Considering Animals in Emergency Response

*Filling the Ark: Animal Welfare in Disasters* is the third book from Leslie Irvine by an academic publishing house. This book is part of a series entitled *Animals and Ethics*. The author is a sociologist (with expertise in social psychology, identity, and the self) whose peer-reviewed articles have appeared in sociology journals. Her first book, *Codependent Forevermore: The Invention of Self in a Twelve Step Group*, examined how people recover after the breakup of a committed relationship. Her second book, *If You Tame Me: Understanding our Connection with Companion Animals*, examined how the subjectivity of non-human animals becomes available to human beings during the course of everyday interaction. The author’s qualifications to write on the subject of this current book are a keen personal interest and hands-on experience following Hurricane Charley (Florida, 2004) and Hurricane Katrina (2005).

In chapter two Irvine states: “I believe that it is wrong to kill another living being—even if that being has lived a good life and suffered no pain in dying” (p. 57). The book, however, is not a successful vehicle for promoting this belief in the reader. It could be described as part diary and part editorialized summaries of specific types of animal disasters. It is not a scientific study and provides no statistical evaluation of any new data, yet Irvine makes broad recommendations.

The book’s structure does not serve it well. It is organized into similarly constructed chapters, each of which focuses on a specific type of disaster and the socio-structural factors that allowed that disaster to occur. Irvine then makes recommendations about how the disaster could have been avoided or how in the future it could be averted. Irvine points out, for example, that the death of marine mammals and birds subsequent to the 1999 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill off Alaska was made possible by the global system where massive quantities of crude oil are delivered around the world by the most efficient means possible. She argues that the risk could be mitigated by better ships, less oil transport, and improved preparedness.

Underlying the structure of the problem-example-solution formula of each chapter is the author’s belief that there is a simple solution to each problem. As those working in social policy and familiar with “wicked problems” know, this is seldom the case. In review of the avoidable animal welfare risks of concentrated livestock systems (chapter 2), the solution Irvine presents is to work toward elimination of the current dominant system of livestock production. To suggest that it would be feasible to counter the massive hegemony of the transnational agri-industrial complex armed with the corporation bill of rights currently articulated in the World Trade Organization Agreements, however, is simply naïve.

Chapter one is an exception to this pattern that proves the rule. This chapter discusses the plight of companion animals in natural disasters such as hurricanes. The fundamental problem described in this chapter is infrastructure failure in urban environments subsequent to intense local weather anomalies. Irvine does not, however, propose a concentrated effort to work against the sociological and economic factors causing the current massive urbanization of this planet—a suggestion that the reader would regard as naïve.
There are several other substantial weaknesses in Irvine's book, including some significant omissions. One of these is the fact that the largest threat to the largest numbers of animals on this planet is the Foreign Animal Disease Eradication (FAD) programs of Western governments. Despite the ample documentation of pyres burning in the UK in response to foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 and the mass burial of live chickens in Southeast Asia in 2005 in response to fears about the H5N1 avian flu, Irvine is silent on this risk, with the exception of some light comments in the introduction. This is especially frustrating to the reader, when, in the closing pages of the book, there is a section entitled “We Never Imagined,” which challenges the reader to broaden the base of thought about responsible preparedness. In the reviewer's opinion, the largest potential for catastrophic animal suffering in the United States is subsequent to a foreign animal disease incursion. It is negligent for a book printed in the United States on the topic of animal welfare during disaster not to draw attention to this egregious fact. Welfare slaughter provisions do not exist in current public documents related to Foreign Animal Disease (FAD) eradication plans in North America.

Another significant omission from Irvine's book is any discussion of the literature on the ethics of the treatment of animals—a substantial deficit in a book that is part of an academic series on ethics. There is scattered discussion of how society values different species of animals differently—specifically, companion animals, wild animals, and food animals. This classification is nearly identical to the one Zygmunt Bauman uses in his examination of how we treat nonpersons in our society: how pets are met and included in our society; how wild animals are unmet, recognized as animals but outside our society; and how food animals are mismet and evicted from society. It is one of the deficiencies of Irvine's book that she acknowledges neither Bauman's analysis nor that of any other thinkers on this subject.

There is also no serious discussion in Irvine's book about the ethics of saving or taking of animal life, although the book is primarily about rescuing animals. She approaches the issue in a limited way with regard to rehabilitating wildlife, where the rate of success of reintroduction to the wild is so abysmal as to call into question whether the animal has any benefit from the attempt to rehabilitate. Clearly, if we hope to access public monies for animal rescue or hope to initiate significant change in the institutions and social structures that result in risks to animals, we need a coherent description of the good achieved by avoiding animal death.

Although this book is published by an academic press, it cannot be considered an academic work. As a general interest book, it provides a good review of the facts around specific past incidents where there was avoidable loss of nonhuman lives. It is not for the library—possibly for the coffee table.

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