

Pet Waste

Not a Natural Part of the Ecosystem

There are hundreds of animals in the forest, and nobody seems worried how their waste products affect the environment, so why should you worry about pet waste?

According to the U.S. Humane Society, 40% of United States households have at least 1 dog. Assuming Marshall is average, there are at least 222 dogs per square mile in the city (based on 3,111 households). This is a much higher population density of large mammals than you would find in a natural forest. You would expect to find an average of 4 fox, 0.8 coyotes, 0.1 wolves, 2.6 raccoons, 0.1 lynx, 0.6 bobcats, 8.5 skunks and 0.2 bear per square mile in undisturbed areas.

High animal populations yield lots of waste for the ecosystem to decompose. In a natural forest, this waste would slowly be broken down by microorganisms and would then be filtered through the soil by rain and snowmelt.

In an urban setting, the natural system has been altered by increased runoff due to impervious surfaces (surfaces that do not allow water to infiltrate the soil including rooftops and asphalt or concrete roads, parking lots and sidewalks). Pet waste that isn't properly disposed of will often be flushed into streams and lakes before being completely broken down.

Contaminants in Pet Waste

Pet waste may contain pathogens such as bacteria, viruses and parasitic worms that can be transmitted to humans who are gardening in contaminated soils or who are recreating in infected waters.

Some specific diseases and parasites carried in pet waste are:

- Campylobacteriosis - a bacteria causing gastrointestinal illness in humans
- Cryptosporidium - a protozoan parasite causing gastrointestinal illness in humans
- Toxocariasis - roundworms that may be transmitted from dogs to humans

Pet waste also contains nutrients that help weeds and algae grow. Excess vegetation growth in aquatic environments is both unsightly and it uses up the oxygen that fish and other aquatic life need to live. Oxygen levels are also reduced as bacteria decomposes pet waste (a process requiring oxygen).

What Should Pet Owners Do?

Most of us don't have dogs willing to use the indoor facilities, so pet owners need to clean up for them.

Pet waste should be picked up and either be:

- flushed down the toilet (be sure to pick out rocks and sticks first)
- put in the trash or
- buried in your own yard. If you want to bury pet waste, make sure it is in a hole at least 6 inches deep, away from vegetable gardens and water sources, and in permeable soil (not clay). Do not add it to compost piles.

