

Harmed in the making of: fake animal rescue videos

Animals being cooler than you online is nothing new – otters holding hands, the craze for capybaras, and untold millions of cat photos to name only a few. Pictures and videos of our beloved beasts are upvoted, retweeted, liked and shared in extraordinary numbers. Extraordinary numbers, however, provide the perfect cover for harmful disinformation to spread unseen. Fake animal rescue videos are one such culprit.

Please be aware, while the following article is important, you might find it distressing.

Fake rescue videos are short, online visual media that purport to show an animal being saved from some dire predicament by a brave and selfless human, but which have been entirely staged. They typically feature a domestic kitten or puppy, small primate, or similar cute creature who is saved just in time from an allegedly wild predator – a snake, an eagle, or a ferocious dog, framed as viciously attacking or killing their prey. Others depict animals freed from traps, debris, or rubble. They are produced for profit, and circulate on social media, YouTube, and other video-hosting websites, which offer monetisation opportunities and guarantee high viewership. With an average run-time under five minutes, they are easy to consume and easy to access.

What fake rescue videos present as true and spontaneous is nothing but dangerous, cruel stagecraft. Animals are deliberately harmed in their production, suffering everything from mauling by a larger animal to being glued into traps. Frequent injury on set goes without saying; many animals in fake rescue videos have visible scars or appear more injured than the events on-camera would reasonably cause, implying the repetitive filming of

multiple takes for the perfect angle, and the use of the same individual animal in several different videos. The predators fare little better: University of Bonn herpetologist, Mark Auliya, described one fake rescue video in which a dog was ‘attacked’ by a ‘wild’ snake: a snake so distressed they were lying perfectly still. Snakes posed as villains in these videos sometimes have scarring on their snouts, usually seen in captive specimens who strike at the bars of their cages from stress or boredom.

There is a human cost to fake rescue videos, as well. The ‘rescuers’ are actors, unskilled in handling dangerous animals and environments. *National Geographic* reports an explosion of fake rescue video uploads from Cambodia during COVID-19. With Cambodia’s tourism-dependent economy suffering from international travel restrictions, it is all too clear how high-risk online content plays its part in exploiting economic and social injustices. The pandemic heightened our desire for feelgood content, creating the perfect market – fake rescue videos take advantage of compassion for animals through being shared by unwitting viewers, unaware that they are contributing to the clandestine industry’s profits. In claiming to show a good-hearted individual helping an animal in distress, fake rescue videos minimise the expert, strategic work of genuine animal welfare organisations.

Although they hide in plain sight, fake rescue videos contain tell-tale giveaways:

- The same backgrounds, individual animals, and people can be seen in more than one video from the same source
- The appearance and behaviour of the animals





Still-frames from rescue videos identified by World Animal Protection ANZ as fake (World Animal Protection ANZ, 1 July 2021 < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5wvLYubTFU> >)

doesn't check out: they appear oddly calm, overly stressed, or too extensively injured for the scenario

- The human looks unsafe and inexperienced with the animals, or in the terrain
- The animal encounters, or environments in which they happen, are unnatural and unrealistic. You'd never see a bald eagle hunting a panda cub in the outback
- It beggars belief that a trained rescuer would have arrived just in the nick of time ... with a camera crew. In a disaster zone.

There are a few things you can do to help:

- Report or flag any rescue videos you suspect to be fake using the site's relevant functions. We recommend only reporting videos you happen to come across: every click of the 'play' button contributes to their play counts and income streams
- Raise awareness of fake rescue videos. Ask your cat meme mates if they have heard of them and talk about them with your children when discussing online safety.

Animals benefit from humans' awareness of them, and the sharing of good-quality online content can engage our empathy for our nonhuman friends. Here are some things to consider before you like, share, or subscribe:

- Does this content come from a reputable source whose name or branding you recognise, like Cat Protection, World Animal Protection, Animals Australia, or a university? Legitimate animal organisations will never harm animals for clicks and likes, nor use sensational visual material to encourage donations
- Does this content, or its source, have a purpose beyond mere entertainment, such as welfare or

education? Social media accounts of welfare and rescue organisations often feature adorable 'Kodak moments' of animals in their care, but only if captured in that moment, and for the purpose of some light comic relief alongside information about pet care or other useful resources shared with followers

- Does this content depict animals accurately and ethically? Your local vet's Instagram photo of a cat with a bandaged leg is not exploitative, but reflective of the true nature of veterinary work, and reassuring that their patient is on the road to recovery.

Not all online animal content is suspect, and much of it is positive. These handy hints should give you some idea of how to approach animals on the internet. The best thing you can do is to continue to share and enjoy the genuine content you love – the kittens, puppies, and even the snakes will thank you for it.

Unfortunately, fake rescue videos are not the only form of profitable online cruelty or disinformation involving animals. 'Cute' exotic pet content, scam sanctuaries, and bogus shelters pose equally serious problems for animals, and for the people who care about them. We recommend that you always check whether a charity is legitimate by looking them up on the website of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission <https://www.acnc.gov.au/>

Our website has a factsheet on animals and the internet to help you identify fakes and frauds, and for more information on protecting yourself against scams or to report a scam, refer to the Australian Competition and Consumer Council's Scamwatch site, <https://www.scamwatch.gov.au/>