-human vulnerabilities, may help front-line responders, service providers and policy-makers to better engage with owners concerning responsibility for their companion animals during disasters.*

**Keywords:** *companion animal, responsibility, taxonomy, natural disaster, Black Saturday*

Attributions of *responsibility* are central to how we manage people in disasters. Often regarded as a single generic concept, this term actually refers to a veritable *cat's cradle* of related ideas and perceptions (Vincent, 2011). In Australia and New Zealand, owners are considered responsible for their companion animals, or pets, before, during, and after a natural disaster (Glasse & Wilson, 2011; White, 2012). To reflect variable uses of these terms in surrounding literature, the words *pet* and *companion animal* are used interchangeably throughout the current paper. To fulfil their responsibility, owners are encouraged to have a disaster plan for their pets. While this is a fundamentally important task, we question whether having a plan fulfils the obligations and duties implied. We ask:

- 1) Do pet owners understand what it means to be responsible across the emergency management cycle?
- 2) Are they willing and able to take responsibility for their animals in a crisis?
- 3) What are the implications for front-line emergency responders, the health of the community, and for companion animals themselves?

## Putting responsibility for companion animals in disasters in context: Victoria's Black Saturday

Black Saturday (7 February, 2009) was preceded by a prolonged heatwave causing what have been referred to as *tinder-dry* conditions, i.e. extremely dry and flammable. In the state of Victoria in Australia, temperatures soared to over 45°C in many areas and fires broke out across the state. Fanned by storm-force winds, fire conditions shifted from a *normal bushfire*, which is a natural feature of the Australian environment

(Council of Australian Governments, 2011), to a *catastrophic event*, characterised by “...extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption...” (FEMA, 2008, p.1). Black Saturday claimed the lives of 173 people and countless animals, and the scale of these and other losses changed the future of disaster planning throughout Australia (McLennan & Handmer, 2012, Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, 2010).

The national policy at the time was to “Prepare, stay and defend or leave early” and was also known informally as *stay or go* (Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, 2010, p.5). The emphasis was on self-reliance of individuals and communities, because emergency responders cannot always be present during a disaster. The emphasis of this policy has therefore since shifted to one of shared responsibility between government and communities. The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2010, p.6) has defined shared, although not equal, responsibility as “increased responsibility for all” when dealing with disasters. The Commission acknowledged that responsibility can only be apportioned relative to capacity, so that fire authorities would assume greater responsibility than the community during a bushfire response because they are more capable of identifying and minimising the associated risks (Council of Australian Governments, 2011; Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, 2010).

The normative vision of sharing responsibility for animals, i.e. how things ought to be, appears to be contested among emergency management practitioners and stakeholders. The processes and practices required to realise a vision of shared responsibility in complex and unpredictable situations have been described as unclear and conflicted (McLennan & Eburn, 2015; McLennan & Handmer, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). Current thinking also highlights an anthropocentric bias, where the norms we ought to adopt in assigning and taking responsibility for companion animals during a crisis do not appear to make a good fit.

Two key themes emerge in the literature regarding animals in natural disasters (Thompson, 2013; Travers, Degeling, & Rock, In Press). Firstly, companion animals can be a *risk factor* for human health and safety. This is because pet-related factors such as strong human–pet bonds can influence the decision of pet owners or others to stay, exposing owners to the risk of injury or death. The loss of pets can also cause high levels of anxiety and depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Secondly, companion animals are *at-risk* themselves, particularly if their owner has a low level of attachment or commitment to them or if the owner is unprepared for an emergency event. Running beneath these discussions is the notion of responsibility. However, what this responsibility entails does not appear to have been clearly explained.

Against this background, the concept of responsibility is increasingly invoked in public communication as a motivation for pet owners to comply with emergency management plans (Thompson, 2013; Thompson et al., 2014). However, while top-level emergency management appears clear in its operational responsibilities towards animals, studies and reports (see: Decker, Lord, Walker, & Wittum, 2010; RSPCA, 2011; Taylor et al., 2015) suggest that, at the operational level, responders are less likely to know who is responsible and how.

The current paper outlines a structured examination of how different concepts of responsibility can be enacted around human–companion animal relationships in the context of natural disasters. Drawing on witness testimony from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC), we applied Vincent’s (2011) Structured Taxonomy of Responsibility Concepts to three pet owners’ experiences of Black Saturday. We then explore how this structured approach can help owners and responders better understand and engage with the concept of responsibility for companion animals during a disaster event.

## Methods

### Materials

This paper is mainly based on Volume IV: The Statements of Lay Witnesses of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission’s final report (VBRC, 2010a). Supplementary information was gathered from media interviews and reports. This volume is publicly available in an electronic, searchable format “to assist research and provide a public record of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission website” (VBRC, 2010a para 1). It contains “the written statements of each lay witness who gave oral evidence to the Commission” (VBRC, 2010a, para 2). It also “includes associated material provided by these witnesses, such as photographs and videos” (VBRC, 2010a, para 2). All lay witnesses participated voluntarily and none were required to testify. “The lay witnesses were identified in various ways, including

from community consultations...and written submissions to the Commission.” (VBRC, 2010a, para 4) These witnesses all agreed to being identified publicly as a result of the Commission. Their addresses and some names were nonetheless deleted from the transcripts to protect their privacy and the privacy of third parties.

### Research ethics

Throughout Australia, ethics certification is not required for research using documentary sources such as Commission of Inquiry reports, newspapers and news websites, or where the information is based on publicly available information (Office of Research Ethics & Integrity, 2016). The Commission worked closely with witnesses to ensure that the level of privacy afforded was acceptable to them. The ongoing use of witnesses' testimony is therefore not assumed to carry any clear risk of harm.

### Conceptual framework

There are various research-based frameworks for responsibility, each covering conceptually related theories and approaches, with a lot of overlap between them. No one theory or approach appears to constitute the best frame. Instead, each one draws attention to particular issues and challenges (McLennan & Handmer, 2014). We chose Vincent's (2011) taxonomy to help us unpack the concept of responsibility in different contexts and scenarios. Breaking down the notion of responsibility is not new. However, Vincent has identified the relationships between the concepts in particularly considerable detail.

### Vincent's taxonomy

Vincent's (2011) taxonomy describes six forms of responsibility in common language use: capacity, role, causal, virtue, outcome, and liability responsibility. *Capacity* responsibility refers to the capacity of an individual – their ability to understand what is required and to have the resources to act appropriately. *Role* responsibilities are created by the institutional position and circumstances of an individual. For example, firefighters are responsible for fighting fires.

Capacity and role responsibility are closely linked; the greater the capacity, the greater the role responsibility, in terms of duties or obligations, that might reasonably be expected of an individual. Capacity also relates to causal responsibility, which can be understood as those causal links that connect our actions and decisions to an

event or state of affairs. *Virtue* responsibility involves a history of commitment to do what is considered right or moral. *Outcome* responsibility concerns responsibility for actions and is “backward looking” (Vincent, 2011, p.17) at a state of affairs or outcomes. It is morally imbued as here we often apportion praise or blame. *Liability* responsibility is derived from both virtue and outcome responsibility. This aspect of responsibility raises the essential question of who is held responsible, and how they are held responsible, for what has happened.

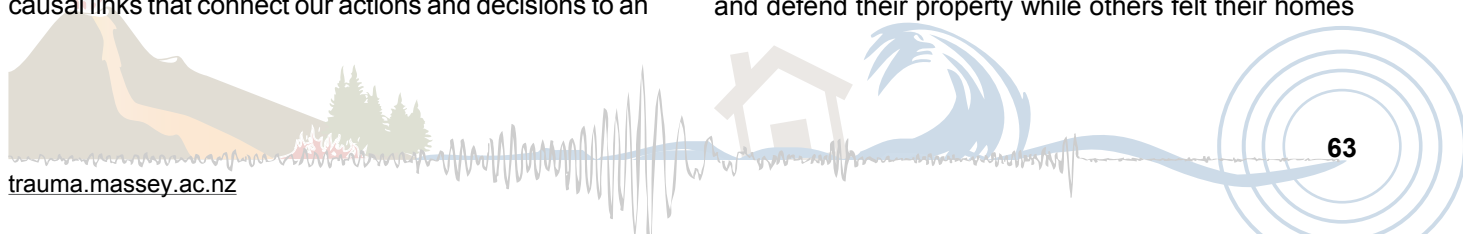
A key insight here is that the term “responsibility” can be used to describe very different features of a situation. Some of these features have no moral dimension in particular. An individual might have the capacity to assume responsibility. However, to be held accountable in this way, the person usually requires control over a decision and the ability to carry out the decision. Using Vincent's taxonomy as an analytic framework, our analysis proceeded through several cycles of immersion and crystallization of insights. This research process was based on Borkan (1999) and comprised repeated readings, constant comparisons, discussions among all the authors, periods of testing of alternate explanations, and then re-immersion within the research material.

The first author examined all the transcripts of the witness statements provided to the VBRC that dealt with pets. Witness statements that addressed other non-human animals such as livestock or wildlife and/or with no mention of pet animals were excluded from the analysis. Below, we present three case examples to help illustrate different aspects of responsibility illustrated by our analysis of all applicable witness accounts. These selected examples also provide sufficient detail regarding fire context, intentions, motivations, and interactions to discuss and draw conclusions regarding the different notions of responsibility for pets during disasters. They reflect variations in:

- decisions to stay or go;
- level of preparedness (well prepared, partially, unprepared); and
- contact (or not) with front-line responders during the event.

## Findings

There were 100 statements selected, with 44 of them mentioning companion animals. Many individuals affected by the Black Saturday fires planned to stay and defend their property while others felt their homes





were not defensible and planned to leave. Many felt their plans were sufficient to deal with what they described as a normal bushfire. Most individuals had some fire awareness education, particularly through annual sessions provided by the Country Fire Authority (CFA). However, Black Sunday appeared to eliminate many good plans.

### Ron's story

**Pre fire.** The Commission chronicled how Ron and his wife were breeders of Airedale dogs which were considered part of their family. At the time of the bushfire they had 21 dogs, including 11 puppies. Ron is noted as saying that they made the decision to stay and defend their home mostly because of the dogs and knowing that the main road could be impassable during a bushfire (VBRC, 2010b, para 8). Ron and his wife had assumed responsibility for their safety, and had built their capacity to defend their home, their dogs, and their own lives. They had attended the CFA's annual education sessions and followed the advice provided. They conducted an exercise drill moving their dogs from the kennels into crates kept in the house where they would stay and defend (VBRC, 2010b).

**During the fire.** The Commission detailed how two family members arrived to pick up the puppies but became trapped by the speed and ferocity of the fire (VBRC, 2010b). Ron put their plan into action, patrolling the house and watching for embers, wetting down walls and doors. The dogs were in their crates and were moved from room to room as each room fell to smoke or fire. Ron stated that:

*We never saw a wall of flame approaching—one minute there was dense smoke and then everything was on fire. Even when that happened I was not overly worried—I thought that we would just have to focus on keeping the house intact and not worry about anything else.*

(VBRC, 2010b, para 18)

**Post fire.** The fire destroyed the house. Once it had passed Ron and his wife loaded the dogs into the cars and left the property. Through some luck and a lot of good management, Ron, his family and dogs survived. Ron praised the Country Fire Authority, acknowledging their role in the outcome:

*Every year, the St Andrews CFA conducts a session in our area where all the property owners can go*

*through their fire plan.... The advice was invaluable and frankly, I don't think we would have survived without it.*

(VBRC, 2010b, para 9)

**Summation.** Ron had deliberately developed a capacity to deal with the circumstances he found himself in so he could better perform his role responsibility of managing risks posed by the fire. His actions and decisions, or causal responsibility, led to a good outcome with all lives saved. In many ways Ron has embodied the ideal model of someone who takes his responsibility for his animals seriously. It is worth noting, however, that the fire exceeded Ron's capacity to protect his home. Ron told the Commission how he and his wife chose to rebuild with additional safety features based on the lessons learned, as it was a good location for their dog breeding (VBRC, 2010b). Some may view this decision as enhancing his capacity to assume role responsible for future events while others might argue that it is irresponsible to rebuild in an indefensible area.

### Juliet's story

**Pre fire.** Juliet lived on a property with her dog and three horses belonging to her friend, Priscilla. According to the Commission (2010c, para 9), Juliet's initial plan was "just to go". Later, she decided to stay if she did not feel safe to leave. The latter plan comprised basic actions such as turning on the sprinklers and staying indoors. At the time of the fire, Juliet had a trailer for transporting horses (horse float) but no tow bar on her car (VBRC, 2010c).

**During the fire.** According to the Commission (VBRC, 2010c), Juliet would have left earlier with her dog if not for the horses and knowing that Priscilla was on the way. Priscilla arrived with her brother, father, and a horse float. Departure was delayed and they became trapped by the rapidly encroaching fire. A television helicopter appeared, flew away, and returned with a police helicopter. Police Sergeant Key was lowered to the ground. The situation was dire and Sergeant Key knew they had to leave immediately (VBRC, 2010c). As Juliet and her dog were being winched up, the dog panicked and broke free of her arms (Carnovale, 2009). She stated that, "I think it also dawned on me that I would be leaving everyone and I didn't want to do that. At that point I yelled for them to let me off" (VBRC, 2010c, para 31).

Juliet thought that she was lowered to the ground because she demanded it. However, Sergeant Key

tells us (Silvester, 2015, para 19): “I knew if they tried to winch us up I could bring the aircraft down.” Following operational protocol, Sergeant Key cut them both loose because of the danger to the helicopter and crew (Carnovale, 2009; Ross, 2011). They left the property by car driving through flames on both sides of the road, guided by the helicopter pilot, while Priscilla held one horse by the halter out of the car window (VBRC, 2010c). This was extremely dangerous, meaning that Sergeant Key could have forced abandonment of the animals. However he did not.

**Post fire.** The next morning, Juliet returned to her property with a friend. Her house was still there. They drove down the mountain road, through the devastation, to find out if anyone needed help. They loaded up some horses belonging to another neighbour and then left the mountain (VBRC, 2010c).

**Summation.** Juliet might be regarded as irresponsible for being largely unprepared, and not ensuring she had the capacity to take care of the animals in her care, even for during a normal bushfire. Thus her ability to perform her role responsibility was diminished during the fire event. Juliet had planned to leave earlier that day with her dog but stayed because of the horses, and she believed she had a moral responsibility to do so.

Sergeant Key assumed operational responsibility once he was on the ground, and was causally responsible for saving their lives. However, this also marks a potential for tension and conflict between responder and pet owner when the responder takes on role/operational responsibility and the owner refuses to relinquish what they may see as *their* responsibility. Control resides with the police but Juliet seemed unaware of this shift. In some sense, Sergeant Key allowed Juliet and Priscilla to share responsibility for saving the animals. But the force of the owners’ attachment to their animals and their relative incapacity to manage the situation they found themselves in shows how contingent and complex the outcomes of a decision to take responsibility can be, for owners and responders alike.

### Elaine’s story

**Pre fire.** Elaine and Len were an older couple living on a half-acre, approximately 2000 m<sup>2</sup>, property in a small town. Len was in poor health with heart problems and limited mobility. His heart problem required regular medication. Len still drove a car but Elaine did not (VBRC, 2010d). They had no fire plan largely due to

a sense of security after living in the town for 50 years without a fire incident of note (VBRC, 2010d).

**During the fire.** As the fire drew closer, Elaine made many attempts to convince Len to leave but he refused to recognise the danger (VBRC, 2010d). Elaine was very frightened. At one stage, she tied their dog to the tray of their ute (pickup truck) hoping that Len would change his mind. When she saw flames, she pleaded with Len to leave but he would not accept that the fire would reach their home. Eventually, she thought “I’m not staying here to burn” (VBRC, 2010d, para 20). She walked away, taking nothing. A neighbour picked Elaine up and drove her to an evacuation point. Elaine went on to state that:

*When I left the house, I had no idea where I was going—the only thing I can remember is that I wanted to get out. I was not thinking clearly because I was so annoyed with Len and I was also feeling terribly guilty about leaving him.*

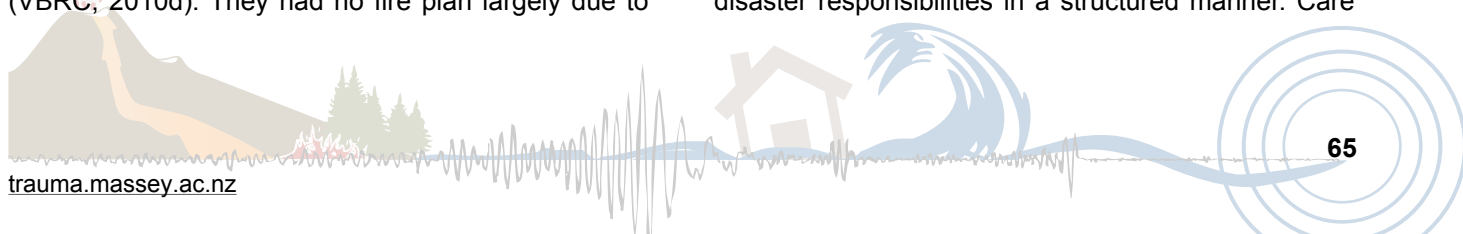
(VBRC, 2010d, para 21)

**Post fire.** Len and the family dog were killed in the fire. A police officer found their cat near to death. A local vet nursed it back to health before returning the cat to Elaine without charge.

**Summation.** This is a tragic case involving two vulnerable people who lacked the capacity to deal with a natural disaster exceeding their experiences and expectations. It is notable that the safety of their companion animals was not central to their decision-making, or to the awful outcome. Although Len could drive the car, he did not have the capacity to recognise the risk, to assume role responsibility for addressing the situation, and to act accordingly. Perhaps this example is a reminder of the need to share responsibility between government, individuals, and communities to ensure that more vulnerable people have adequate support. It also highlights how vulnerability and risk crosses boundaries between species. In providing support we should also consider how a person’s desire to protect and care for their companion animals is often experienced as a moral duty, and can act as a prompt for greater preparedness amongst owners (Thompson et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

Care must be taken to initiate and guide discourse on disaster responsibilities in a structured manner. Care



must also be taken to ensure everyone agrees how their obligations and duties to other humans and to nonhumans can guide their actions within prescribed limits, depending on the circumstances faced. The case studies outlined above highlight how attributions of responsibility are often more akin to reactive expressions of our attitudes to risks rather than well-constructed moral arguments.

One challenge facing emergency management is ensuring that their conversations about responsibility with pet owners do not degenerate into simplified arguments about blame. While Vincent's (2011) taxonomy helps us to unpack responsibility and identify relationships between concepts, an oversimplified use of this framework could unwittingly steer conversations in an emergency management environment towards this direction, of blame. McLennan and Handmer (2014) recommend the use of multiple responsibility frameworks to ensure the capture of elusive issues. Multiple frames could also help explore responsibility in a more proactive manner, using positive constructs. Concerning simplified arguments about blame in particular, Thompson (2015) suggests that the term *responsibility* might be too austere, *obligation* too onerous, and *duty* a little too earnest. Instead, it seems that we should identify terminology that resonates with animal owners and inspires a duty of care rather than seeking compliance.

Whatever the terms, conversations about responsibility in emergency management need to engage pet owners and front-line emergency responders alike. This conversation should extend beyond whether pet owners have a plan, to tackle difficult questions about who takes responsibility, how, and when. There is much work to be done in this complex area. For example heuristics could be developed to guide people in comparable situations, so they can make better decisions that meet accepted norms of ethical behaviour concerning their pets. Increasing awareness of responsibility and how it is enacted around the human–companion animal relationship in natural disasters could help achieve better outcomes for all concerned, including non-human companions.

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