

Community narrative: Wild animals

As the fires continued to spread across the East Coast, Katy began to get more and more worried about the wildlife. No one seemed to be doing anything for them, and it was obvious how completely decimated the landscape was from the intensity of the fires. The few who would make it—if any did—would be left with nothing if people didn't act.

Katy could see on Facebook that other people were worried about this too, and she heard through her neighbour that there was going to be a meeting at the local pub to see what the community could do.

At the meeting, people put their hands up to say what they could contribute to efforts. For some people, this meant reaching out to work contacts who could send food or materials to build feeders and water dispensers. For others, it meant keeping track of the supplies and people, and for others having access to vehicles and being able to drive.

All sorts of people, including kids and teenagers, pitched in, especially once there was a physical coordination point where people knew to come. People from far and wide tried to help in ways that they could, though sometimes the interventions from afar seemed divorced from the reality of what was happening on the ground. The local rural store became a vital point of connection for the wildlife efforts, and there were often people preparing food or rigging up new water dispensers at all times of the day and night.

Still no one in the formal disaster response seemed to be doing anything for the animals, so Katy and her crew kept going. They had some trouble finding out if there were supposed to be formal efforts or not—everyone they spoke to seemed to think it was someone else's job, or no-one's. It was a mess, and the animals were the ones paying for it.

It wasn't always clear what food should be going out, or what materials people should be using to do so. But every time new information came in and suggested something different should be done, Katy took careful note and tried her best to follow the guidance. She knew that it wasn't going to be perfect, but in the middle of a climate disaster, what is? Everyone was doing their best. It would have been much easier to do the right thing if the people in official positions provided guidance in the first place. Or if there was somewhere to get reliable information that people new to caring for wildlife could use.

Katy drove food to different distribution points, and put some food and water stations around her property, which backs onto a national park. She carefully kept location coordinates for her stations, and provided these to the person in her local area who was in charge of collating the information. Katy's daughter taught her how to use GPS as she went, which was a wholly unexpected part of the learning curve!

As the fires got more and more international media coverage, more people arrived to help out. Still, the formal disaster response was adamant that protection of human life and property trumped people's desire to care for wild animals. Katy knew that the land belonged to those animals as much as it did to humans. The idea that people wouldn't even try to save any creature who had survived the inferno itself made Katy feel both deathly sad and unbearably angry. She refused to accept that there was nothing humans could do. Especially

when it was human actions that had driven the climate disaster in the first place. It didn't make sense that it was ok for those actions to have happened, but not ok to take action now.

Katy and her friends began driving into private properties they knew the owners had evacuated, and distributing more food and water. They opened gates and tried to create paths to safety for the domesticated animals they saw on the properties along their way.

As time went on, it was clear that very few wild animals had made it through. Sometimes food wasn't touched for a couple of days—but, sometimes, the food was used by unexpected animals in unanticipated ways. When that happened, in the midst of all the horror, it was one of the few things that could make Katy smile.

The volume of goods being donated from across the world got a little unwieldy at this point. Members of the volunteer group Katy was a member of sometimes had to spend time sorting through the donations and then redirecting them to other groups or sometimes even straight to the tip, rather than making, distributing and checking up on the food and water stations themselves.

The fires took months to move across the country and the state of constant vigilance was wearing everyone down. Throughout her time helping care for wildlife, Katy was managing to keep turning up for work while also looking after her family, including the cats. The two times they had to evacuate were full-scale projects and each time she came back to the house, Katy felt relief that the place was still standing, but also waves of anxiety that animals out there were losing their homes and their lives.

Donations had also been pouring in from across the world, mainly through the existing wildlife carer organisations, but the money wasn't always getting to the people doing the work. Katy had spent hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars on petrol at this point and she knew some of the others had spent even more, including people who really couldn't afford it – especially now. It seemed ridiculous how difficult it was to access some of the donated money.

Formal disaster response officials had been getting more interested in the work that was going on informally to protect and care for wild animals. Some of the RFS members were trying to help out, but mainly that work was about euthanising animals who were considered to be too badly hurt from the fires to rescue. Some of them did take joey pouches out on the trucks. But there was definitely a sense that some of the interest from formal people was driven by a desire to stop people going out to set up and monitor the food and water stations.

Fleur had been involved in wildlife care for decades. Ever since falling in love with the little injured wombat, all those years ago, Fleur had known that caring for wild animals was something she had to do.

As the years have gone on, she'd moved a couple of times and been involved in different networks. But the point was always the same: find the animals you can help, and help them. Pretty straight forward.

The 2019/20 bushfires were something else. Absolutely unbelievable. No one was prepared. Fleur joked with her friend Laurie, at some point during the whole ordeal, that at least people might realise now how much animals matter. If the American news shows could cut through to people, perhaps they'd finally change some minds!

And it was tough sometimes, during the fires, dealing with well-meaning people who were desperate to help. Fleur saw some of the food being prepared in her local community volunteer group that had sprung up, and knew it wasn't going to end well. Between the wire hangers that Fleur could just see a small animal getting into trouble with, and the food and water being put out acting as predator beacons, she worried that it might do more harm than good.

But then, in the middle of the whole thing, who wants to hear that? She tried to gently introduce some ideas to the group and found, so long as she wasn't shaming anyone, most people wanted to learn. That felt good. But everything was on a knife's edge. There was so much at stake. And it wasn't the people trying to help that had caused the problem. A crisis is really not the time to be learning new skills or settling differences between views.

Fleur helped set up a spot for the volunteer vets from overseas to use as a base. After sorting through some of the medical supplies that had been donated and getting rid of the expired or restricted items that shouldn't have made it, she helped bandage and apply ointment to the few animals that got brought in. The thing that felt the hardest was how few there were.

In the end, what probably kept Fleur going were a couple of her carer friends who made sure to check in on her, and she with them, and knowing that they wouldn't stop trying to help either. When the firefighters came through to help protect Michelle and Doug's place, Doug was out there side by side with the fireys protecting the chicken coop while Michelle took the wrapped-up joeys and got the hell out of there, to Fleur's. When the fire came past Fleur's, they were able to pack up again and go to Laurie's place further South.

When the fires finally died down, that didn't mean the work ended. The surviving animals needed to be cared for well past the arrival of the rain, and then the pandemic. For many of them, the health issues caused by things like smoke inhalation wouldn't show up for a while—but Fleur knew that when they did, she would still do whatever she could to save a life. The loads of laundry, and the night-time feeds, and the enrichment activities and the shovelling of shit—let's be honest—all of it, Fleur would do.

But it would help if more people helped shovel the shit. After the bushfires it's been one thing after another. It's beyond time for people to wake up and do what they can to help.

When the fire season was officially over, it wasn't long before the Covid-19 pandemic arrived and the communities that had been helping each other through the climate disaster were separated. The stories of how people acted to care for and protect animals during the bushfires have not been gathered together to help people in future disasters to act, until now.