

Canine Considerations

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The Humane Society of the United States estimates that in 2016, 77.8 million dogs are residing in U.S. households, which is up more than 11 percent from 2011. Recent years have seen the wonderful trend of people adopting rescue dogs (in full disclosure, including this author). With so many pooches in our communities and parks, dog owners can help everyone coexist better by obeying a couple of laws.



Figure 1. This sign is at Royal Lake Park's entrance.

Pick up your pet's waste and dispose of it in a trash can. Back two hundred years ago, all homes and businesses heated their buildings and stoves with wood or coal. The resulting smoke dissipated into the air. Fast forward to modern times to when Fairfax County alone has more than 1.1 million residents. Imagine if every single Northern Virginia dwelling burned those same fuels for all of their energy needs. The air would be unbreathable! Likewise, in the days before garbage pick-up, people left their dog waste where it fell. When relatively few dogs inhabited an area, their feces did little to impact the environment. The modern canine population is huge and its unchecked waste causes problems. Here are several of the many reasons to be a responsible owner and "scoop the poop":

- Dog waste fouls the immediate area. The smells and foot prints in doggy doo are evidence of that point! Chances are the dog walker uses the same route, so it taints the place for their next visit. Then, after a rain or thawing snow, the feces partially disintegrates into the puddles, so a walk is like stomping through an unflushed toilet. Pretty gross!
- Pet waste contaminates the broader environment. Not all of it "harmlessly decomposes."
 - So much pet excrement washes into the waterways that it and lawn chemicals are the top suburban sources of nitrogenous pollution.
 - To folks thinking that they are far from a waterway when they leave the dump on the grassy median, guess again. It is only a few feet from the impervious curb, where rains wash it down storm drains and into streams.
 - A significant amount (typically, 10-20 percent) of the suburban environment's fecal coliform bacteria originates from dogs. Whereas the exact bacterial counts and animal sources differ based on various factors (e.g., location, season), the extensive Four Mile Run study from 2002 provides a good example of the fieldwork, data, and references behind water quality studies: <http://www.deq.virginia.gov/portals/0/deq/water/tmdl/implementationplans/4mileip.pdf>
 - Beyond the bacterial concerns, some parasites, such as hookworms, rely on the animal passing the eggs or developing larvae. Those young parasites infect healthy animals. If your pet carries parasites, picking up the waste helps prevent spreading the disease.
 - Furthermore, any unmetabolized medications, including antibiotics and parasite preventatives, become introduced into the environment where low level exposures can help these organisms build a resistance.
 - Storm drains ≠ sanitary sewers. Sanitary sewers wash into a sewage treatment plant—the same place handling water from kitchens and bathrooms. Storm drains chute water



Figure 2. Picking up the poop only to chuck the bag into the woods is unacceptable. Toss it into a trashcan instead.

into a creek or river without any processing. Help keep pet waste out of storm drains, including bagged excrement, which sullies the environment with an extra plastic bag.

- Dog stools attract unwanted wildlife. Some of the food passes through undigested. Those “morsels” can draw scavengers including rats.
- Leaving the feces on a neighbor’s yard or in the natural areas is simply impolite. Even if it is “off the trail,” it still causes the above-mentioned impacts. Volunteers, including children, participating in trash cleanups and habitat restoration inevitably get their hands and feet in the excrement. Claiming to enjoy the parks and appreciate those maintaining them yet leaving dog waste behind sends two very different messages.

Keep your dog on a leash. The place to freely exercise your pup is within a fenced yard or designated dog park. Elsewhere, physically restraining your dog makes everyone safer regardless of how well your pooch behaves off-leash:

- You know when the dog is doing his or her business and can immediately cleanup the poop (readdressing the first point).
- You never know what is ahead on the path that your canine companion could get into.
 - This year, Royal Lake has had multiple cases of rabid animals. Whereas everyone’s dog should be up-to-date with rabies vaccinations, a rabid animal could still needlessly injure your pet. Rabid animals are extremely unpredictable; knowledge of how normal members of that species behave is out the window when dealing with a rabies infection.
 - The ill animal is now dead and rotting. Hardly a healthy doggy treat!
 - Unfortunately, some individuals deliberately leave items to injure animals. Several years ago, broken glass was left on trails to cut paws. Last year, folks reported finding bread balls concealing toothpicks inside. People have left poultry carcasses and other inappropriate foods in the forests; whether or not these baits were additionally laced with anything is unknown.
 - Dogs have a knack for sticking their noses in dangerous places, including chemically-treated lawns. A leash is the best way to pass one of these yards quickly and with the dog’s head up.
- Dogs wander where they should not. For example, on January 22, 2016, an unleashed Saint Bernard strayed from the owner’s attention and fell through thin ice at nearby Woodglen Lake. Fortunately, first responders were able to save this pooch. That story is one of many like it though not all of them have happy endings.
- In the woods, unleashed dogs have a greater chance of brushing up against poison ivy. That plant might not harm the dog while giving the owner a rash when the urushiol oils rub off!
- When loose dogs race around the forest, they destroy sensitive, native plant life. Some woodlands where people and dogs routinely play “fetch” or “chase” are conspicuously devoid of herbaceous plants and seedlings.
- Leashed dogs reduce confrontations with people. On April 5, 2016, a Royal Lake Park visitor was bitten by an unleashed dog. Police are still investigating this case. Restraining the dog on a leash



Figure 3. Death and decay are natural processes that can be encountered in parks. This fox carcass was found next to Shanes Creek, partially eaten, decomposing, and fly-covered. It serves as a visceral reminder of what unleashed dogs can happen upon and a reason to prevent dogs from playing in or drinking from waterways.

might have avoided that situation. Let's also consider that some people do not like dogs, no matter how "friendly" the pooch might be.

- Leashed dogs reduce confrontations with other animals. Loose dogs should not intrude upon and harass wildlife in their natural homes.
- Loose canines have a greater risk of stirring up or getting into altercations with other dogs.
- Cars have an increased chance of hitting unleashed pups.

Like a competitive swimmer who still wears a life vest while boating, a truly confident dog owner will set the good example for others to follow. If you really want to demonstrate your canine-handling skills, show that you love your dog enough to keep him or her leashed and respect the area by responsibly cleaning up any waste. Thank you to everyone who already picks up after their pets and walks dogs on a leash.

ADDENDUM: check out this article's continuation, [Follow-Up to Canine Considerations](#) (August 2016), based on reader questions and comments.

Further reading:

Pet Waste and Water Quality:

- http://www.stormwatercenter.net/Pollution_Prevention_Factsheets/AnimalWasteCollection.htm
- <https://cfpub.epa.gov/npstbx/files/wiexpets.pdf>
- <http://www.livescience.com/44732-eliminating-pet-poop-pollution.html>
- <http://www.doodycalls.com/resources-toxic-dog-waste/>
- <https://www.novaregion.org/DocumentCenter/Home/View/289>

Benefits to Leashing Pets:

- http://www.parkrecord.com/ci_23141219/ten-reasons-keep-your-dog-leash
- <http://www.sierratradingpost.com/blog/hiking/leash-laws-teamsierra/>
- <http://www.lowcountrydog.com/story/sections/leash-laws-and-why-we-love-them-131509>

Pets by the Numbers:

- http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/pet_overpopulation/facts/pet_ownership_statistics.html

Fairfax County Laws:

- Unrestricted dogs prohibited (Leash Law) – [Section 41.1-2-4](#)
- Animals causing unsanitary conditions (Pooper-Scooper Law) – [Section 41.1-2-6](#)

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