

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Tanya Dominguez

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to "Getting Curious". I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Tanya Dominguez, an inspector for the RSPCA in Australia. Where I ask, "How are you rescuing the animals at Australia"? Welcome to "Getting Curious". This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited to welcome this week's guests, Tanya Dominguez. You are a inspector for the RSPCA.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:00:30] Yes, I am.

JVN [00:00:31] OK. So we think we are very lucky to have a lot of Australian listeners. I think we're very lucky to have a lot of American listeners and people all over. But for those folks who don't know what the RSPCA is.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:00:43] Well, the RSPCA, it's, we're a charity. We're a non for profit charity in Australia. It stands for the "Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals". And in New South Wales, we have a number of shelters, a number of visionary clinics, and we have an inspectorate and I'm from that law enforcement division of the RSPCA.

JVN [00:01:06] Law enforcement division of the RSPCA. And then what was a piece of the sentence you said right before it. An "inspectorate"? Like, or what did you say?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:01:13] Oh.

JVN [00:01:14] I could have just been like an accent thing, I just I was like, what's that mean? I loved to ask-. Like the the RSPCA has like like because-.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:01:22] We have a law enforcement division.

JVN [00:01:23] Yes. But you're also an inspector.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:01:26] Yes, I am an RSPCA inspector.

JVN [00:01:28] Yes. And so because I think that's like a term that we don't really hear as much.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:01:32] Right.

JVN [00:01:33] And I guess we do like a detective or like an inspector, but I think it's a fierce title.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:01:37] Oh, absolutely. We have a fierce job sometimes.

JVN [00:01:40] So does your RSPCA here in Australia have a really-? Because we have like the ASPCA back in America and I think there like is, or do you have relation to the one in the United Kingdom?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:01:50] We we don't we're not related as such, but we do similar roles. So the SPCA in America, RSPCA, the Humane Society, we were very similar in many ways and some of the societies over in the states also have law enforcement divisions such as ours. Like animal cops, I guess.

JVN [00:02:07] Yes. Yes, yes.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:09] Yeah.

JVN [00:02:10] Got it. I'm very lucky that all my cats are from different-. They're all like rescue cats from like different-. My two youngest are from the Philadelphia like chapter of like the PSPA is what they call it. And all my other cats are rescues from different like little animal shelter. So I love an animal shelter. I love animals so much. So tell me about how you got involved in this line of work. Like you're minding your own business one day in, what part of Australia are you from?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:37] Well, I'm from New South Wales, as born and bred.

JVN [00:02:39] You are?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:40] Yes, I was born and bred. I'm a first generation Australian.

JVN [00:02:43] You are?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:44] Born and bred in Australia.

JVN [00:02:45] Where's your family from?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:47] I've got an Argentinian heritage.

JVN [00:02:48] Work.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:50] Yep.

JVN [00:02:50] I love that. Amazing.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:51] Yeah.

JVN [00:02:51] So and then you came to. We may need to edit this out, if I like a total idiot, but we're, we're in new New South Wales.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:02:59] Yes we are.

JVN [00:02:59] Yes, ok great.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:03:00] Yes, we are.

JVN [00:03:01] Perfect. And there's seven states in Aust-? For the Americans who don't know.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:03:08] We have, yes, states and territories. So yeah. There's quite a few.

JVN [00:03:09] Got it.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:03:10] Yeah. Not as many as America though.

JVN [00:03:12] Right.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:03:12] That's right.

JVN [00:03:13] So you are based here in New South Wales and so you're you're like area cover like Sydney and-?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:03:20] Yes. So I actually manage a number of inspectors. I'm the area manager for the northern part of Sydney. It's quite a large area and-.

JVN [00:03:28] I would imagine.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:03:29] Yeah. And we have six inspectors investigating cruelty complaints and and that sort of thing in the northern part in Sydney. Yeah.

JVN [00:03:39] And so how has I mean, obviously, you think, you know, it's it's hard for Americans or, you know, anyone. I think really to know what the experience of being involved in bushfire coordination is like or what animal cruelty work would look like or really how those two would come together in the last year that, you know, Australia has experienced in New South Wales. Right? Yes. Yes.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:04:02] Yes.

JVN [00:04:04] I don't have my notes in front of you on my phone. So like, oh, my God, I'm about to say it, I hope I don't say it wrong. But yeah. So New South Wales. So, I mean, what has it, what has this been like? I mean, I know that the fire season for this particular bushfire started like much before, like a typical bushfire season would start.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:04:20] It's unprecedented that it start so early. They, we really started seeing fire start in September up north. And they basically traveled down all the way down to the bottom of the state and then into other states. You know, the amount of bushland, homes that have been destroyed, it's it's phenomenal and it's been unprecedented. We've never seen anything quite like it before. And it's following a quite a long drought, quite a severe drought. And so it just makes things so much worse when everything's so dry and things burn very quickly. And there's from-, unfortunately for the animals and for people, they didn't really get much of notice to get out, and so we've we've had a lot of a lot of devastation, a lot of loss of life.

JVN [00:05:05] So it wasn't just that it was like, you know, because I do think I've never heard of numbers that came out of a of a fire like this fire in terms of loss of life for animals. I mean, I remember before I came to Australia for the tour, we were hearing numbers like half a million animals, which is just unfathomable, unfathomable amount of animals to think about.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:05:28] Yeah. So as RSPCA inspectors, we're not, we have concerns for all animals regardless of what kind they are. So both wildlife, stock animals, pet animals, all animals. Right? so there is a estimated guess and I guess it's going to take quite a long time as surveys to work out exactly how many animals are lost. But there is a very conservative guest, guess of one billion animals may have los-, may have lost their lives in this fire season, but the inspectors have also been involved in stock animals, cattle, sheep and those kind of animals, horses that have also been fire affected. And it's been quite devastating.

JVN [00:06:08] So if someone lives in the northern hemisphere, your summer usually starts, which I think, you know, California, our, our typical fire season is like more associated with like the spring and summer. Correct? and so I think typically just to give someone an idea that isn't familiar with fire season in Australia, your typical fire season would start in like what, like December?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:06:29] Yeah, that's right. When it starts getting really hot, when we start and get temperatures exceeding the 30s with hot westerly winds from the desert.

JVN [00:06:36] Yeah.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:06:36] 'Cause we know Australia's huge continent, but majority very arid. And we get those westly winds and they're very strong. That's when we get these sort of high fire danger days. And. And we have different scales of fire danger and extreme or catastrophic events. And we had a number of catastrophic events in New South Wales alone and that, you know, that created this fire season. But it did start very early. So normally we're looking at December, January, maybe February. But for it to start in September, that's it's yeah, it's been a hard road.

JVN [00:07:10] And the RSPCA is a nonprofit. So it's a charity that it's like not like it's like funded by the government or funded by like, you know, tax here is just funded by contributions of people.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:07:20] Absolutely. We get less than two per cent or about two per cent funding from the government and all the rest of our operations are due to our generous donors.

JVN [00:07:31] And so when a fire season is extended like that by multiple months, I would imagine that your resources are like more strained and it makes it more difficult to keep up with the amount of animals and need, people in need to help their animals when you're already stretched with like a longer fire season.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:07:48] Absolutely. We were already stretched in New South Wales due to the drought. Our regional offices have been really struggling with the amount of work due to the drought. Obviously, that affects stock animals. There's a lot of very thin looking animals out in the regions due to lack of food. And then there's a fire season that comes along and then there's the added pressure of having to then be concerned about wildlife and stock animals and people's houses burning and all the things that come with fires as it added extra.

JVN [00:08:23] So just rando other Q. How long have you been doing? How long have you been in this line of work?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:08:30] So I've worked for the RSPCA since some well 1998, so a long time. I've been an inspector for six years, but before that I worked in, as a veterinary nurse.

JVN [00:08:43] So you've been like, you've been speaking to these things and understanding the forces at play, especially for Australia specifically for a long time. And the reason that I say that is because it seems like the relationship between the environment and then really anything that we have, any sector of people that are in service have to, the, how they have to approach their job is becoming more severe due to the environment in so many ways that it seems like when I talk to people, they wouldn't have necessarily thought of. Like in 1998, I'm wondering if like you if you would have known to say, like, oh, we're seeing a lot of like thinner animals around because it's like there's a drought. It's like it just seems like things are getting worse and there's like effects that people are seeing that like. So instead of me answering a question, I'll ask you one. Are you thinking are things affecting you and affecting your job now more and an environmental or climate change sort of way that you maybe weren't aware of when you first got into this industry? First got into this job?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:09:44] Oh! Sure. Absolutely. I mean, we, Australians used to having fires and we're used to having droughts. That is a thing for Australia. But this is a very long drought. It's prolonged. New South Wales has had quite a lot of water in the last couple of weeks. But it's only been on the coastline. It's not really reached, you know, the areas of Australia where they're most drought affected, there's been very little rainfall there. So it's the drought hasn't broken. And, you know, whether it's climate change or whether it's Australia's weather pattern, it's doesn't really change the fact that we are really struggling with what's going on with the weather at the moment.

JVN [00:10:24] One hundred percent. So basically the drought thing going on for years leading up to September. And when you're dealing with something like a drought and you're an inspector for the RSPCA. Like what? I mean, I guess even before the drought, like what are the aspects that, cause I got to see your amazing video about kind of like what makes your job a good day and what makes your job a difficult day.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:10:48] Yeah.

JVN [00:10:48] And just for anyone who hasn't gotten to see that. Like what? It's a very multi-faceted thing that your day could be. It's a million different things.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:10:55] It absolutely. And it's one of the reasons why I love my job. It's sometimes a bit strange to say that because we are investigating animal cruelty complaints and that comes with with with problems. We were faced with aggressive animals. We're faced with sometimes unhappy or aggressive people. It can be dangerous. It can be stressful, but every day is different. Every day brings a new set of challenges. And it just you know, and it is very rewarding job as well.

JVN [00:11:27] So prior-, so you coordinate like all like North Sydney. And then due to the bushfires, did you end up having to be involved in something like more rural, whereas you would be maybe a little bit more urban typically?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:11:39] Yeah. So I was actually sent down. So if I'm not sure if you know, but on New Year's Eve, we had some really catastrophic fire events down in the south of New South Wales. And there was huge fires that came through very, very quickly. And there was very little notice given or ability for people to escape. So I was sent down on very short notice. I spent a

week down the south coast, about 11 different town centers that I went to. And there was a combination of doing animal welfare checks to ensure that, say, stock animals that may have been a, fire affected were okay, checking in on farmers, checking in on people in the towns to see if they needed any help from the RSPCA and then also checking on wildlife and doing some wildlife jobs and, you know, trying to rescue burnt animals and getting them to veterinary treatment. And so, you know, I did come across quite a lot of devastation. It's really hard to explain what it's like driving for like three hours in the bush. And it's just burnt. And it's not normal like normal bushfire burnt, which is what we commonly seen in Australia, where there's still some sort of leaves on the trees and that sort of thing. We're talking about acres and acres and acres of black toothpicks. It looked like I was in another, like on another planet. That's all I can explain, especially when I got down to Pericos, a very small town down the south coast that had just been obliterated. And the fires actually burnt there twice. And I understand that. I don't think a single house survived in that town.

JVN [00:13:27] And so how do you, when you approaches such a scene like that, do, does everyone just get out of their cars and search for animals? Is it about delivering food?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:13:40] It was about everything, really. We were sort of. We were. It was a combined effort, but we were out there with food for dogs, food for cats, horses and also wildlife. So we were leaving food drops. So we're working with local wildlife carers and loading them up with food for the animals that did survive the fire. The problem with these fires that was so fast moving that the majority of Australian wildlife aren't very fast moving animals. So if you think about lizards and our snakes and our tree dwelling animals, like our koalas, and our possums, they didn't really have much of a chance to get out. The animals that could get out were our macropods. Wallabies, our kangaroos, those sort of animals. Unfortunately, if they did survive the initial fire, that would then go back to their habitats that was still smoldering because their fires can then burn for two weeks underground so they could fall into a fire pit, so to speak, and burn themselves again. And if they survive that, then they found themselves with nothing to eat or drink. So it's actually it is it is such a domino effect with these fires and and the weather pattern that we're having.

JVN [00:14:58] So when you get there is there are different people within your team that deal with like domestic animals versus like wildlife or like like or like poisonous snakes or like lizards like, or is it kind of whoever finds whatever deals with what they find as they find it?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:15:15] Oh, we had, we've had lots of teams go out. So we've we've visited 80 townships so far and delivering goods and supplies. Veterinarians, nurses, animal handlers have been attending those townships as far as wildlife, it's mostly veterinarians and RSPCA inspectors that are going out because it is a little bit more difficult. Catching snakes, or catching kangaroos or wombats like I've done that have been fire affected. Say, yeah.

JVN [00:15:47] You're having to catch wombats?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:15:49] I did. I did catch a wombat.

JVN [00:15:51] Aren't they really? I think I held like one and a half year old wombat at this place. But like they were saying, how, like, you know, you really can only handle them for my 0-2 because like once they go through puberty, like they're mad as hell.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:16:04] Yeah. Well.

JVN [00:16:06] Basically.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:16:06] It was it was caught with a dart. So as an inspector I have the ability to dart animals.

JVN [00:16:13] But a wombats like a big ass aggressive guinea pig with some teeth that'll like take your wrist off.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:16:19] Yes.

JVN [00:16:19] Like it could like bite your hand off couldn't it?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:16:21] Well, they have very small mouths, but I agree, they're aggressive and they're very big.

JVN [00:16:25] But it could really just like bite the shit out of you. So you've got a dart that little baby thing.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:16:29] Yeah, absolutely. And it's less stressful for them as well.

JVN [00:16:32] Okay. We're getting a really quick break. We'll be right back with more "Getting Curious" and Tanya right after this. Welcome back to "Getting Curious". This is Jonathan Van Ness. So you're doing your day to day coordination in December. It's New Year's. This fire happens and you go down. And that's kind of what starts off this tour of townships. And you said that you visited 80.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:16:54] Oh, RSPCA New South Wales has visited 80.

JVN [00:16:58] Oh, yeah, yes.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:16:58] I visited 11 in just one week.

JVN [00:17:02] Right. So I've my brain's just been thinking this several times and I don't-. Did they ever. Was it just fires from other places? Was it like a fireworks thing because it was New Year's Eve? Did, is anyone even like asking how the fire started right now or is that like just-. Did you ever wonder that, like, how did this start?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:17:19] There was, you know, there's always the concerns that there are people lighting fires on purpose or accidental fires with people perhaps throwing a lit cigarette out the window because it's so dry. And because it hadn't rained for so long, it doesn't take much. But we can get spontaneous fires. In Australian bushland is in some ways designed to have fires to regenerate. But these aren't the kind of fires that it needs. These are the kind of fires that obliterate trees and animals and and don't leave anything behind. So, yeah, it's difficult to say how they start. I think the one near my house, I was living in a bushfire zone for months. That was started by a lightning strike.

JVN [00:18:09] So your family has been affected by this set of bushfires?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:18:13] Yes. Well, we lived on the edge of the fire and I spent months watching the fire from my back window, coming home to complete darkness at three o'clock in the afternoon, my kid calling me on the phone, saying, "Mommy, it's raining ash at home. When are you going to get home"? So it's it has been a very stressful time. Yeah.

JVN [00:18:34] So as someone who's living with that reality in their backyard, how did your family prepare-, like, did you have like bags ready to go if you needed to for those months?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:18:43] Yes, we were packed a number of times. We sent our children to the grandparents. My husband's with the Rural Fire Service as well. So sometimes he was out with the fires and I was sitting at home watching through the window, you know. So, yeah, it was intense, a few months, I, I actually spent a number of weeks where we didn't see the sun. All we could see it was this weird orange circle in the sky because it was so-.

JVN [00:19:09] And that was for weeks.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:19:10] Yeah.

JVN [00:19:11] I mean in America, the way the coverage was, you would have thought that it was like a couple days.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:19:17] Oh no.

JVN [00:19:17] And then those pictures were so impactful of like, you know, like families like going into the ocean and like like when the fire was approaching like those coastlines, but it it does seem like the coverage got to, you know, a certain point. And then it like you just don't hear those personal stories of like how really the scope of what that experience was.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:19:36] It's incredible this there's been so many stories. I, you know, I came across so many people that they just want to tell you their stories when you go and visit these townships. One of, one of the places I went to was close to a very small township on the south coast called Mogo. It was a township just slightly outside of Mogo and we got a call about a house that had burned to the ground and the animals were in need of help. So we rushed out there and we met with the family and they were decided to so they wouldn't have to leave their animals behind. They had four horses and a huge number of dogs that were all their pets or rescue dogs. And they were living out of tents because the house had burnt to the ground and they were living at a tent. They didn't have toilets. They didn't have running water. They didn't have electricity. You know, it was really devastating. And they were staying with their animals. Their only water source was their-. They had a, they had a water source, but it was full of ash, that was another major problem for these towns that, you know. The ash then affected the very little water that's left. And then they were having to take their horses to drink that water, knowing that it wasn't good, but they had no other option in that short term. And then the stories about how they got out and got all their dogs out. You know, their 17-year-old daughter was at home on their own when the fire came through and she jumped on her horse and rode her horse out.

JVN [00:21:09] So what are the states of these towns now like? I mean, are the I mean, the fires are. I mean, how are we healing? How are the how are these people coming back now?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:21:19] Yeah, it's it's a really long process, which is sometimes hard to grasp. You know, we've lost about 5.3 million hectares of bushland just in New South Wales. So, you know, there's just been so much loss. There's three thousand homes that have been lost.

JVN [00:21:40] In New South Wales alone? Or all of Australia?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:21:43] Across Australia.

JVN [00:21:44] That's I mean, either way, it's a credible amount of loss of-. I mean, I. I lost my beautiful little baby cat unexpectedly last year and. I mean, losing my stuff. I feel like is. I mean, it would be dev- because I like my stuff, but nothing was worse, is worse than like losing an animal. Like eve-, whether they're 14 and like it's like my first cat, like, had cancer and like, you know, it's a natural cause of the second time was like a freak accident, like the most devastating thing ever. But going through a natural disaster like that and then losing your pet or, you know, like you getting out and not having your pet get out is I can't think of a worse thing.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:22:32] Yeah, we we we came across a lady who the fires came through. She couldn't get out quick enough. So she got in her damn with her dog and put her fire blanket over her head and sat in that dam for hours waiting for the fire to go over. When she came out, all of the horses had perished in the fires. I can imagine how devastating that would be. Horses are just like big dogs. They, you know, people's pets. But there's been such loss of life. But in in saying that, there's been some amazing, miraculous stories of survival. One of our inspectors was winched in by helicopter to go and assist some animals that had been fire affected. They had survived the fire, but the owner couldn't get back to the house that, you know, they got separated by the fire and we got winched in to be able to give those animals-.

JVN [00:23:21] What's does "winched in" mean?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:23:22] Oh, so with the helicopter got dropped down onto the property with a helicopter to then feed them water. His dogs because he couldn't get back because he'd been separated by fire. So while there's been so much devastation, there's been some amazing stories of survival.

JVN [00:23:36] How did they get back together?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:23:37] Oh, eventually the roads were cleared and he could get through. But when there's huge fires, the trees burn for days and they can actually fall on people. And people are killed after the fact because the trees would literally just fall or cars or fall on people.

JVN [00:23:53] What if someone lost their house and the pets survived? But part of the house was destroyed. And so like, was there any things were like, you know, like a like a black adler or like some like big ass scary animal survived and it was like trying like chase the dog or something. Like, I worry about my cats getting like chased or like if I was in Australia, like, what happened if your cat couldn't hide from a fucking from a snake? We can cuss on here. I remember. So it's fine, but yeah.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:24:17] That's right. Look, we do have quite large snakes. I've not heard any stories about snakes attacking cats. But-

JVN [00:24:25] After the fire, my biggest fear is-

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:24:27] After the fires. No, but we did have something that that sometimes we forget is that when these fires go through these properties, they lose their fence lines. So they have, they've not only lost their house and they may have lost their pets, but they've actually lost the ability to keep their pets safe after the fact.

JVN [00:24:43] Right. So, you know, we've been helping with, with that, with that aspect. We have been setting up temporary pens for people so that they can keep their dogs, for example, safe. You know, people that are living out of their tents and that sort of thing, providing shelter for the animals, for their dogs. So they're not in the baking sun.

JVN [00:25:06] Is that stuff still going on like or how are people, or at this point, are people reunited with their animals and at least like in their temporary housing while their homes are being rebuilt, like insurance is dealing with all of that? Or are people still living out in their tents like are we still helping animals there?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:25:22] We, the RSPCA certainly is. We are out all week, every week and have been for four months now. This weekend alone we'll be at two different places. But we're always out trying to help people as far as whether people have been able to go into their temporary accommodation while their houses are being rebuilt. Not everybody. You know, we are talking about a huge amount of houses that have been burnt. And I believe that there are still people and also wanting to stay on their property with their animals. And so they are living in a caravan, perhaps on their property.

JVN [00:26:00] I think that, we've got to interview an incredible firefighter who has been working on bushfire coordination responses and in small communities and-, or rural communities, not small communities. But I just, I think that your your experience of this fire and your vantage point on it gives you such a unique insight into the way that this natural disaster would impact all these various ways in your life that you wouldn't think about whether it's being separated from your animals or separated from medication, having your houses burned down. Like what? Like what did people do like in terms of like planning that you noticed that worked?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:26:42] Having in Australia, one of the most important things is having a good evacuation plan. You need to know exactly what you're going to do depending on how much time you have. If you're in the middle of a bushfire season and you are close to bushfires, you need to have things prepared. Things that are really important to you. You know, your passport, your driver's license, your birth certificate, things that are hard to replace. And have those packed away and its, well, making sure that you have provisions for your animals. You know, if you have eight dogs and you've only got one car, you need to start having a think about how you're going to move those animals to safety.

JVN [00:27:20] Like have a van?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:27:20] On short notice. That's right. You might need to, you know, maybe call friends, see what plans you can put in place in order to, in order to get out in time and safely.

JVN [00:27:33] I think about because I mean, also bushfires aren't I mean, there's also just like house fires. Likes just getting out of like your house with your animals. So like, is it like about having like a bag that you can throw your cat in. To just run like hell?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:27:49] Yeah. Well, I mean a cat bag perhaps made for cats. Or like a cat basket.

JVN [00:27:52] Yeah, that's what I mean.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:27:53] Yeah. So having those things in place, knowing what you're going to do, where you're going to go, how you can execute the plan depending on where you live.

JVN [00:28:01] Oh ok, thank you. Ok, we're going to take a really quick break. We'll be right back with more Tanya after the break. So at this point in the recovery we have, there are still people that are like, there still a lot of recovery happening, still a lot of people, animals in need and that are going through this recovery process.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:28:18] Absolutely.

JVN [00:28:19] So. So I guess, you know, including the bushfires. But, you know, more prior to that and just the general work of what RSPCA does. And animal welfare, as you know, a service and is like a career path. What, what do those, what do those days entail?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:28:40] Well, it could be anything like I said before. It's one of those, as an RSPCA inspector, it's one of those things that you just never know what the day is going to bring. We have a very busy job. There's not many of us. So the state of New South Wales is quite big. We have a lot of people that live in this state, but we we have about 37 inspectors in the state. So it is a tough job. We investigate and we've received 16,000 cruelty complaints in the last 12 months. So that's a lot of, a lot of-

JVN [00:29:15] That's a lot a day.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:29:17] So, yeah, absolutely. So in and out of that, there's prosecutions. There's court time. And it can get really busy. So that's what a day mostly is. But you could be, you know, have a handful of jobs knowing that you're going to go here, here and here and it's all these things you going to do. And then all the sudden you get a call about some horrendous accident that, you know, that's happened or an animal stuck that needs to to be rescued. And that will take the rest of your day. And that's the beauty about our jobs. You just never know what's going to happen.

JVN [00:29:53] So when it comes to criminality and like a complaint about animal cruelty, like if you guys have it, like, do you have to? How do you work with the police to like-? Like do you arrest their ass or like what? How did, how does that work?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:30:06] So as RSPCA inspectors in New South Wales, we are officers under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and police officers also officers under the same act. But we have the power to enter land. We have the power to seize an animal, to take that animal into our care. And we also have the power of arrest. So while we do engage with the police often with perhaps persons of interest that might be aggressive or known to be aggressive or situations that might be dangerous, we also have quite strong powers in New South Wales as inspectors.

JVN [00:30:41] So really, we don't even need them, honey, 'cause like we're, like you're getting it together like with your, like with the team. That's amazing.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:30:47] Yeah. So, I mean, again, there is very little government funding and we do rely on charity, charitable donations to keep us doing what we do. But we do have we have been given that that power that is so important to us to be able to enter someone's land, to have a look at their animal and assess whether that animal needs extra care or not.

JVN [00:31:11] So what do you, what will people kind of call in for? Like I think so many of us are on our phones, we're listening to music like we're just not really being vigilant to, you know, things that we're seeing and, you know, we're not really paying attention. And so I think, you know, we often we'll hear those stories about like how someone's they've been abducted and they like leave like that note to like someone at the bank or like the McDonald's. They'll be like, help me, like call 9-1-1 or whatever. But I think there's, I would assume that it's similar stories like that to people seeing something or observing something that doesn't feel right. And that's how, is that true?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:31:45] Yes. So people can call or email cruelty reports and then inspectors will follow up with their report and basically investigate the allegation that's been put to us. So the reports can be anything from a dog being locked in a hot car to an emaciated horse. Or it could be an animal that's been left without food and water for a long period of time. There's a menagerie of things that are reported to us and we investigate every single cruelty complaint that comes to us and then follow through with it to see whether then offenses occurred or not.

JVN [00:32:27] Is there ever I mean, really, I would imagine is usually a pretty high rate of, there was something wrong. Right?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:32:35] Well, yes and no. We do have busy seasons. Summer is a busy season in animal welfare. Because of the heat. More people are out. More people are doing things. So they're seeing the dog in the park. That's done, that looks unwell, they're driving-

JVN [00:32:53] Oh and maybe the dog has like cancer or something. Like it wasn't emaciated, just like "My dog's got cancer. It's sick, like leave me alone". Or whatever.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:33:00] That's right. So they're out and they're seeing things. We have fireworks. We have thunderstorms that all causes some animals to freak out and run on the roads and get hit by cars and that sort of thing. But what we find is that people have different perceptions of what is okay. With animals. People's perceptions change depending on where they live. So some people think that animals should be allowed inside all the time. And then other people prefer their dogs outside. And it's it gets a little bit difficult when there's people's perception of what is ok and isn't ok.

JVN [00:33:35] Yeah.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:33:36] So that's where we get a little bit of gray area. And sometimes-.

JVN [00:33:38] How does that fall?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:33:39] Well, sometimes we get reports that, you know, that aren't offenses. That to one person. It's a terrible thing that, you know, that that dog's never allowed inside the house.

JVN [00:33:49] Like is someone left their cat out, I probably go, like, steal the cat and be like, you aren't being a very responsible cat parent cause you let your cat outside and like a wolf's gonna get it. And so I stole it. And they'd be like, you stole my cat and I'd be like your fucking cat was going to die. You were letting outside. So I stole it. Yes, you're right.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:34:02] Yeah. Well, perhaps not stealing it.

JVN [00:34:03] I have very strong feelings about like cats going outside. Do you know? I read this article. Maybe it's false but I'm pretty sure it's correct that like outside cats have an average life expectancy of only four years because they get like run over by cars, like eaten by animals, like other animals. I'm like obsessed with my cats. I really need them all to be good, like 20. That's my goal. I want like four twenty year old cats.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:34:23] Well, in Australia, cats, unfortunately do compete with our native animals. So we do have a lot of small ground winning animals like lizards and that sort of thing, or even tree dwelling animals like possums that unfortunately do get attacked by cats.

JVN [00:34:43] Oh, they do, they can't help, but they're just playing.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:34:46] Yes, I guess you could see it that way.

JVN [00:34:49] Oh my god, do you loath the cat, because they get introduced-.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:34:51] Oh no.

JVN [00:34:51] But did they get introduced to Australia? So they're like fucking up the animals sort of a thing.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:34:55] We do have cats competing with native animals. And that that is that is a concern for for the general population.

JVN [00:35:04] So wouldn't the RSPCA like love cat parents like me who like don't let their cats outside?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:35:09] Keeping a cat indoors, especially at night, is incredibly important. It's for their safety and it's also for the safety of native animals. Right.

JVN [00:35:17] Whereas I'm obviously way more concerned about the cats safety because like lizards really scare me. So do snakes. I'm like such a sucker for cats. I just love them so much.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:35:26] They're great animals.

JVN [00:35:27] They're so cute. Do you have pets?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:35:29] Yes, I do.

JVN [00:35:30] You do? What do you have?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:35:31] Well, I can't have cats because one of my children severely allergic.

JVN [00:35:34] Oh, no.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:35:34] Found that out the hard way. I brought some foster kittens home and he was really allergic.

JVN [00:35:39] Oh, no.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:35:40] But I have two dogs.

JVN [00:35:41] Oh cute. And I'm so glad everyone got through the fire season. And did the fires go away from your house now?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:35:48] Yes. So that fire has as has been put out and the majority of the fires in New South Wales now under control, which is really good to see.

JVN [00:35:59] But under control doesn't mean out.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:36:02] No, it doesn't. No, not at all. We did have quite heavy rain recently and we did have flooding in Sydney, quite heavy flooding in some areas. And that assisted in putting some of the fires out in the Sydney area. But yes, not all the fires are out.

JVN [00:36:20] But not like more inland.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:36:23] Yes.

JVN [00:36:24] Right. So, yes. Oh. So then I guess my next que-, or so for people that like, obviously you see a lot of like very upsetting things that I think a normal, you know, average person would be like very much like "ahhhh". But I guess my question is, like, what would you say to encourage people to get into this line of work? Because, you know, you said there's like not that many of you in New South Wales, and I would imagine that most, you know, animal welfare organizations could always use more people. But as far as like more than being a volunteer, like for someone who makes it their life's work, what has been like the most fulfilling and most fulfilling and best aspect of it and like what you think would make more people want to get into the fold?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:37:11] I, it's having that compassion for animals and really wanting, especially in animal welfare, is giving animals a second chance at life, second chance of having a home. Really for me, it was, you know, as an inspector anyways, removing an animal from a terrible situation and then following that animal through. And then getting a-. They go to a new home, they're in a loving home. You know, they're being fed properly. They're being looked after. When they need veterinary treatment, they're getting it. And it's that that is what keeps me going as an inspector and makes my job so rewarding. And I think for a lot of people that work in animal welfare, it really, at the end of the day, is changing the life of an animal.

JVN [00:37:55] Oh, my god, that brought-. Yes. And then do you ever get things where it's like, you go to someone's house and you're like, you're not supposed to be raising like a dingo? Or like you're not so suppose to have kangaroos in here. Is it? Do you ever get those things like where people are like raging like an exotic animal or thing like they shouldn't have in their house or it's like too big for their house or something?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:38:13] I've never come across an exotic animal that they shouldn't have. That's never happened to me as an inspector. But certainly we do come across people that may be overwhelmed, that may have one too many animals. You know, those things, those things can be problematic, you know, getting a border collie or, you know, a cattle dog and then, you know, going into a one bedroom unit in the city, that can be an issue for that animal and the people. So we do come across those sort of things. Yes.

JVN [00:38:45] Have you ever like, do you ever, did you guys have the show "Hoarders" in Australia?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:38:51] We did. I do believe that we've had a number of of shows about hoarding.

JVN [00:38:56] There was one in America called "Hoarders", and there was this one season finale where this man was-. His wife died and they were obsessed with like their pet rat. And then he like, honey, like the loss of his wife just like put, propelled him into this, like, rat hoarding obsession. And he literally had like thousands and thousands of rats. Have you ever run into, like, an animal hoarding situation?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:39:19] All of the time.

JVN [00:39:20] So that, is that the biggest thing that happens?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:39:22] That is one of our major problems. Yes.

JVN [00:39:25] So what happens when that happens?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:39:28] Well, it's tricky because-.

JVN [00:39:30] Not so much the gory details because like I'll literally have a nervous breakdown.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:39:32] Oh no.

JVN [00:39:32] But does like the person just need you, like do you refer the person to like a policeman and a therapist? Like what's going on with them?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:39:41] Well, obviously, they they've got a mental health situation going on. So, you know, we do try to engage with mental health teams in the area. But also then we need to look at what's going on for the animals, because quite often in these hoarding situations, the person isn't capable of providing adequate care to so many animals. It's expensive. It's difficult. You know, if you've got a house with, you know, 60 cats.

JVN [00:40:09] Fuck. Is that how many there are?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:40:12] It's happened. Yes, absolutely. So, you know, it it's almost impossible to know which one's sick. You know, you see-.

JVN [00:40:19] How do you measure your nervous system when you go into a situation like that? Like, aren't you like, don't you get pissed?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:40:28] I personally operate in a way that I see the problem and I'm there to resolve the issue in whatever means necessary. And I'm very methodical about that. So I'm not getting involved in the emotional side of it. I'm like, I have a job to do. I'm here to do something. I'm going to remove these cats or whatever it might be that I'm doing.

JVN [00:40:49] What if the person is going berserk as you're coming into the situation?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:40:54] That's usually when we would engage the police. And certainly we would have intel about this person beforehand so we wouldn't go in there usually blind. I mean, it has happened that we've just gone to knock on a door about a sick animal and then you realize that they don't just have one, that they've got many. That does happen to us. But generally speaking, we have intelligence about a person that has way too many animals. Whatever those animals might be.

JVN [00:41:29] Wow. So and then at that point, once you're in. I was interrupting you so much because I just couldn't handle it. But so you get in the methodical situation, does that have to do with getting the animals to vets?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:41:41] Yeah, absolutely. Most the time when we're going to these large hoarding situations, we do take veterinarians with us. So they can assess the environment and every every animal if possible. And we're very methodical so that we are cataloging, cataloging every animal that come, that there is going to come into our care that we're removing. We're photographing every animal. We're recording every animal. They go into a cage. They go into an ambulance. And then you proceed to the next one. And that's and everybody has a task. And there's usually a number of inspectors involved in those kind of operations.

JVN [00:42:16] And then like when you get all the animals out, is it like then if the owner got like, you know, had charges as a result of it or like that-? I mean, I feel like the horses are probably like uninhabitable or like all messed up, aren't they?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:42:28] They can be. We've had to call hazmat to a number of inspections that we've had. And they will measure the ammonia in the air and ensure that it's actually safe for us to work in. Because if you can imagine some of these houses, there are piles and piles of animal feces all over the kitchen benches and that sort of thing. And that can create a lot of ammonia if there's no windows open, which quite often in hoarding situations, everything's closed up.

JVN [00:42:59] So we don't have super much time left. But I want to go back to the bushfire, bushfires for for a moment.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:43:07] Sure.

JVN [00:43:07] So I've also noticed as far as myself as an interviewer, when I get uncomfortable, I really steer the bus away and I get really nervous about talking about things like, oh, my God, it's so sad. So I have a lot of work to do as an interviewer, just noticing that about myself after these 40 minutes. But so when you were talking about like, you know, the snakes, lizards, koalas, like the animals that couldn't get out as quickly, but then other animals that could. I would imagine, though, that when you're going through the cities and the recovery efforts are happening, that you would come across all sorts of different animals, like in general, like some of the ones that were slower movers probably still survived sometimes, right?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:43:46] Yes, I don't-. It depends. And fires can be so strange and they can really just pick certain areas and not pick others. And you'll be driving through and it'd be burnt and you're driving through hours of burnt bush and then all of a sudden there's just like this little green patch that hasn't been burnt. And you're like, why didn't that get burnt? So, anyway, it's it's hard to predict fire movement and so, yes, some animals have been able to escape or have survived, the fires gone around them. But then there's so much habitat loss. So the food is gone. The houses are gone if they live in trees. And so it's been yeah, it's been really rough for Australian wildlife this season.

JVN [00:44:26] So where do you like the zoologists and like environmentalists and like is it, is-. I mean, are we even talking about that yet? Like like have there been species lost? Have there been species really greatly affected? Are those bigger surface level conversations even happening yet or is it still about like helping the people and like-. Yeah.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:44:51] Yeah. So my understanding is in New South Wales, we have about a thousand endangered species of animals and plants. That was before the fires. We really not sure yet. And it's going to take a long time of surveys to be able to work out whether those endangered animals have now become critically endangered or they're extinct and whether some of the more common animals that we see have maybe, maybe reduced in populations in some areas where they are have becoming possibly endangered. That's going to take awhile to work out. You know, we're talking about areas that are still smoldering. You can't enter. You can't drive through. You can't walk through it because it's dangerous.

JVN [00:45:34] Are you seeing any reports of like animals or they haven't been before? Or like like whether it's kangaroos, snake, just, people finding animals or they haven't found them before?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:45:44] Absolutely.

JVN [00:45:45] I was actually on holidays at a caravan park and there was a snake right in the middle like a quite large python just slithering in the middle of the crowd, like looking for some way to escape. And that, you know, and this was, you know, in a fire area. So the place had burnt around months before. And now the caravan park had reopened, and they survived the fire. And this snake is clearly outside of its area because everything around it's been burnt. So all the food that it would normally be eating is now gone. It's not having to, it's pushing, it's getting pushed into areas where it normally wouldn't be, so there's this snake and slithering around and it's trying to get away from people. And all the kids are obviously inquisitive, like "Mom, there's a snake". So I went out to my truck. Even though I was on holidays. And I grabbed my snake bag and I put it in my snake bag and I took it out to safety. But-

JVN [00:46:36] So you know how to do that?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:46:38] Yeah.

JVN [00:46:39] So what? So what, what happen? So you so you go to the car, you get the snake back. It's got like a hook in it.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:46:45] So I have a snake bag and a jigga. So the jigga is like it's long stick with a crooked end. And that sort of picks up the snake. And then I have a bag with a sort of it's got a an opening at the end and I sort of guided the snake into the bag.

JVN [00:47:01] Did you pick it up by the back of the head after you got the jiggle on it or whatever?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:47:05] No. I saw I use the jigga sort of a third of the way up its body to sort of just guide it into the bag. And it sort of just, they just fell into the bag.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:47:13] Was it kind of tired from just like all the people and being-.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:47:16] Probably, you know, it wasn't moving very fast. And. Yeah. Got it. It was. Yeah.

JVN [00:47:22] And then where did you take him to?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:47:23] So I just went. Very likely. It's important to ensure that you try to release animals as close as you can to where they were found. Is that-.

JVN [00:47:31] Just so that it's like orientated?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:47:32] Yeah. And it's their territory and food sources and all that sort of thing. That's no point in getting that snake that's used living by a river, taking it 20 kilometers inland.

JVN [00:47:40] Right.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:47:41] So I then found a safe place that was still green, there still would be food and released it to safety.

JVN [00:47:47] Oh, yay. What, and then-? So I guess I had thought originally that you would need like what if it was like a black adler, something really poisonous ass one.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:47:56] Yeah. Not sure if I would have been as comfortable with a poisonous snake. I have to say. We do have a number of poisonous snakes in Australia. So yes, that would probably-.

JVN [00:48:06] If there was that would you would just like is there someone who is else at the RSPCA who is like a venomous snake expert or something?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:48:12] We don't, we don't have anyone that I know of at the RSPCA in Sydney that's a venomous snake expert. But there are people that you can call certainly most of the fire brigades will deal with snake catching as well. I have, I have also removed a snake out of my swimming pool. So snakes are not an uncommon thing in Australia.

JVN [00:48:34] Not loving that. So. Wow. So how can people get involved that are listening, not in Australia? That would love to help and be able to-. I read this article that was like, stop sending the koalas fuckin mittens. Like they don't need the mittens like, give us your cold, hard cash. Like what? How can people help?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:48:55] Absolutely. Donations, certainly for people that aren't living in Australia or New South Wales are the easiest way to to help us, to do the work that we do. Yeah. So just getting online for people overseas. If people living in Australia, they can do it online or they can call us as well, but online is certainly an easy option.

JVN [00:49:18] And, but people are like needing donations right now. So donate to the RSPCA is the point.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:49:22] Absolutely. Yeah.

JVN [00:49:24] Yeah. Well, Tanya, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. Is there anything that you want people to know that we didn't touch on that like we needed to before we get going and let people go on with their work days or whatever? It doesn't have to be anything you have to look up. Just anything that strikes out at your soul that we like, that you maybe wanted to mention that we didn't get around to.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:49:42] I guess the message, you know, for the average pet owners, you know, look after your pets if you can. De-sex your pets if they, you know, stops the breeding cycle as we know. I'm sure in the states as well, there is an overabundance of animals. There are shelters full of animals waiting for homes. We don't need to be actively breeding animals for people. There's so many animals waiting. If you're looking for an animal, please don't shop. Please adopt. Go to your local shelter. Go to your pound and give an animal a second chance of life.

JVN [00:50:17] I could not agree more. Last thing I know, they said that that was last question. And this is also like really non-sequitur. But I just have to ask. I would be remiss if I didn't. What's it like growing up in a country where it's summer during Christmas? You know, because for us, it's like, it snows during Christmas. And you just you think about white Christmas, honey. You think about like

it's you know, you bundle up and stuff like, well, and like New Year's, it's cold as shit. It's, it's winter in America. Ok so, you're from Australia. What was it like?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:50:52] It's amazing. It's our favorite time of the year for Australians. I, I can't imagine having New Year's or Christmas and not be going to the beach or jumping in my pool or, you know, being outdoors. It's, it's an Australian thing. We wouldn't know any other way.

JVN [00:51:09] So I didn't mean to assume that you-. So family to celebrate Christmas, though?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:51:12] Of course. Yeah.

JVN [00:51:13] OK, so. OK, so just talk about this is a little bit more before we leave. This is obviously it's about animals and animal welfare and stuff. But you grew up in a country where it was pool time in the summer?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:51:23] Absolutely.

JVN [00:51:24] So what do you guys have for Christmas dinner?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:51:26] Oh, well, barbecues normally. Yeah. I mean, yes. There's some families who do Christmas turkey.

JVN [00:51:31] Is it like stuffing? Is it.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:51:33] There are some families.

JVN [00:51:35] But it's more of like barbecuing food? Like the corn on the cob situation.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:51:38] Yeah. Or prawns on the barbecue and-.

JVN [00:51:41] Shrimp on the barbie?

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:51:42] That's it.

JVN [00:51:44] Oh my God. So you just, when you think Christmas you just so think summer.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:51:49] Absolutely. Salads and cocktails and yeah, all that sort of fun stuff, you know, cold beers and you know, it's just all about summer and all about being outdoors and yeah.

JVN [00:52:02] Love Australia. Thank you so much for your time. You're amazing. Everyone donates to, donate to RSPCA. Tanya, thank you so much for your time and for all of your incredible work. I look up to you so much and I hope that you inspired in this episode other people to get into this line of work. I just think it's incredible.

TANYA DOMINGUEZ [00:52:16] Thank you.

JVN [00:52:20] You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Tanya Dominguez. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of wherever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe, honey. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter at CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. "Getting Curious" is produced by me, Julie Carrillo, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson and Colin Anderson.