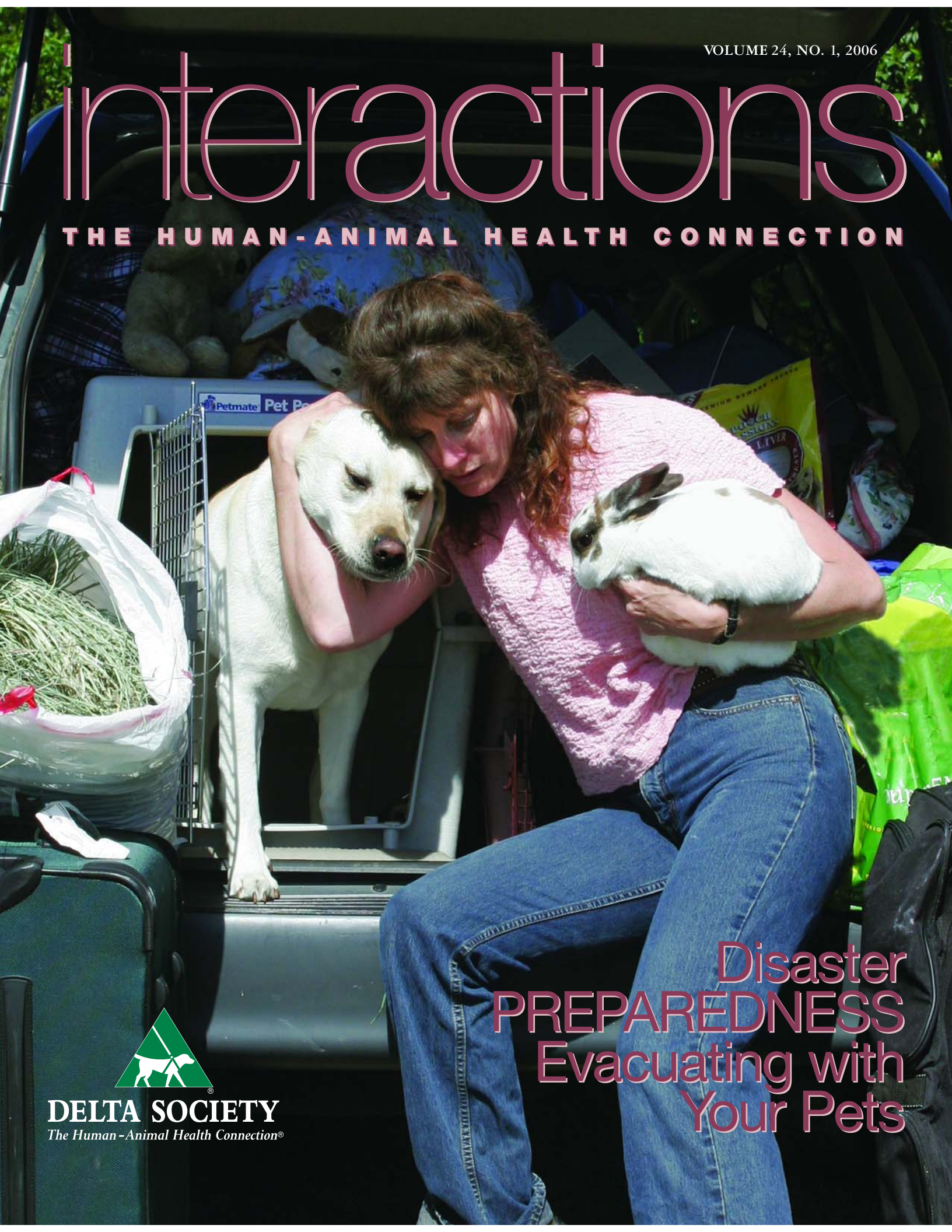


Interactions

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Disaster
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Companion Animals in Emergency Situations

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During the past five years, the world has seen natural disasters unlike anytime in recent history. These disasters have led to an unprecedented migration of people from their homes and communities to other parts of the country and world. For instance, the wildfires of San Diego in 2003, the tsunami of Southeast Asia during 2004, and most recently the 2005 hurricanes of the Gulf Coast of the United States have displaced millions of people. Newspaper articles and photographs have shown numerous people holding onto the few items they were able to grab before being evacuated from their home. For instance, during the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, people were photographed carrying a few clothing items and water bottles. Other photographs include children hugging their puppies and kittens, grown men with their dogs, women carrying guinea pigs and birds, and others leading horses out of harm's way. When interviewed, people have reported that they were concerned about their children, companion animals, and personal photographs. The outcry among the viewers regarding the televised and media reports of stranded people at the Superdome in New Orleans or others sitting on their rooftops and their companion animals prompted this study.

My colleagues and I attempted to locate research in this area and were dismayed to find a lack of information. There were no studies or literature that addressed the issue of items that people rated as most important to them during emergency evacuation situations. However, the media—including television, radio, and newspapers—were full of stories of people all over the world who described grabbing items of importance when forced to evacuate. People told stories of refusing to evacuate when told they could not take certain objects, items, or living things with them. The most poignant of these stories are those of people being forced to leave their homes without their companion animals. Knowing how important companion animals are to us, we decided to develop a study to gain a better understanding of the importance of animals to other people.

The study was designed to understand the value that people place on items. We were specifically interested in companion animals and wanted to gain a better understanding of the importance that people place on them during times of an emergency evacuation. Not only did we want our study to provide us with valuable information, we believed that our findings would guide emergency planning agencies, at all levels of government, in developing evacuation plans to meet the desires of the general public. Due to the onslaught of natural disasters around the world in the past few years and those that are forecast to occur in the future, it is vitally important for these

agencies to develop emergency plans to include ways to include the items and animals that people value. Additionally, this study will be beneficial to psychologists and sociologists as the results will enable them to have a better understanding of the importance of items that people insist on taking with them during an emergency evacuation. Furthermore, in the event of their loss, this information will assist psychologists and therapists in developing therapeutic treatment plans for the evacuees.

Participants were recruited for the study from faculty at Oklahoma State University (OSU), the city of Tulsa, OK, Connecticut University, and from an online experimental website at OSU (Experimetrix). Undergraduate and graduate students could access Experimetrix by using their university student account. Students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses received extra credit points for completing our survey. Participants were asked to give the survey to their family and friends. Finally, we worked with the web design staff at OSU Center for Health Sciences to make the survey available online for people to complete and return electronically.

The Emergency Evacuation survey asked for age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and the number of children and/or companion animals residing in the home. Participants were also asked if they had prior evacuations and, if so, to list the three most important items they took with them during the evacuation and to rank order them in order of importance (1st, 2nd, and 3rd). A place was provided on the survey for participants to make comments or explain their answers. Although emotional discomfort with the study was not anticipated, participants who had evacuated in the past may have felt some negative emotions when remembering the episode. However, answering the survey may have provided them a way of relieving these emotions.

Surveys were collected for two months. The data was then analyzed using a statistical software package. There were 318 (235 females, 83 males) total participants completing the survey. They ranged in age from 18-67 years with an average age of 23 years. Most were from the United States (304) and represented various states. For instance, 255 participants were from Oklahoma while Connecticut, Texas, and Kansas had 24, 14, and 4 participants, respectively. New York and Pennsylvania had two participants; Arizona, California, and Virginia had one participant each. The majority of the participants were single and never married (85.1%, 269 participants) and 47 (14.9%) were married, separated, or divorced. Of the 318 participants, 266 (83.6%) did not have children and 52 (13.4%) participants had either one or more children in the home.



Sherri M. Stone watching a tornado to see if they need to move to a storm shelter.

Participants were asked if they had companion animals. There were 193 (60.7%) participants with one or more companion animals in the home. These participants reported a total of 428 companion animals with dogs the most common species (211 dogs, 49.3%). Other companion animals included cats (91, 21.3%), fish (11, 2.6%), birds, horses (6, 1.4%), and various rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, snakes, lizards, and various farm animals (18, 6.4%). Of the 125 participants that did not currently have companion animals in the home, 86 (68.8%) had at one time or another kept companion animals in the home, with the majority, 71 (36.7%), reporting that they had dogs in the past.

Fifty (15.7%) of the participants reported that they had previously had to evacuate their home. The reasons for the evacuations varied and included flood (11, 22%), tornado (18, 36%), fire (12, 24%), combination of hurricane/fire/tornado or earthquake (one participant each, 2%), and three (6%) other reasons. Forty-three (86%) returned to live in the same home after the evacuation. They reported that family/children were the most important belongings they took with them with companion animals being the second most important. Twenty-one (42%) of the prior evacuees reported they would not have left without those belongings, 19 (38%) reported they would have left without them, and 10 (20%) did not answer that question.

We were interested in two groups of people: all the responders, regardless of whether they had family/children and companion animals living in the home, and those who had companion animals in the home—whether or not they also had family/children living with them. The results of our questions were quite similar for both groups. Specifically, when we examined the surveys for all of the 318 participants, 66 (20.8%) reported that family/children were the most important belonging whereas 95 (29.9%) reported that companion animals were the most important. The other most listed items included, but were not limited to, cell phones (47, 14.8%), wallet/money/ID (34, 10.7%), and photographs (29, 9.1%).

When the surveys were analyzed for the 193 people with companion animals, 45 (23.4%) reported that family/children were the most important, but 87 (45.3%) stated that companion animals were the most important belonging they would take with

them in an emergency situation. This group also included cell phones (18, 9.4%) as highly important to them but wallet/money/ID (4, 2.1%) and photographs (8, 4.2%) only marginally important.

We compared these two groups on the question “Would you refuse to leave without these belongings” and received similar answers. The surveys for all of the 318 people indicated that 195 (61.3%) of them would refuse to leave without the most important belonging while only 115 (36.2%) reported that they would not refuse to leave without the most important belonging. The data for the 193 people with companion animals revealed that 135 (70.3%) answered “Yes” that they would refuse to leave without the most important item and 52 (27.1%) answered “No” that they would not refuse to leave without the most important item. The other top items listed included, but were not limited to, cell phones, wallet/purse/ID, and photographs.

Due to the ever increasing occurrence of natural disasters, emergency workers are faced with decisions regarding a mass departure of residents and the items they will allow the persons to take with them during an emergency evacuation. Although some disasters occur without notice and leave little or no time for the evacuees to gather anything upon departure from the home, other disasters provide a few minutes before evacuation. The emergency situations which allow people time to “grab” things from the home were the focus of this study. The “refuse to leave” questions were intended to determine if the participants would risk their lives if not allowed to take certain things with them.

We based the “refuse to leave” question on the behavior exhibited by victims of Hurricane Katrina. For instance, several media reports showed residents who refused to leave their homes without family members and/or their companion animals. Televised scenes also showed victims wading waist or chest deep in water dragging along various things such as clothes, furniture, and plastic containers holding children and animals. However, when the military arrived to place these victims on the buses to transport them to Houston and other cities, they were not allowed to take their animals with them. One poignant story described a young child who refused to leave his dog only to be required to tie the dog to a post and get on the bus without it. Pictures of the crying child being pulled from his dog were shown across the country to the dismay of viewers worldwide. Other televised pictures included numerous dogs tied to the guardrails along the highway outside the Superdome in New Orleans.

The results of this study support the scenes witnessed on television and in newspaper articles of evacuees from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. For example, just as the evacuees from those hurricanes reported, the participants in this study responded that their family/children and companion animals were the most important belongings they would take with them in the event of an emergency evacuation. Additionally, the results of this study indicated that these desires hold true for all people—those with

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Disaster Supply Checklist for Pets

Every member of your family should know what he or she needs to take when you evacuate. You also need to prepare supplies for your pet. Stock up on nonperishables well ahead of time, add perishable items at the last minute, and have everything ready to go at a moment's notice. Keep everything accessible, stored in sturdy containers (duffel bags, covered trash containers, etc.) that can be carried easily. In your disaster kit, you should include:

- ▲ Medications and medical records stored in a waterproof container and a first aid kit. A pet first aid book is also good to include.
- ▲ Sturdy leashes, harnesses, and carriers to transport pets safely and to ensure that your pets can't escape. Carriers should be large enough for the animal to stand comfortably, turn around, and lie down. Your pet may have to stay in the carrier for hours at a time while you have taken shelter away from home. Be sure to have a secure cage with no loose objects inside it to accommodate smaller pets. These may require blankets or towels for bedding and warmth, and other special items.
- ▲ Current photos and descriptions of your pets to help others identify them in case you and your pets become separated and to prove that they are yours.
- ▲ Food and water for at least three days for each pet, bowls, cat litter and litter box, and a manual can opener.
- ▲ Information on feeding schedules, medical conditions, behavior problems, and the name and number of your veterinarian in case you have to board your pets or place them in foster care.
- ▲ Pet beds and toys, if you can easily take them, to reduce stress.
- ▲ Other useful items include newspapers, paper towels, plastic trash bags, grooming items, and household bleach.

OTHER EVACUATION TIPS

- ▲ All mobile home residents should evacuate at the first sign of a disaster.
- ▲ Evacuate to the safest location you can that's as close as possible to home. Long-distance evacuation can be a problem when highways are crowded.
- ▲ When planning for hurricanes, identify your evacuation zone and level to determine if and when you would have to evacuate. Be prepared for one category higher than the one being forecast, because hurricanes often increase in strength just before making landfall.
- ▲ Your local humane organization or local emergency management agency may be able to provide you with information about your community's disaster response plans

For more information on Disaster Preparedness for Pets, go to Delta's website at www.deltasociety.org.

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family/children and companion animals living in the home and those without either in the home.

Although this study provided a very good look at the items of importance to people during an emergency evacuation, it is important to point out potential flaws in the survey instrument. For instance, the survey asked the participants to list the "items" that they want take with them. However, several participants noted in the comments area that they were confused if this included living things such as people and animals. The word "items" was used in an effort to avoid this response bias from the participants. Future surveys would benefit from asking the participants to list "who and/or what" they would take with them during an emergency. Additionally, future studies should attempt to gain more international participants. The current study only included a small percentage of international participants due to limited contact with participants outside the United States.

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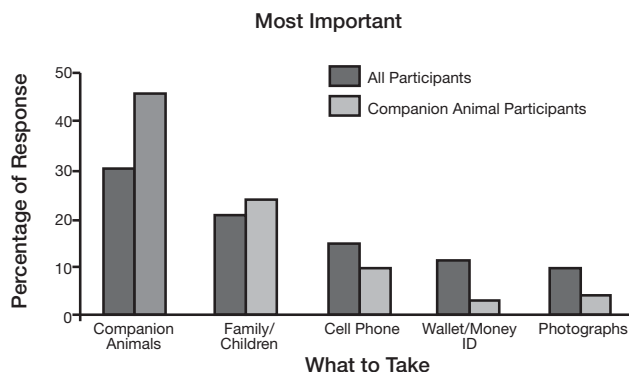


Figure 1. The five most important belongings people would take with them. All participants, regardless of family/children and companion animals in the home, compared to the participants with companion animals in the home, regardless of family/children.

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