

# Dogs in Parks: Managing the Waste

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Conservation



In a word, it's about the poop.

Environmental management of dog waste has become a more pressing issue for park and recreation agencies as the percentage of households with dogs increases and the demand for dog parks continues to grow. However, dog waste is not a responsibility that many people within park and rec agencies, want to deal with. Considering the otherwise stellar environmental performance of most park and recreation agencies in addressing environmental and waste issues, dog waste just doesn't seem to rise to top of the design, maintenance and management menu. In fact, for many dog parks or off-leash dog areas managed by parks, once the dog waste is out of sight after flushing it off pads or dog areas, it is out of mind as well.

The scope of the problem of dog waste in America is huge. America's nearly 90

million dogs produce about 11 million tons of dog waste per year. A widely quoted estimate of the volume of dog poop by a commercial dog-waste collection company, named Doody Calls, is that it would fill a line of dump trucks stretching bumper to bumper from Boston to Seattle.

The stark fact is that only about 60 percent of dog owners pick up after their dogs; 40 percent do not. This seems to hold true with some exceptions on the type of area according to studies done in parks, in urban communities, and in suburban areas.

A 2017 Penn State University study of dog waste for the Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics Center in Open Space and Mountain Parks of Boulder (Colorado) found that dog caretakers with dogs on a leash were most likely to pick up after their dogs and dispose of the waste in receptacles. However, park visitors with dogs said the infrequent number of pet waste stations made them less likely to pick up and dispose of their dog's waste.

The problems are not just from the solid waste and nutrients that can wash into local streams and lakes, but also the potential for spreading pathogenic bacteria and viruses, including *E.coli*, salmonella, cryptosporidium and a range of intestinal worms and parasites that can be transmitted to other dogs and mammals. Numerous studies have shown that much of the bacteria in urban waters comes from pet waste.

## Tackling the Problem at the Source

Prince George's County, Maryland, is meeting the problem head on. The county has launched a comprehensive effort to deal with dog waste in its communities and has applied several creative and innovative strategies to get people engaged.

Dawn Hawkins-Nixon, the associated director for sustainability for the Department of the Environment (DOE) in Prince George's County, says that the catalyst for their initiatives was the granting of the county's MS4 permit in 2014. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regulates the conveyances of stormwater into the waters of the United States, and Prince George's County's permit contained a requirement that the county reduce harmful bacteria levels in the Anacostia River and Piscataway Creek watersheds.

This requirement coincided with the growing concern residents expressed to the county about pet waste in common areas. "The lack of responsibility by pet owners was a major concern by residents, who wanted us to do something about it," says Hawkins-Nixon. This led the DOE to begin a comprehensive program of education and awareness intended to change peoples' behavior. The scale of the problem is significant, according to Hawkins-Nixon. DOE estimates there are 150,000 dogs within the county that produce 37,400,000 lbs. of waste per year. Since only 60 percent, at best, pick up, this leaves 45,000 lbs. per day that is, essentially, untreated sewage.

"We realized this could not be just a traditional paper campaign with signs and flyers," Hawkins-Nixon shares. "We knew we had to engage residents and school-age kids. We developed games and educational materials and made them bilingual as well." The agency was also innovative in its outreach. One of the games staff took to community events and schools was a bean bag pooper scooper game, where kids got points for depositing their "dog waste" in the proper receptacles and waste stations. Hawkins-Nixon says that the gross-out factor drove kids wild with delight, and it proved to be an effective way to communicate their objectives. Another innovative approach Prince George's County has taken is to hold Pet Waste Summits — one in 2017, one in 2018 — that drew more than 75 people representing various community organizations.

The DOE partners with the University of Maryland's Environmental Finance Center and the People for Change Coalition and has developed a small grant program, using stormwater management fees, to provide pet waste stations and signage to communities. They have provided local communities with 86 stations so far and plan to have 146 placed by 2019. Debra Weller, environmental section head of DOE, says that local communities have been extremely supportive, and the messages of public health, environmental quality and community appearance have really resonated with residents.

Many of these inner Beltway communities in Prince George's County are integrally linked to the stream valley parklands of the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), which connects communities to these linear parks by trails and by community and neighborhood parks. MNCPPC also owns five dog parks, which are popular and well-used, within these communities. Reducing the impacts of dog waste pollution from dog parks and within the larger community requires a full effort by county agencies and community organizations.

According to Hawkins-Nixon, the county agencies and community organizations are looking at ways to make the campaign sustainable and renewable. They are building capacity with their organizational partners. "It makes a big difference when a community takes ownership. It is so much more meaningful than when residents are being told they need to do this by the government. When a community invests in an effort, it has a much better chance of success," Hawkins Nixon explains.

The bottom line is that the county is improving public health, reducing runoff into streams and waterways, and making communities more of a place to love and appreciate. "It's great to be able to go out to public places and play with your kids safely," Hawkins-Nixon adds.

Prince George's County has recognized the problems presented by the high percentage of dog ownership and taken a direct and energetic approach to address the challenges. Park and recreation agencies with a commitment to environmental and public health must take notice of the impacts dog waste has on their communities and dog parks and forthrightly acknowledge the problems and deal with issues. Our parks, trails and streets will be much cleaner and healthier for dogs and people.

