

A couple of days later I get an email requesting chat from 'Lulusmom'. She wants to chat as she's planning a trip to Australia and New Zealand after a divorce settlement. We strike up an email conversation and I give her some good tips on places to include in her travels. Lulusmom is the proud 'mother', as she describes it, of a 4 year-old teacup Poodle. I ask her about how long she's been on the site and whether she's gone out for a pet date. As she describes it, "I'm 43 and haven't dated anyone for years. Initially I was unsure about Internet dating but this site was featured on a chat show on TV. I thought I would check into it and it seems like there are some nice people to meet here. In this day and age there are many places to meet people-bars are out of the question for me as I rarely drink and hate smoke. I just figure that this is another opportunity to meet someone. I haven't had a date date. I have met another lady who lives in a neighbouring suburb and we've met for coffee and several walks in an off leash park. I'm not at the stage where I really do want to be involved in a long term relationship with a man, just to meet some new people is fun."

I'm offline over the Christmas break so haven't checked the site for over a week. When I do I see that I've got a couple of messages and pet buddy requests. 'GermSheplover' has sent me a pet buddy request and also has emailed me through the site. I decide to check out his profile and when I click onto his selection of photos I'm not sure I want him to be a buddy. It would appear the guy is heavily into German Shepherds but alarmingly most of the photos show him (or some guy) with a German Shepherd in full attack mode-the sort of training with the dog attacking a heavily padded arm. There's also something that makes me slightly unnerved by his email as it would appear he has some intelligence about me. He's managed to find my true identity by Googling me. Somehow he's managed to piece together enough clues from the scant personal information I've given because he knows about my

connection with Urban Animal magazine. His communication is way too familiar for my liking and it's a relief that you have option of blocking a members' communication to you.

On a lighter note I have a nice email from a gent in Oregon. He's a fellow Capricorn, 49, divorced and loves his two Vizslers. I ask 'Vizler2' how long he's been on this site and his experiences. "I've been on this site since mid November. It seemed like a good idea and a nice way to meet dog lovers and exchange stories and backgrounds rather than just dating. There's only a small number of members and so far I've not had any pet dates as such." Vizler2 used to live in California and kindly gives me some tips on my upcoming trip to the wineries in the Napa Valley-he seems like a genuinely nice guy.

That Latino lothario, Bighunka_lovingfun has knocked on my virtual door and requested me to be a pet buddy but I decide not to join his online harem. Then I get a request for 'chat',-it's from Moondoggy. He laughs (in the online world I discover that this is shown in type as "LOL") when I tell him I thought I had scared him off. It turns out that true to his profile as an outdoorsy-type, he's taken time off over the holiday season to go trekking through Tunisia.

Online 'Pet Dating' adventures can be had at www.datemypet.com

***Publisher's Note:** She was caught, by her pertner who found about the site and hap-pened to view her pic and profile at the same time she was on the site as a member since the site shows photos and info on Who's Online Right Now! Imagine his surprise to see his own dog... possibly being unfaithful. But as the author explained to her partner-it was all in the name of research.)

****The online names have been changed to protect the identities of the innocent.**

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Sometimes it takes a cataclysm of the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina, and the resultant media frenzy to investigate every facet, that makes us realise our own vulnerability and lack of a plan for ourselves to survive a natural disaster. The TV footage from one of my old hometowns, New Orleans, showed such incredible devastation and told the tales of pets that were abandoned, died or luckily survived, reinforced the need to have a disaster strategy.

The hard facts are that most people have no personal strategy and are unprepared for any disaster whether a bushfire, earthquake, cyclone, flood, hazardous material spills, or other problems. Most pet owners also have no plan for either evacuating their fur children or being prepared for a calamity that would cut off their utilities and ties to the outside world. Unlike parents, many pet owners have not had the training or the experience to prepare their companion animals for the unexpected. Whether it's a burst water main that floods a neighbourhood or a full on cyclone, disaster can strike anywhere at any time.

In the case of New Orleans, at least 50% of the people who evacuated had to leave their pets behind, 80% of the people who returned did so to rescue their pets. In most situations, 90% of pets left behind to fend for themselves do not survive. And in the case of Katrina, people who did not have their own transportation and had to be evacuated were not allowed to take their pets, many remaining behind at great risk of death, injury or starvation.

Evacuation efforts for Hurricane Katrina were made difficult by many factors. One of those factors involves the lack of planning for people's pets. Although there was a mandatory evacuation for people, they were not allowed to board evacuation buses or go to the shelters with their pets. Having to leave pets behind added to evacuation failure rates and put people and animals in grave danger.

So how do you put together a plan for your pet's or pets' survival in case of emergency? There are three things to consider-whether or not you will be with them when disaster strikes and also what you need to take with you at a moment's notice if you are home together when the time comes.

An evacuation order may come, or a disaster may strike, when you're at work or out of the house. If you are not home when a problem happens, the first thing to have is a notice on your property that there are pets inside and what type they are. For emergency personnel, a sticker at the entrance that identifies the occupants is vital and there is an excellent resource. Highly visible, reflective and adhesive Zig and Tig's "Pet Rescue - Animals Here" safety sticker can be applied to windows, doors, the post box and most other non-brick surfaces-available from www.zigandtig.com and also through the Yagoona RSPCA.

Find out if a trusted neighbour (or close-by fellow pet owner) would be able to take your pets and meet you at a prearranged location. If so, be sure that the person is comfortable with your pets, knows where your pets are likely to be, knows where your disaster supplies are kept, and has a key to your home. This is vital in having you reunited with your pets, especially if you are prevented from getting back to your home or neighbourhood. If you use a pet sitting service, they may be able to help, but discuss the possibility well in advance.

The single most important things that you can do to protect your pets if you evacuate is to take your pets with you! If it's not safe for you to stay in the disaster area, it's not safe for your pets. Animals left inside your home can escape through broken windows or other storm-damaged areas of your home. Leaving dogs tied or chained outside in a disaster is a death sentence!!!

The main dangers are exposure, starvation, contaminated water or food, predators or accidents. The human cost is separation from the loved companion animal and the uncertainty or nightmares that owners suffer when they can't find them and don't know their fate. In the case of Katrina, many people had nothing to go back to, were relocated far from their homes and had no communication capability to be notified if their pet was found. So a majority of pets that were rescued had to be re-homed, if they even survived the process.

Studies of evacuation failure rates prove that evacuations are less successful if people cannot take their pets with them or to a safe place instead of leaving them in the danger zone, such as in their home that's in the path of a cyclone. A positive example of animal evacuation was in preparation for Hurricane Rita in Texas that followed closely after Katrina. The leaders learned from Katrina and allowed people to evacuate with their pets. The evacuation failure rate for Rita was much lower than for Katrina.

- Once you leave your home, you have no way of knowing how long you'll be kept out of the area you may not be able to go back for your pets.
- If you leave, even if you think you may only be gone for a few hours, take your pets.
- Leave early-don't wait for a mandatory evacuation order. An unnecessary trip is far better than waiting too long to leave safely with your pets. If you must be evacuated by emergency officials, you may be told to leave your pets behind. Because evacuation shelters generally don't accept pets, except for service animals, you must plan ahead to ensure that your family and your pets will have a safe place to stay. Don't wait until disaster strikes to do your research.
- Contact hotels and motels outside your immediate area to check policies on accepting pets. Keep a list of 'pet-friendly' places handy. Call ahead for a reservation as soon as you think you might have to leave your home.
- Ask friends, relatives or others outside your immediate area if they would shelter you and your animals, or just your animals, if necessary. If you have more than one pet, be prepared to house them separately.
- Make a list of veterinarians and boarding facilities who might shelter animals in emergencies; include 24-hour phone numbers
- Ask your local animal shelter if they provide emergency foster care or shelter for pets in an emergency. This should be a last resort, as shelters have limited resources and are likely to be stretched to their limits during an emergency.

One thing that we learned from watching the drama of Katrina was the necessity of having not only an exit plan, but also supplies for three days without food or water as well as basic first aid supplies. What we came up with was a 'To Go Kit' which we made up from a knapsack style cooler bag that we packed with supplies with a plan to rotate any semi perishable items once a year.

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 non-perishables well ahead of time; add perishable items at the last minute; have everything read to go a moment's notice. Keep everything accessible, stored in sturdy containers that can be carried easily (duffle bags, covered trash containers, etc.) And keep them in a place where they are easy to grab if you have to leave suddenly.

Consider the following and make a checklist of what is possible.

- Do you have a carrier for your animal 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.
- You'll need a sturdy lead and preferably a harness for each animal rather than relying on a collar. Pets can become anxious, startled or confused and wriggle out of a loose collar too easily. And make sure that each harness and collar has a waterproof plastic or metal identification tag with home and mobile phone numbers. Have these changed? Check!
- If your pet has a medical problem, have current, fresh medications and copies of medical records (stored in a waterproof container such as a zip lock bag).
- Current photos of your pet for identification in case your pet gets lost. Also copies of their registration certificates and microchipping information. Has your address and contacts changed since your pet was microchipped? Check!
- Pack adequate food for three days and a manually-operated can opener. Consider foods that won't go off or rancid over time.



- Pack twice as much water as you think you'll need and as a backup, a small medicine bottle with eye-dropper (from your chemist) with chlorine bleach in it to purify water (four drops per litre and wait a half hour) in case you need it.
- Flat pack rubbish bags, extra ziplock bags and poo pick up bags. No one is going to pick up after you in a disaster!
- A roll of paper towels and a bar of antiseptic soap are a must. Pack them inside a waterproof container that you can also use as a feeding or water dish, such as Tupperware.
- You should have a pet first aid kit and ours contains a variety of gauze pads, Telfa non stick bandages, ACE bandage, antibiotic ointment and antiseptic ointment such as Betadine (ask your vet about this), alcohol swabs, waterproof tape, cotton balls and pads, perhaps even some rubber gloves in sterile plastic ziplock bags. And finally, a flash-light-all packed in another plastic waterproof container that can double for the other dish.
- 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. Or at least a blanket.

This may sound like overkill, but look at the upside-you may need the first aid kit for yourself! And while we're at it, remember perhaps some long-life treats!

If your family and pets must wait out a storm or other disaster at home, identify a safe area of your home where you can all stay together. It should be a room without windows for no breaking glass or escape route. Keep dogs on leashes and cats in carriers, and make sure they are wearing identification.


After The Disaster

- Don't allow your pets to roam loose. Familiar landmarks and smells might be gone, and your pet will probably be disoriented-pets can easily get lost in such situations.
- Walk dogs on a leash and keep cats inside (or in carriers, if your house is damaged and they could escape).
- Be patient with your pets after a disaster. Try to get them back into their normal routines as soon as possible. Be ready for behavioral problems that may result from stress.
- If problems persist or if your pet seems to be having any health problems, talk to a veterinarian.

If you've made it this far, you're far more prepared than most people to face any eventuality, so perhaps stash a copy of this article along with your 'To Go Kit' and hopefully you'll never need it. But if you do, you'll have the peace of mind to ride out a crisis together.

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