



**Animal Ethics and Well-Being**  
with Dr. Frank McMillan

*Frank McMillan DVM*

# One very valuable lesson from Katrina

The lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina are profound, but one lesson that has been almost completely overlooked has enormous implications for homeless animals everywhere. It involves a little-known aspect of animal rescue work that had been around for several decades but was catapulted to national prominence after the hurricane.

When an animal rescue operation makes the news, there is often a sudden demand among the public to adopt the animals who have been rescued. In hoarding situations, where dozens or even hundreds of animals are kept in miserable conditions in someone's home, or when a puppy mill is closed down, many people want to help by giving one of the rescued animals a loving home.

This is, of course, a good thing. But, unfortunately, this desire to help is often too narrow. For example, after a puppy mill is shut down, many interested people will contact the shelter where the rescued dogs have been taken and ask to adopt one of those dogs. Sometimes people get to the shelter too late and are told that all the puppy mill dogs have been adopted out. Typically, then, the prospective adopters are told about all the other dogs there in the shelter who need homes. Yet, over and over, at that point potential adopters say they really wanted one of the rescued puppy-mill dogs and didn't come to adopt a "regular" shelter dog.

When Best Friends rescued thousands of animals after Katrina, we transported them to shelters all over the country to give them the best chance for being adopted. And the public responded with open arms by going to the shelters to adopt the Katrina animals. But all too

often, only a Katrina animal would do. The demand for adopting a Katrina animal became so intense that some shelter workers commented, only half-jokingly, that they could adopt out all of their shelter animals if they just said they were Katrina rescues.



From an animal welfare standpoint, this makes no logical sense. Other animals in shelters may have suffered and, in many cases, had suffered much greater hardships than the Katrina animals. Why not help them? What is the draw of adopting one of the animals from one specific rescue operation?

The answer isn't difficult to ascertain. There is a magnificent reward for helping an animal with a known history of tragedy, and not just any tragedy, but one actually witnessed on television. Dramatic images of the Katrina rescue were broadcast day after day. Even if the rescue is from a hoarding situation or a puppy mill, video images of the animals' horrendous living conditions often are shown to the public. So it's no wonder that people want to help out an animal who was forced to endure unspeakable, and graphic, misery.

The problem with the helping hand being so selective is that there are so many other equally needy animals in shelters waiting for loving homes, and people don't realize that adopting one of these animals makes the space available for one of the high-profile rescue animals shown so dramatically on the TV news.

We all know that dogs cooped up in puppy mills can suffer miserably. But it's not uncommon for a local prosecutor to have enough evidence of cruelty to close down a puppy mill and yet be unable to take action for one simple reason: If the dogs are removed from the puppy mill,

*It's not uncommon for a local prosecutor to have enough evidence of cruelty to close down a puppy mill and yet be unable to take action for one simple reason: If the dogs are removed from the puppy mill, there is nowhere to take them.*



## Ask the Vet with Dr. Michael Dix, Best Friends Medical Director



Got a question for Dr. Mike? E-mail [editor@bestfriends.org](mailto:editor@bestfriends.org) and put "Ask the Vet" in the subject line. For timely medical advice, please consult your veterinarian.

**Q:** Why does my cat lick off his fur?

**A:** If you live in the southeastern U.S. and your cat goes outside, fleas are the most likely culprit. Fleas can actually be a problem almost anywhere, but they tend to be worse in warmer, humid climates. Other parasites, such as lice and ringworm, which is actually a fungal infection, can also cause your cat to itch and pull off his fur.

Outside of infectious causes, allergies are a relatively common cause of excessive licking in a cat. They can be allergies to food; external sources like pollens, molds or mites; or contact irritants such as the cat's bedding. The exact cause of an allergy can be difficult to determine. Skin infections related to allergies can also cause fur loss, as can diet. If your pet's food has a lot of fillers and not enough oils, it can lead to a dry coat and fur loss. Systemic diseases such as kidney disease, hyperthyroidism, inflammatory bowel disease and diabetes can also lead to fur loss (but these diseases typically are not itchy).

The most common cause I see for cats licking off fur is excessive grooming related to stress. If a cat who doesn't like other cats is in a multiple-cat household, for example, he may become stressed, and that stress manifests as excessive grooming. Other potential stressors include new animals in the house, moving, an outdoor cat visiting or a new baby.

Because there are so many possible causes of excessive licking, you should have your pet thoroughly examined by your vet.



there is nowhere to take them. The local shelters are already full. So the dogs may be forced to continue living in inhumane conditions simply because of lack of shelter space. Even monetary donations, which are very helpful, can't create the space.

One of the best things that people could have done to help the Katrina animals would have been to go to their local shelter and adopt an animal (only, of course, if they could provide a safe and loving home to that animal). The benefits would have been huge: The shelter animal would get the home he or she so badly needed, the adopter would gain a greatly appreciative new companion, and the adopter would know that he saved not just one animal's life (the one he took home) but also helped out a Katrina animal. It's truly a win-win-win situation.

Katrina was unique in many ways. But the mindset of adopting only one of the specific rescued animals is still very much alive. It has been part of recent large-scale rescues of puppy mill dogs, hoarded cats and Michael Vick's fighting dogs. But in a very short time there will be another puppy mill that is shut down,

and hundreds of dogs will need immediate housing as they are removed from the puppy-mill owner's property. The area shelters will be overwhelmed. The biggest help anyone can provide in these cases is to adopt an animal from a local shelter (again, only if a safe and loving home can be provided) to make room for the large number of rescued animals.

If during the massive Katrina rescue, individuals all over the country could have simply given a loving home to just one local shelter animal, the benefits to those needy animals as well as the Katrina survivors would have been incalculable. And that's one of the greatest lessons to be learned from the Katrina disaster: To help an animal recovered in a specific rescue operation, you don't need to limit yourself to adopting one of those animals — you can help them and one more by opening your heart and home to a local shelter animal. 🐾

*Dr. Frank McMillan is the director of well-being studies at Best Friends and is currently studying psychological trauma in animals.*