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### Filling the Ark

Leslie Irvine, *Filling the Ark: Animal Welfare in Disasters*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009. 166 pp. \$24.50.

As I write this, news comes in of the devastation wrought by the terrible earthquake in Haiti. Media coverage shows harrowing pictures of people being pulled from the wreckage, or of rows of bodies in makeshift mortuaries. The horror is made worse because the country is very poor, with many people living in shanty towns, and because air and sea ports are wrecked, making additional difficulties for those bringing in international aid.

Gradually, the scale of the human tragedy becomes clear, and every day the newspapers tell us more about rescue attempts and the gruelling problems facing survivors. But inevitably, and perhaps rightly, they will concentrate on the human story: what they will not tell us is that many of the tens of thousands who lost their lives this week will not be human. Quite soon after the earthquake struck, a parallel rescue attempt began, and the Animal Relief Coalition for Haiti was established<sup>1</sup> to provide mobile clinics for nonhumans injured in the crisis.

Leslie Irvine's book, *Filling the Ark*, examines human responses to animals' needs following such disasters. Reports from Haiti followed a typical pattern: first, the breaking news of the calamity; then, accounts of the numbers of people dead or missing, followed after a short while by reports (usually via email to those of us on animal listservs) of animal rescue efforts. Laudable though these activities (and the speedy response of global internet communities) are, the response begs one important question: which animals will be rescued? As Irvine notes, it is overwhelmingly pets who will be brought to clinics, and pets who will be taken to temporary shelters.

Irvine's book underlines, and sheds new light on, our complex and ambivalent relationships with other animals, or the rest of the natural world. At times, individual animals count: as rescue teams dealt with the aftermath of Katrina, each animal was allocated a data card, to facilitate matching animals with their guardians. Efforts were made to provide rescue plans to allow companion animals to be taken to safety. Meanwhile, animals who live only as numbers have no such luxury.

Other animals — on farms, in laboratories — will undoubtedly lose their lives in the earthquake/flood/fire, and will suffer horribly. But their deaths and agonies will pass unnoticed. For chickens and other agricultural animals kept under intensive conditions, natural disasters such as hurricanes bring not only devastation but also an aftermath of unimaginable suffering. Automated feed and drink dispensers fail, as does the waste removal machinery; and so too the air conditioning, allowing the temperature inside animal sheds to rise inexorably. Irvine tells of several examples — of chickens in collapsed broiler houses in Ohio, of the more than 35, 000 animals who drowned in the flooding following a storm at the Texas Medical Center. Their suffering goes unremarked.

Their deaths do not count, either. Rather, Irvine emphasises, the deaths of some animals only “count” if they were killed by human hands — in laboratory procedures, for example, or at the slaughterhouse on the way to becoming meat. Accidental death of these thousands of sentient creatures is categorized as a “nuisance,” as loss of data — or money. It is not categorized as loss of life. After Hurricane Rita, news reports mentioned in passing the deaths of thousands of cattle: the reports referred to how the farmers were hurt, the rice fields were seriously harmed, but the cattle “merely” lost (2-3). Moreover, that so many animals could be drowned in flooding in laboratories ought to be seen as neglect on the part of the authorities: yet, “I found no cases in which federal funds were withheld, nor ...any cases in which labs were charged with violations of the Animal Welfare Act in the aftermath of a disaster,” Irvine comments (99).

*Filling the Ark* is a fascinating account of the heroic efforts made by people in animal rescue organisations to help reduce loss of life. People and organizations work hard to set up temporary animal shelters for rescued pets, or to remove injured birds from oil-spills or collapsed chicken sheds. They sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to help a single animal. Unlike Leslie Irvine, I have not been involved in such work, and reading about how people faced these Herculean tasks filled me with admiration. And, I confess, even though lab animals are a particular interest of mine, I realized I hadn't thought enough about what happens to them in disasters.

It is not, however, altogether a story of triumph over catastrophic evil. As Irvine points out, it is not only the fact of the disaster, but also how rescue operations are organized, that can make a difference to survival. Just as the lack of infrastructure hindered humanitarian aid attempts in Haiti, so too does the absence of structure get in the way

of aiding animals. Thus, her aim in the book is to examine *how* we make decisions about the treatment of animals. What happened after Hurricane Katrina, she suggests, was disaster piling on disaster. Animal helpers struggled to find food and housing for those they rescued — problems that were then exacerbated by several organizational failures.

Animals, like some groups of people, are particularly vulnerable in emergencies. This is not so much because of the effects of the disaster itself (although poorer people, for example, may live in structurally less safe areas, so making them more vulnerable), but has to do with the way that rescue plans are implemented. For animals, problems resulted from rescue plans that were less than clear, combined with human ranking of the worth of various animal kinds.

Many people struggled to ensure the safety of their companion animals after Katrina. If someone walked away from their house with an animal inside, it is easy, then, to see them as villains, as completely uncaring. But many people were *forced* by rescuing authorities to leave their dearly loved animals behind — far from villains, they were victims, Irvine points out. And not only were some forced to abandon their pets, but others had to witness their animals being murdered — officials were shooting stray animals in the streets in Dallas, for example. In one well-publicized case, a dog was wrenched from a small boy's arms, because pets were "not allowed" on the bus (23). And, of course, many animals that were rescued were never able to be reunited with their owners — there were simply so many animals that it was difficult to find specific individuals.

Tragic though the stories were of lost or killed pets, one positive change followed Katrina. The U.S. government signed into law the Pets Evacuation and Standards Act (PETS), which required state and local authorities to include pet animals in their disaster plans. In that sense, the PETS Act is good news — at least some animals stand a reasonable chance of help. However, the Act only stipulates that people will be *allowed* to take their animals with them; it does not ensure that they do, and many people — who perhaps live in earthquake or hurricane-susceptible zones — do not adequately plan. How many, for example, have a cat basket for every single cat in their household?

In taking us through details of how disasters or their aftermath can cause animal suffering and death, Irvine does not flinch from naming the extent of the problems and cover-ups. It is not just the disaster itself, but also social and cultural consequences, which impact animals. All of these show up the cracks in our categorization of other

beings and their worth, and indicate that it is human actions in the wake of disasters which put many animals at risk.

But her aim is to do more than analyse the ways in which plans were, or were not, implemented; rather, she uses the examples of responses to previous disasters to make policy recommendations, ranging from lists of recommended actions for individual guardians of companion animals to more extensive challenges to governments and commercial enterprises regarding intensive animal use. These are, I think, one of the strengths of this book.

While I found *Filling the Ark* thought-provoking, I felt a little uneasy about the metaphor of the title, and with which the book begins — the ark. Partly, that unease springs from the religious connotations, and partly from the biblical assumption that other animals go in two by two, male and female (clearly, Noah was not a biologist). And I would be concerned if we left the fate of all these animals to one man (or deity): it requires coordinated work from a large number of people to effect a rescue.

Such nit-picking aside, one question remained for me. After reading through the list of recommendations, I was left wondering how harassed rescue agencies would make sense of them in the field. To be sure, Irvine's main point is that what matters is having coherent policies and good organization in advance of disasters, which should include adequate planning. But the problem remains that many animals are property in Western legal and cultural frameworks,<sup>2</sup> and so it comes down to individual "owners" whether or not proper provision is made.

Irvine is not sanguine about the difficulties we face in implementing adequate policies. She recognises that, for companion animals, responsibility resides with the guardian - who may quite get around to making contingency plans for disasters that may never happen. But we *can* help animals in disasters, Irvine maintains, primarily by making them less vulnerable. "Doing so," she points out, "involves rethinking our uses of animals" (123): these more radical recommendations for other animals are ones that accord well with the concerns of anyone working in animal advocacy — for example, that institutions do not pack large numbers of animals into huge sheds which cannot easily be evacuated. The argument for farm animals is one for sustainable agriculture, and in laboratories, for considerable reduction of animal use — not easily attained goals, to be sure, but goals to aim for, nonetheless. What can happen to intensively-managed animals in disasters serves to underline how inhumane are the conditions in

which such animals live. We should not have to wait for the next disaster to demand change.

### Notes

1. Set up by the World Society for the Protection of Animals, and the International Fund for Animal Welfare.
2. Except wild animals. All companion animals, and those kept by humans in captivity for any purpose, “belong” to someone in law. For discussion of this point, see Gary Francione. *Rain Without Thunder: the ideology of the animal rights movement*. Philadelphia, Temple UP, 1996.