

The environmental impact of pets, Part 2: what you can do

By Christie Keith, Special to SF Gate
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An overwhelming sense of guilt may have been the biggest thing you got from my [previous column](#) on the environmental impact of owning pets. But there are many steps you can take, from easier to the more difficult, to reduce the carbon pawprint of your companion animals.

Easy Changes: Stuff

Want to lighten the load just a little? America's pet product manufacturers are ready to help. Welcome to the wonderful world of recycled and recyclable pet products!

The outside story. Pet food, pet toys, pet supplies, pet cleaning and grooming aids, pet medications -- pretty much all of it has one serious environmental problem, and that's packaging. Just as with products intended for humans, those seeking to be more eco-friendly should try alternatives such as bulk buying and using products that come in recycled and recyclable packaging.

Even cardboard boxes used for dry pet foods are not always recyclable, as some of them are lined with metal or plastic to prevent food spoilage. Check the bottom of the packaging for recycling information.

Always dispose of drugs, pesticides, shampoos, chemicals and the containers they come in safely. Federal guidelines for the safe disposal of [human medications](#) apply to veterinary drugs as well. Flea control products, as well as many pet shampoos and dips, need to be disposed of carefully as well, according to [EPA, state, and local guidelines](#).

The inside story. Then there's the stuff itself. Fortunately, there's no shortage of pet toys and supplies made with recycled, degradable, and recyclable materials -- in fact, annual sales of "green" pet products are estimated to reach over \$1 billion this year. So for your own pets, or the eco-friendly pet owners on your holiday shopping list, consider some of these toys and supplies:

- **SmartyKat** A complete line of cat toys, treats, and beds using recycled and recyclable materials. Some favorites include the SuperScratcher, as well as several play-encouraging and interactive toys.

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- **PoochPlanet** From the same folks who brought us SmartyKat, dog toys, treats, and beds made with recycled materials -- including a line of **dog beds** filled with recycled plastic bottles. According to the company, their customers kept 30 million recycled bottles out of the waste stream last year alone.
- **West Paw Design** This Montana-based company makes dog and cat toys and beds using recycled and organic materials, including the popular Organic Bumper Bed and the Eco Nap Mat.
- **Planet Dog** This company makes two toys out of pre-consumer recycled materials, and the toys themselves are recyclable. They also make collars, leashes, and harnesses using hemp, a sustainable, degradable, and recyclable fiber.
- **Everyday Studio Cat Trees** Designed by San Francisco artist Susan Kralovec, these cat trees are made of corrugated cardboard, with 35 percent minimum recycled content. Materials are non-toxic and low VOC.
- **Earthbath Grooming Products** They're free of phosphates and enzymes, and are biodegradable. They also sell in bulk for professional use, or for those who want to minimize packaging waste.

Where's it from? The pet food and toy recalls of products made in China have made most of us aware that many things we buy for ourselves and our pets are made all over the globe, and that not all countries have similar manufacturing standards. Even products made locally might contain ingredients and materials that came from all over the world, with the attendant ecological fuel cost.

Some companies, such as PlanetDog.com, have made a commitment to re-locating their manufacturing plants closer to their market. Others like West Paw started out with that commitment, and still make their line of dog and cat toys and beds in Bozeman, Montana. Always investigate where the products you buy for your pets are made, as well as how far the ingredients and materials used to make them had to travel to get there.

Pet service businesses. Businesses use stuff, too. If you're looking for an eco-friendly place to board your dogs and cats, San Francisco's **Pet Camp** was founded by two former EPA staffers, and is certified as a **Green Business** by the City and County of San Francisco. While they're the only pet-related business to receive such certification, eco-aware pet owners might want to check with other pet service businesses they use. Does your dogwalker use biodegradable poop bags? What kind of shampoo does your groomer use?

Bigger Changes: The Ins and Outs

First, the "out." Pet poop is polluting storm water and, when it is enshrouded in non-degradable plastic bags, taking up landfill space. High levels of canine-origin fecal bacteria have been found in bodies of water into which surface water drains, and sea otters have been sickened and killed by a parasite found in the feces of some cats. Many common brands of cat litter are non-degradable and are produced by strip

mining. So what do you do with all that pet waste?

When it comes to pet poop, there are a few options.

Flush it. The best place to dispose of dog poop is the toilet, and yes, there are [flushable pooper scooper bags](#).

For used cat litter, the situation is less clear. Some litters are produced specifically to be flushable, and for cats who don't carry the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, that's a good solution. But around half of all cats do, and their feces should not be flushed. Even those indoor cats who were infected in the distant past can, under some circumstances, still shed cysts in their feces, so before you decide your cat is one of those who don't, have your veterinarian run a *T. gondii* titer test on your cat. If the test is negative, and your cat has no opportunity to eat soil, prey or any form of raw meat, then you're probably safe to put flushable cat litter down the toilet.

Toss it. Big dogs mean big poop, and lugging dog waste back home and flushing it isn't always the most practical solution. The next-best course is to use a degradable scooper and toss the poop in the trash.

If your plumbing system can't handle flushable cat litter, or your cat is *T. gondii* positive, goes outdoors, eats raw meat, or doesn't like flushable cat litter, the next-best option is to use a degradable recycled litter and dispose of it in the trash in a degradable container such as a paper bag. Litters are available made from post-consumer newspaper, as well as degradable plant materials such as wheat, corn, and cellulose. Clay litters are produced by strip mining and do not degrade, so unless your cat is one of the ones who doesn't care about the environment but does care about his special litter not being replaced, they're not the best ecological choice.

Products that can make tossing pet waste more eco-friendly include:

- [Biobags' Doggie Waste Bag](#), probably the most common choice.
- [Scooperbox](#), a fully degradable cardboard scooper made from 100 percent recycled materials.
- [Dispoz-a-scoop](#) combines the best of both methods, and is a degradable plastic bag with a rigid cardboard frame.
- [Feline Pine](#) Made of reclaimed pine dust from lumber yards. Degradable. The company says the product is flushable but labels the product with a warning about *T. gondii* transmission.
- [World's Best Cat Litter](#) Degradable and flushable. Made from corn.
- [Yesterday's News](#) Made from recycled newspaper -- the company says a "significant portion" of that is post-consumer, and also says that "most" publishers today use safe inks, and their manufacturing

process neutralizes all ink residues. Degradable but not flushable.

- [SWheat Scoop](#) Made from wheat. Degradable, and claims to be "the only litter on the market that's certified flushable in sewer or septic systems by the SGS U.S. Testing Company."
- [Green Tea Leaves Litter](#) Made of pre-consumer manufacturing waste, this litter contains just wood dust and green tea. It clumps, it controls odor, and it's degradable and flushable.

Let it rot. Can you compost pet waste? It depends on who you ask. Pretty much everyone recommends against using compost made with any fecal material on food crops, but [studies done in Alaska](#) found that properly handled compost made using dog poop got hot enough to break down into clean, usable compost.

If you want to try composting dog poop and used degradable (non-clay) cat litter in your own garden, [CityFarmer.org](#) has step-by-step instructions and even a video demonstration. You can also try one of a number of in-ground mini-septic systems such as the [Doggie Dooley Pet Waste Disposal System](#).

Many cities around the world are trying different approaches to dog waste disposal. San Francisco is testing a method that doesn't just reduce the dog poop carbon pawprint, but creates energy instead of waste. [Sunset Scavenger](#) processes dog poop in a methane digester, where bacteria turn the waste into methane gas. Methane can be used just like natural gas, and can also be used to produce electricity.

Now, the in: Food. If supporting humane and sustainable agriculture with your shopping dollars is important to you, consider [making your pets' food yourself](#), out of fresh, locally produced ingredients. That way, you can control the quality of the ingredients just as you do in your own diet, and also eliminate all the wasteful shipping, storing, packaging, and advertising that goes along with the multi-billion dollar pet food industry.

I've been making my pets' food for almost 23 years now, and it's easier than most people think, but if it's not for you, some commercial foods are more eco-friendly than others. It's not enough just to buy foods that claim to be "natural" or "healthy," but meats, grains, and vegetables that are produced in accordance with the regulations of the California Certified Organic Farmers and other independent third-party certifiers such as Oregon Tilth must meet certain standards of sustainability in their production. There are also small, local companies that may be producing pet foods using locally grown, sustainably produced ingredients. A few companies that offer sustainably raised and/or certified organic meats in their pet foods:

- [By Nature Organics](#) Organic products are certified by Oregon Tilth. They make both dry and canned cat and dog foods. Not all foods are organic, so read labels.
- [Castor & Pollux Organics](#) A complete line of both canned and dry cat and dog foods, plus treats. Products vary in how much of their content is organic. USDA Organic certification.

- **Primal Pet Foods** Their produce is certified organic, and they claim "All of our meats, poultry and game are purchased through farms and ranches that take pride in producing wholesome sources of protein through natural, sustainable agriculture." Their foods are sold frozen and are intended to be fed raw. They are located in the San Francisco area.
- **Karma Organics** Dry food and treats for dogs using 95 percent certified organic ingredients, including meat. USDA Organic certification.

Dogs and cats are both members of the order carnivora, and evolved eating the flesh of prey animals. Some people worried about the environmental impact of meat diets want to make their carnivorous pets into vegetarians or even vegans. Although a vegetarian diet is possible for both species, a vegan diet is at best controversial and at worst, dangerous for an obligate carnivore such as the cat.

For those who want what's best both for their pets and the planet, there's a middle road. Most of meat's bad rap belongs not to livestock raising per se, but to industrialized, high-volume farming practices. Locally, groups such as [SF Raw](#) seek out small, local farmers and ranchers who raise their livestock using sustainable methods such as pasturing and grass feeding, and practice environmentally careful agriculture, and buy their meat, eggs, and other products in bulk. This saves money as well as minimizing shipping. Groups like this one exist nationwide and are listed at [DogAware.com](#).

Not convinced? Although dogs and cats are the most popular pets in America, there are many herbivorous animals who make wonderful companions. By no means should anyone give up their current pets, but if the consumption of meat is an important issue for you, consider a pet such as a rabbit in the future. Rabbits make wonderful companions, and there are many of them in need of homes. And, as pet columnist [Gina Spadafori writes](#), ecologically, it doesn't get much better than a bunny:

A rabbit is better than a garbage disposal. It's true: You can give a rabbit all your green kitchen trimmings and he'll eat them with enthusiasm, no electricity required. Then he'll produce lovely waste that will super-charge your compost pile, providing you eventually with the most luscious rich compost for your garden. So you can grow more lovely vegetables, giving him the trimmings, and on it goes. The circle of life, without the petro-chemicals!

Indoor vs. outdoor cats. While this doesn't exactly match the "in and out" I was talking about, cats who roam freely do have a greater impact on the environment than cats who are kept indoors or only allowed into safe outdoor areas. Because it's a big topic, the indoor/outdoor cat debate and ideas for enriching the lives of indoor cats will be the subject of a future column. Nevertheless, it's a fact that keeping cats indoors with access to safe outdoor enclosures will protect wildlife from their predation, keep cat feces and urine from contaminating soil and water, and prevent your cats from contracting *T. gondii*. If your cats do roam, consider using a collar with a bell on it to alert birds to their presence. And while I've never tried it, there's also a [cat bib](#) that supposedly prevents cats from harming birds.

The Biggest Step of All: Thinking about it another way

It may seem that humans keeping and caring for companion animals puts a strain on the planet. But the balance isn't as unequal as it might seem at first glance. Sharing our lives and homes with animals has the potential to make us better environmental citizens -- and better people, too. I know, because that's what happened to me.

Back in the 80s, I was the typical over-achieving workaholic. I lived in San Francisco, stopped every morning for my triple-shot latte at the CafŽ Flore, and spent the whole day indoors working, and most of my evenings in clubs, theaters, and restaurants. My main form of recreation was shopping.

And then in 1991 I adopted my dog Colleen from the Peninsula Humane Society, and all of that changed. Every morning I went to the dog park or the beach, and every evening I walked her all around our quiet neighborhood. I started seeing things I'd never paid any attention to before: The stars. Flowers growing on the side of the road. Birds in the trees and the skies. On our trips to the Bay Area's state and county parks, we saw bobcats, coyotes, snakes, and jackrabbits. Once I even saw a mountain lion off in the distance. I began not just to see but to care about the natural world in a way I never had before.

Even if it can be challenging to reduce our pets' carbon pawprint, I'd argue that their net ecological impact is positive. That's because in seeing the world through the eyes of our animals we come to both know and care about the natural world. The saying "God invented the cat so that man might caress the tiger" doesn't only mean that we get to have a tiny bit of the wild in our laps at night; it also means that a little piece of our heart goes out into the wild.

Perhaps most importantly, the human-animal bond fosters compassion not just for our pets, but for all living creatures -- other humans included. An open heart is never a bad thing, for us, for the planet, and for the other people and animals with whom we share the earth.

One last word about recycling. My dog Colleen was one of the millions of second-hand animals who are waiting for a home in America's shelters, pounds, and rescue groups. They say love is better the second time around, so if you're ready to bring another pet into your home, perhaps you can practice some of what I've preached on an animal who needs a second chance.

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