

Philip Jose

Interviewed by Anabel Priscilla Roeder

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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas

Anabel Roeder: My name is Anabel and I'm interviewing Philip Jose over his experience in Hurricane Harvey and how he had to deal with the animals here at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi. The date is Friday, September 29, 2017, and we are in his office. There could be, um-hm, several interruptions due to the fact that he is in his office and the door is open. Okay. So, when you first heard about Hurricane Harvey what came to your mind?

Philip Jose: Uh, Hurricane Ike. I was in, a student at Texas A&M Galveston when Hurricane Ike came through and it hit right over our campus and we evacuated for that. The school was very proactive and at the time we evacuated it was actually supposed to come to Corpus Christi. So, you know, we had taken a couple of things, you know, "Oh, it's gonna be a four-day weekend and we'll be back," and then the hurricane moved, turned north and ended up going right over our campus and our campus was closed for the rest of the semester. So you know, when I saw Hurricane Harvey, my first thought was, okay this one looks like it might be headed this way. Let's, let's start mentally preparing for the worst-case scenario, if we have another Ike-like incident.

AR: Okay. Um. Do you know what the university's procedure is for a hurricane, when it comes to preparing the labs and the animals that are in the labs?

PJ: Absolutely. Absolutely. Every year we have a, a meeting regarding just the general (coughs) going ons of the college and the university and one of the things we talk about in our college and departmental meetings is to be prepared for hurricanes, especially in the fall semester as that's typically the peak of hurricane season. And having lived through the hurricane at a university, you know, it's one of those warnings that very much brings true, so I do, you know, pay a lot of attention to any advice, any changes in policy we have. In the case of our labs, we help craft that policy and along with EH&S and our superior department heads and the recommendation of the university. Generally, its, it's about securing equipment, securing chemicals in case there is a lot of damage to a building, to limit the amount of chemicals that can be exposed or stolen. Anything that could be potentially dangerous, sharps, scalpels, nettles, things like that make sure they're secured, cover up all your equipment, so that if water does get through, it doesn't ruin your equipment and then the last thing we do is take care of the animals. And the reason why that's last is because usually your evacuating so there's no sense in packing them up until everything else is ready to go and it's literally the LAST thing you do on your way out the door.

AR: Okay. So did the university supply you with supplies for the hurricane, for the animals? Did they give you guys bottled water? Food?

PJ: So they didn't give us food, it wasn't like we were rationed out "Here's food for the animals," but I do have a purchasing card from the university, which is used for lab supplies and

taking care of the animals, so if there's anything I needed for the animals, I would use that. So in a way they did, so it may not be a ration of food but they give me the means to support the animals. Generally, we keep on stock, in stock, mice, rat food for the animals and things like that so since I have that on hand I just grab what I have and just bring that with me so that we don't waste it. And usually I got a 5-gallon jug of water floating around so I just grab that. Um, that's pretty much the procedure dealing with the animals.

AR: All right, um, so whenever you took the animals from campus did you take them all in their original containers or cages that are in here?

PJ: Absolutely not.

AR: (Laughs) okay.

PJ: They all have fairly large cages and trying to move them in those would be very difficult. They're heavy. They're bulky. We would need a pretty sizable trailer to fit everybody in, um, plus with us driving it's generally safer to keep them in something a little smaller, just to let them feel protected. Most animals feel that if they're in a cage or in a burrow, or, you know, in a nest of some sort, they'll feel safe. So when you're doing something like moving it can be stressful, it's a very new experience for them. Especially when there's a, you know, barometric changes going on they're sensing that there's something, not right with the hurricane coming, you know. You see their behavior changes and when your behavior changes they really feed off of that. Um. And we, we have some smaller containers that we'll put them in, or crates that we'll put them in depending on the animal uh to travel so that they feel safe, and then we have a larger cage that collapses down that we bring with us so during the travel they're in small cages, and then when we get to our destination where we evacuated, we set up larger cages and put them in those larger cases. It's not always as large as their regular cage, but its not a permanent living situation. It's typically were going to be evacuated to for a couple days, maybe a couple of weeks. It's enough space that they'll be okay for a couple of weeks, and then at that point if you do realized you're going to be gone for a long time, you can reassess the situation and go find other caging, other housing to get them in something more appropriate for long term living quarters.

AR: So when you evacuated, where did you guys do? And if you went to a hotel how did you manage to get all those animals into a hotel? (Laughs)

PJ: Yeah

AR: (Laughs)

PJ: We didn't go to a hotel. Luckily we've got family in Texas, so we evacuated out to family in San Antonio and uh that was an interesting experience because as we typically visit there we usually have one personal animal with us. This time we had all of the university, well most of the university animals - some of the animals went with a student workers - and then all of our personal animals on top of that so, uh, it became quite interesting as it was like a clown car as we were pulling in animals, after animal, after animal, after animal, which at one point the family said something along the lines of "you can't swing a dead cat around here without hitting two animal cages."

[Lab Teaching Assist Interrupts Interview]

AR: *Whispers* Uh he can.

PJ: He's just, uh, can, that was just Lee

AR: Uh Okay

PJ: He was just coming into make a joke probably.

AR: Oh, Lee Lehman just walked in, but left the office, okay. You said that you had a student worker take some of the animals, how do you know their experiences was with that?

PJ: I don't know exactly what his experience was, so I'd be hesitant to speak on behalf of him, but he took some of the snakes because he had a lot of snake enclosures and he raises a lot of snakes and we had literally run out of room in our car, we couldn't fit them anywhere else, plus I'm not sure how the family that was very graciously letting us stay will feel with a six foot and a half bull snake just showing up on their door step so um, I had asked my student worker if he'd be willing to take him and he said sure, so I set him up with the necessary food and water he would need and we stayed in contact throughout the hurricane.

AR: Cool. So which animals gave you the most trouble during this evacuation?

PJ: Well

AR: Okay, university wise.

PJ: Cause, I can tell you it was our tortoise.

AR: (Laughs)

PJ: Our personal tortoise was the most trouble because he refused to stop pooping. Every time we put him in a cage he'd poop and then we'd clean it up and then we'd put him back in and then he'd poop again and poop again, and were like "Oh my gosh, we are trying to get out of here so stop pooping." The university animals, the most, that gave us the most problem, really none of them gave us very many problems. Ferdinand the large bull snake, did take an aggressive posture towards me when I went to take him out of his cage and he struck at me which is fairly unusual. But once I got the hook on him, I was able to grab his tail and he calmed right down and was as docile as he normally is. So, I think he was a little stressed out and a little amped up and you know the storm coming and sensing that, as usual, Monkey Joe our, our rehab squirrel, was for a lack of better term a little squirrely.

AR: (Laughs).

PJ: He –still gets a little nervous around people and with people handling him. So it's not as easy as reaching in and taking him out like we can with the snakes or with some of my personal animals. His is a little bit more, tricky you have to coast him into his cage. And or at least close enough in to his cage that you can get a hand around his butt and kind of push him in, so it takes a lot of treats. Luckily, he's food motivated so if you can just throw a lot of food at the back of his cage, he'll inevitably curiosity will get the best of him, and um, you can, you can, once he gets in the travel cage, just kind of push him in and close it. He usually turns around and gives you a dirty look and turns back around and continues to eat his pile of treats. So probably the squirrel.

AR: Squirrel. And which one, um which animal gave you the least issue? Which one was fine the entire time, no problem?

PJ: Uh, that would probably be the blue tongued skink. He pretty much slept through everything. They sleep a lot anyways. But he really did sleep through everything. Every time I turned around, he was sleeping. He was really easy to handle. He ate fine; he drank fine; he slept like he normally did. You would think that it was just another day.

AR: Right.

PJ: For him, he didn't even notice anything go on other than the fact all of the sudden he was crammed in a vehicle with a bunch of other things and oh its dark, I think I'll go to sleep.

AR: (Laughs) That's funny. Um, so how many animals, including your personal pets, did you have to care for? At this, during this hurricane evacuation?

PJ: One, on jeez, hold on give me a second here.

AR: (Laughs)

PJ: I'm going to have to use my fingers to count. [Pauses] Ten.

AR: Ten animals?

PJ: Um-hm.

AR: Oh gosh. So, um, so I know that you have a few personal pets.

PJ: Um-hm.

AR: So, um how did, did your personal pets notice the animals? Were they upset that you were giving the animals attention or were they pretty relaxed about it?

PJ: [PAUSE] They didn't notice the other animals, but I'm not sure I'd say they were also relaxed because hurricanes, they, just like other animals they pick up on that and just the general hustle of getting out and evacuating and traveling new places does put a little bit of stress on them. I think with personal animals, they pick up on your stress a little bit more because you spend more time with them, socially, not that we don't spend time with our animals here at the university but a lot of times, there's classes in the labs where the animals are held and we didn't necessarily get the university animals, when they were hatchlings or pups or you know, young. So they don't necessary have that bond with you, you know, from raising them where the animals we have at home, we've raised since hatchlings or have had for many, many years. There's very much a bond there, so they really pick up on your emotional state as well. They didn't notice at all, one of the reasons why we try to keep animals separate. You generally put some sort of barrier or something between them so they don't see each other and they don't stress out. I've had my bearded dragon here in my office before, and every time he sees- the blue tongue skink is much larger than he is- my bearded dragon will run over and puff up his chest and try and start a fight so I have to, put a small barrier up, when I have my bearded dragon here, so that he doesn't bother the skink. The skink never looks impressed.

AR: (Laughs)

PJ: The skink always looked confused, you know, so we kept them separate, so there wasn't a lot of interaction between those animals at all. So, they, it just really was a non-factor.

AR: Can you tell me about any of the sounds animals made? Was there any new sounds you've never heard before. Anything in that sense.

PJ: Nope, uh reptiles aren't always vocal, at least the reptiles we have, usually they're only vocal if they're angry.

[Hershel Tuley Lab TA Interrupts]

Hershel Tuley: Thanks for making the standards better.

PJ: No problem Hershel.

HT: See ya on Monday.

PJ: All right , take care. So the squirrel generally doesn't make many sounds, none of the animals really make a lot of sounds, the only real difference was the squirrel was less active, he was definitely less active though but with being less active more calm, I was actually able to handle him more than I had previously when working with him, so, that was about the only real behavioral change I noticed.

AR: That's interesting, you'd think the squirrel would be more like panic strict.

PJ: Panicked, stressed.

AR: Right.

PJ: I gotta go. He, you know, he, once we got him in his cage and got him settled in his pot to hide in, his little flower pot, he just calmed down and sat down, was just really relaxed so that was nice because he was the one I was most worried about that would stress the most.

AR: Now, can you tell me, just because we've talked about the squirrel a lot. Can you tell me, why the squirrel is here?

PJ: Okay, so.

AR: So, people can kind of understand.

PJ: yes

AR: Understand him.

PJ: So Monkey Joe is a very special squirrel. He is non-releasable, which means he was brought to a rehab and he had so much damage that he was not deemed fit for being sent back into the wild on his own, that he would not be able to survive, which means he would need a new home. When he was a pup, during a storm, his home litter was blown out of a tree, out of their nest and he was the, the, unlucky one who fell on the cement and hit his head. So when he was brought into the rehabber along with the rest of the nest, he had some mobility issues. He'd walk in circles; he couldn't walk straight; he had difficulty standing, and they were pretty sure he was not going to get better. He actually did show a lot of progress as he grew cause he was very very young when he was brought in; I'm not even sure his eyes were open yet. And so they put him with the other wild squirrels hoping, well maybe he was young enough he had figured how to overcome any damage he had gotten, any brain damage he had gotten. And he could be released cause that is the goal of rehab. It's not to keep animals; it's to get them back in the wild where they belong. He improved very rapidly and improved a lot, almost to the point where they felt

comfortable setting him outdoors but then he plateaued. And he stopped improving and he still had coordination issues, he still had balance issues. We think he may have vision issues, based off how he looks at things and focuses things. He turns his head, in abnormal ways when he's focusing on something to see something, so we think he may have some, some blindness, which for squirrels being blind, having coordination issues, is not a recipe for success in the wild.

AR: Right.

PJ: So he was deemed non-releasable. Unfortunately, the rehabber who he was brought to was retiring and didn't have a place for him. So he was rehomed with me. I was sub-permitted under the rehab permit. I've been working with him ever since to make sure he had at least has a good home.

AR: Right. Nice. So is there anything you wish you could've done differently or do you feel that if there is another hurricane in the future that you would do differently? Or do you think you guys handled the situation fairly well?

PJ: Well we definitely handled it very well. We definitely handled it very well. We didn't have any, we didn't lose any animals; we didn't have any animals that stressed; we didn't have any animals stop eating. The only thing that I would probably do differently is stacking the car on the way there. That was, it was a bit of a Tetris game; we were moving cages around and they're collapsing because we have those collapsible cages, and how to fit things and how to stack things to maximize the space and minimize the rattling. So I think the only thing we'd change would be how we packed the car, which on the way back, when you have all the time in the world, you're not rushing to get out we're able to pack it a little bit better, and I think having gone through this now, once we have a better idea of, you know, how, we'd want to stack things to make everyone happy and have a more pleasant trip.

AR: Laughs, so lastly is there anything that you would like to that we didn't go over to add to the interview?

PJ: Um (sigh) There's really nothing that comes to mind. I think the only thing that I could think of is to remember that after hurricanes like this, we focus a lot on the human impacts and the humans that have been affected by this, which is rightfully so, but don't forget about the animals and the wild animals as well. So if you experience a hurricane and you see a wild animal that looks injured or hurt, call your local rehabber and help them. If you're looking for something to do when a hurricane comes through, after a hurricane comes through, and you're having problems finding places to volunteer, do something to help, look at wildlife rehab centers because a lot of times after big storms like this, they will get swamped with baby animals, birds, all kind of things, and they need as much help as they can get. My squirrel, Monkey Joe, he didn't come from a hurricane, but he came from a really really bad thunderstorm and wind storm that happened and like you saw they had I think eight from that litter that were brought in by one person so you can imagine after a hurricane, how many animals will be brought in and then also the animals that are still out there in Corpus Christi. It is an unfortunate time because were having a migration, the bird migration, especially humming birds. And hurricanes tend to rip off a lot of blooms a lot of flowers and tear up a lot of plants that these humming birds rely on and Corpus Christi and Rockport are big stopover for them. They stop here to refuel, before continuing south, so after something like this, you know there's a migration coming through, put

out bird feeders because a lot of their food source is probably gone and so help them out. That, that's probably the best thing you can do, and I think that's all I can think to say.

AR: All right.

PJ: Right now.

AR: Thank you!

PJ: Absolutely.