

Hurricane Irma Effects on Babcock Ranch & Eco Tours

Jessica Shanks, Extension Specialist
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Suggested Citation

Shanks, J. (2022). *Hurricane Irma effects on Babcock Ranch & Eco Tours*. Global Education Lab.
<https://www.globaleducationlab.org/portfolio/shanks>

This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award number 2019-70003-29092. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Background & Educational Story

Babcock Ranch is a sprawling, majestic property located northeast of Fort Myers, Florida. The ranch is not to be confused with the Babcock Ranch development that is adjacent to the property, but sets its own footprint right in the middle of Florida's unique landscape of cypress trees, swamps, grasslands, and beautiful farm land. The ranch is brewed in history that dates back to the late 1800's when the property was originally purchased by the McAdow family and has since changed hands multiple times. Tarpon Blue Land and Resource Management is now the contract holder for the property and manages it according to guidelines set forth by Lee County and the State of Florida. Ken Smith, CEO of Tarpon Blue Land and Resource Management, actively manages the property with other partners and staff. The ranch is visited by thousands of tourists each year looking for an escape from the many beaches that are well within driving distance. Visitors can take a ride through the swamp in "swamp buggies" and see numerous species of wildlife, cattle, and the sprawling pastures that surround the cypress groves. There is also a restaurant on site, a gift shop, and walking trails for guests to enjoy. Photographers and farmers also utilize parts of the ranch for their work and cultivating crops like watermelons. Tarpon Blue received the contract in 2015 to manage Babcock Ranch Eco Tours, and Hurricane Irma struck just two years later.

Hurricanes are part of life in Florida and the season runs from June through November. Hurricane Irma was a category 5 hurricane that initially was not tracking to hit Babcock Ranch. Ken Smith is not a native of Florida but knew that preparations needed to be made to secure the ranch and the multiple staff members. Hurricane Irma was recognized by the National Hurricane Center as a major hurricane on August 31st (NWS) as a category 3. Irma progressed to a category 5 hurricane as it moved through the Atlantic and made landfall as a category 4 at Cudjoe Key on the morning of September 10, 2017. It continued its devastating path but fortunately weakened (NWS summary). Babcock Ranch was definitely more fortunate than their neighbors to the east but still sustained significant damage.

Damage to Babcock Ranch

The ranch sustained significant damage in the wake of Hurricane Irma. Electricity was lost prior to the storm and the ranch would not get power back until 8 weeks later. Ken Smith had prepared the staff for such an occurrence by procuring generators and other supplies such as stockpiled fuel for their vehicles. Structural damage was minimal. Ken said one pole barn was damaged but they were fortunate to not incur more damage. The cypress grove was devastated and due to logging restriction, the ranch could not remove all the downed trees that were left behind. Other trees fell also, which achieved the effect of naturally thinning the timber stand currently on the ranch. There are logging restrictions that limit the ranch to 4,000 tons of lumber per year but since this was salvage timber and not a green cut they could remove a lot of it, just not the cypress trees. No cattle were lost during the hurricane, and the effects

afterwards in terms of pregnancy loss, abortion, and death loss were not elevated. It is surmised that they hunkered down under the palmetto trees and suffered no losses.

Once Tarpon Blue started managing the property they built all new fences. During the hurricane only interior fences were compromised leaving the exterior ones intact. They were able to assess the damage via drone and started clearing roads with front end loaders. The Eco Tours had to be shut down and they were left with an abundance of food stored in the restaurant since no tourists were coming through. The staff managed to secure this food and used it to feed everyone during the following weeks when grocery store trips were out of the question. Ken described being able to feed all of his staff members as being one of his most important considerations. With the Eco Tours being shut down staff were able to work on clean up, helping their neighbors to the east who sustained more damage, and taking care of their own homes during the process. Ken said all staff members continued to work and receive pay and he was able to keep all of them fed. Care had to be taken during clean-up to avoid the multitude of snakes (cottonmouths) that seemed to come in with the huge surge of water also.

Management/Leadership Considerations

Babcock Ranch employs a variety of different people; from the cowboys that work the horses and cattle to the Swamp Buggy drivers and restaurant workers. Everyone has a vital role to play in the management and daily operations of the ranch. Most everyone stayed on property during the hurricane, if not on the ranch then close by at their own homes. Ken Smith went home to Oklahoma and tried to talk others in to leaving but they did not want to leave. Open communication before and up to the event was a key factor for Ken and his employees. Ken gave the employees ample time before the storm hit to prepare their own homes so that they could better prepare Babcock Ranch and be ready to start clean up more quickly. No employees went without a paycheck because everyone found something to do after the storm to help with clean up. Ken described that the ranch has no formal plan because they are so small and need to be very fluid in their operations. He is working on a plan that just needs to be more formalized, but managing such a diverse operation has unique challenges compared to the large corporations he is used to managing. Ken detailed that his first priority after the hurricane was where were the employees and were they ok? His second consideration was were the fences down and where were the cows? His third concern was for the people that live east of Babcock Ranch and if they were ok since they got hit more directly by the hurricane. The best way to analyze these management and leadership considerations is through the *human resources* frame from Bolman and Deal's four leadership frames (2013). This frame deals with looking at the people in an organization and if they are suited for the types of jobs/situations that they are put into. Looking specifically at this frame, Babcock Ranch & Eco Tours really had success with getting the employees taken care of before and after the hurricane. They helped get their homes prepared for the hurricane, gave them time off to perform critical things for their homes and families, and offered them alternative duties at the ranch so they could still get a paycheck during this time of upheaval. Three full time employees work on The Ranch and

then there are a variety of seasonal workers who are temporary. Ken made sure to take care of his workers so they could in turn take care of the business. The Ranch really did not have to adjust their offerings once they opened back up for tourists, but they were significantly delayed because of power outages that lasted approximately 8 weeks in their area. The eco-tours started back once trails were cleared, electricity was restored, etc. and it was safe for people to occupy the property.

Questions

The Problem

Once Hurricane Irma swept through and around Babcock Ranch some quick decisions needed to be made. The immediate problems are the location of the cattle, downed timber causing disruptions in fencing, and the fact that the ecological tours cannot continue.

Content

- Where are the cattle located?
- How might the workers access the fences given the swamp like terrain of Babcock Ranch?
- Why is it important that the cattle be located and accounted for?
- What do you think the immediate concerns for the cattle would be in this type of natural disaster?
- What will Babcock Ranch do with all the downed timber?

Leadership Frame

- As Babcock Ranch moves into post-hurricane times what considerations need to be taken for the employees?
- Do additional staff members need to be hired?
- Are there key pieces of equipment that staff members need to make their job easier and therefore more satisfying?
- How will the owner keep the staff engaged and upbeat during this time of uncertainty?
- Are there other things that the staff could be doing during this time when the ecological tours could not run?
- Are there other ways that the staff could help generate revenue?

Integrated

- Who might Babcock Ranch work with in the future to help with natural disasters such as a hurricane?
- What other considerations might Babcock Ranch take to better prepare for a hurricane in the future?

Summative Assessment

You have been hired by Ken Smith, CEO of Tarpon Blue Land & Resource Management LLC, as a consultant to help him come up with an emergency management plan for his livestock, natural resources, and staff. Be specific about what needs to be taken into consideration, what needs to be done differently, and how he can better manage and support the staff during this time.

References

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2013). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

Masters, J. (2017, Sept). *Cat 4 Irma makes landfall in the Keys; SW Florida next*. Weather Underground. Retrieved from <https://www.wunderground.com/cat6/cat-4-irma-makes-landfall-keys-sw-florida-next>

National Weather Service. (n.d.). *Hurricane Irma technical summary*. Retrieved from https://www.weather.gov/tae/irma_technical_summary