PICK UP AFTER YOUR PETS

Pet waste left in our yards and communities can have many adverse effects on the environment, as it is full of harmful bacteria and excess nutrients.

The Problem

At least half of all surface-water pollution in the country comes from contaminated runoff. Pet waste contributes to the pollution that is transported by runoff every time it rains. Animal waste is a serious water quality problem that is often overlooked. While there have always been animals, it was not until humans and their pets and farm animals concentrated populations along waterways that animal waste became a problem. Waste from dogs, cats, horses and waterfowl may contain disease-causing organisms that are harmful to both humans and animals. Animal waste also contains nutrients that encourage weed and algae growth in lakes and streams.

Did you know?
Pet waste contributes between 20 to 30 percent of the water pollution in America.

Untreated fecal matter can be a source of harmful bacteria and nutrients. Pet waste carries disease causing organisms such as Giardia and Salmonella which can make water unsafe for drinking or swimming. Just as we don't want human sewage in our water, it is important to prevent pet sewage from being carried into our waterways. When pet waste is washed into lakes, streams or coastal waters it carries nutrients that stimulate growth of nuisance weeds and algae. Overly fertile water becomes cloudy and green—unattractive for swimming, boating and fishing. Also, as the waste and the algae decay, oxygen is depleted, which can lead to fish kills. Also, ammonia can be released, further endangering Maine's fish population. Perhaps most importantly, pet waste can carry diseases that make water unsafe for swimming or drinking.

While it may not seem like a big deal if one more cat or dog contributes some waste to the neighborhood environment, think of how many pets are in our community. Animal waste may not be the biggest or most toxic pollutant going into our waters, but it is one of those little problems that can lead to serious environmental and health problems.

The Solution

Managing pet waste properly is something that everyone can easily do to make a positive difference in the quality of our surface waters. The job of cleaning up after your pet can be as simple as taking a plastic bag or "pooper scooper" along on your next walk. Kittery and Eliot have "pooper scooper" laws that govern pet wastecleanup. Any waste left by the animal must be cleaned up immediately. What should you do with the waste you pick up? Here are some options

Scoop the poop, bag it, and place it in the trash.
Scooping your pooch's poop isn't just a courtesy for those walking behind you; it is also the healthy and environmentally sound thing to do. This is the preferred disposal method. From a surface water perspective it removes the pollution source from surface water contact and contains it in a landfill situation where discharges are monitored and containment levels are known. Landfills are designed to safely handle substances such as dog waste, cat litter, and dirty diapers. For biodegradable bags see http://www.lowimpactliving.com/products/Pet-Care/Doggie-Doo-Bags/343.

Did you know?
A day's waste from 1 large dog can contain 7.8 billion fecal coliform bacteria.

Flush it. Maybe.
For those residences on septic systems, flushing pet waste can potentially exceed the design capacity of the septic system. High volumes of hair and ash, not normally found in human waste, can interfere with septic system functions and clog drain fields.

If you are on a municipal sewer system and you can stand the yuck-factor, flushing is a highly desirable method of disposal. Most people, especially those with large or multiple dogs, are not comfortable with the notion of bringing outdoor pet waste indoors to flush it. If you can handle it, go wild!

Bury it. Maybe.
Dig a hole or trench that is
• about 5 inches deep,
• away from vegetable gardens, and
• away from any lake, stream, ditch, well or the water's edge.
Microorganisms in the top layer of soil will break down the waste and release nutrients to fertilize nearby plants.

To protect yourself and your family from disease, keep pet waste away from vegetable gardens and water supplies. Don't add pet waste to your compost pile. The pile won't get hot enough to kill disease organisms in pet waste. Landfills are designed to safely handle substances such as dog waste, cat litter, and dirty diapers. Yards are not.

Did you know?
Cryptosporidium, Leptospira, Salmonella, and E. coli can survive for months in feces or soil. Roundworms can survive for four years in soil.

Use a doggie septic system. Maybe.
If you have a location that will ensure that the effluent will remain safely away from water or vegetable gardens, you can consider a commercially produced pet waste digester, such as the Doggie Dooley (http://www.composters.com/pet-waste-products/doggie-dooley-pet-waste-digester-system_149_12.php). Please note however, that some experts claim these are no better than burial, since they essentially function like broken septic systems. Manufacturer literature indicates that they do not function properly where water tables are high, in low temperatures, and in some soil types common to our area. Manufacturer literature also cites reduced performance when used with dog foods containing high ash levels, which are common in many low-cost dog foods. Even assuming these devices function as designed, there is little if any evidence that they treat waste sufficiently to meet desired standards. Remember, pet waste is sewage just like human waste; using such a device to treat an equivalent amount of human waste is prohibited by law.

Did you know?
More than 990 dogs live in Kittery, producing waste equivalent to 250 people. More than 310 pounds of dog waste are dropped in Kittery backyards every day!

Never hose pet waste down storm drains.
Don't place bagged or un-bagged pet waste in a storm drain or hose pet waste towards storm drains as they drain directly to a stream, river, lake or other waterbody.

Kitties count too.
Improperly disposed cat waste and used kitty litter can also cause water quality problems. Encourage cats to use a litter box. Many cats won't use a dirty box, so make time each day to scoop the poop. Then empty it into the trash.

Many conventional kitty litter brands on the market are full of unpleasant chemicals that you (and your cat!) can breathe in when you disturb the litter. Consider using natural litter - just put the litter right into the trash. It will begin to biodegrade from there. For example: http://www.forotherlivingthings.com/green-tea-leaves-clumping-cat-litter-10-liter-bag-aprox-6-lbs-p-523.html.

For more information on pet waste and water quality, visit http://mainehealthybeaches.org/assets/pdfs/Pet_Waste_&_Water_Qualtiy.pdf.

PROTECT KITTERY WATERS

Spruce Creek Watershed Improvement Project
Town of Kittery, Maine
200 Rogers Road Extension
Kittery, Maine 03904
www.protectkitterywaters.org