

The environmental impact of pets

By Christie Keith, Special to SF Gate

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So, you got up one morning, looked in the mirror, and vowed to reduce your carbon footprint. That backyard composting project you'd been putting off for years? Definitely time. The stack of newspapers by the kitchen table? Going to the recycling center this week, you swore.

And then your cat rubbed against your ankles, asking for her breakfast. You opened the box of cat food and shook the last of the kibble into her bowl, and tossed the empty box into the trash. The noise brought your dog into the kitchen, looking for a walk and his breakfast, too.

While you were driving the few miles to the dog park, you hit the drive-through espresso place, your engine idling while you waited your turn. You sat on the bench at the park watching your dog play with other dogs, sipping a latte and chatting with other early-morning dog walkers, maybe about your newfound resolution to be a better environmental citizen.

You called your dog, hoping he'd pooped while you were otherwise distracted, threw your empty coffee cup into the trash can, and headed back home. You didn't stop at the bank or post office because it was too warm to leave the dog in the car, so you'd have to make a second trip later that day.

When you got home, you opened a can of dog food and mixed it with some kibble. You threw the can away, and then dumped your cat's litter into a plastic bag, and threw that away, too. Then you got back in your car to do those errands you'd had to put off when you were out earlier with the dog.

This isn't a lesson in spotting hypocrisy, nor even a subtle message that people who let their dogs poop without picking it up are jerks. (Although they are — so much for "subtle.") It's really nothing more than a checklist of a few of the ways humans impact the environment with the decisions we make about caring for our pets.

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In this column, I'm going to look at the environmental impacts of pet ownership, some of which are fairly obvious and some of which most of us rarely consider. Then in my next column, I'll examine the solutions to these problems, and even provide a glimpse into ways that sharing our lives with companion animals improves the planet.

What goes in must come out

From that not-so-fragrant pile on the sidewalk to the cat litter box hidden in the laundry room, the biggest piece of the pet pollution puzzle is poop. Whether you dispose of it in the trash, flush it or leave it where it falls, it's a problem.

America's 73 million dogs produce around 10 million tons of dog poop per year — 6,500 tons of that in San Francisco alone, making up around 4 percent of the city's total residential waste. The litter from America's 90 million pet cats results in around 2 millions tons of cat litter being sent to landfills each year. Making the problem worse, clay-based litters aren't biodegradable, as they're already in their final state of decomposition.

While there are regional composting operations that accept dog and cat waste (I'll have more on that in my next column, as well as on an innovative San Francisco solution to the dog poop problem), getting rid of used cat litter and dog feces is one of the most difficult challenges for the green-minded pet owner. Feces left in gardens, parks, empty lots, and on the streets will run off into storm drains and waterways, contaminating them with bacterial waste that can cause human and wildlife diseases.

Compliance rates on canine pooper-scooping vary wildly from community to community. Some areas actually hire commercial poop removal services because local dog owners aren't picking up after their pets, while many dog parks are self-policed to such an extent that before your dog has finished squatting, six people are hollering at you: "Clean up after your dog!" But even the most conscientious poop-scooping dog owners might be picking up their dog's feces with a plastic bag, creating serious problems as the degradable poop is sealed inside a non-degradable bag that will spend something close to eternity in the landfill, along with a couple million tons of similarly-enshrouded cat litter.

While dog feces can be safely disposed of in the toilet, used cat litter should never be flushed. Modern waste treatment doesn't kill a pesky organism known as *toxoplasma gondii*. When water containing this parasite enters the ocean, it sickens and kills sea otter populations. Toxoplasma also causes disease in humans, especially the immune-compromised and pregnant women.

Disposing of used cat litter is only half the problem. The other half is figuring out what to use as litter in the first place. Clay-based cat litters are not a by-product of the manufacture of something else, but produced by strip mining. The clay, known as bentonite, is found under several layers of soil, which are removed in the mining process. The first few inches of clay are discarded, and the final clay is removed and processed into cat litter. When it comes to "green" products, you don't get much less green than that.

(Some more planet-friendly options will be discussed in my next column.)

Back to 'what goes in'

In addition to the difficult problem of pet waste, there's also the stuff that creates the waste in the first place: pet food. Just as with human food, pet food is the tip of the iceberg on a whole host of environmental challenges.

Even people who spend hours at Whole Foods reading labels and querying the butcher about the life and death of that night's dinner often just grab the nearest brightly-colored sack or box for their pets. I used to argue with the owner of a small health food store in Sonoma County -- who wouldn't even sell organic or grass-fed meat or chicken for people because she believed eating animals was cruelty -- about the really terrible pet food she carried. Not only were they low in quality but their meat sources were far less consistent with her store's supposed humane and ecological values than the free-range and organic meats she wouldn't carry.

If you're a consumer who is concerned about the impact of factory farming on the environment (and if you think cat poop is a problem for the environment, let's talk about high-volume hog farming sometime), the source of the meat products in your pet's food deserves as much scrutiny as the source in your own. If you only buy locally grown, organically raised produce, try to support sustainable methods of agriculture, and seek out meats raised and slaughtered in ways you find humane, you might be surprised to find out how hard it is to apply those same standards to your pets' food.

It can also be harder to "buy local" when using commercial pet foods. Even companies located nearby might manufacture their foods in plants in other states, using ingredients shipped in from all over the world. Nearly every vitamin supplement used in this country is [made in China](#), and, as this year's pet food recall taught us, so are many of the raw ingredients of pet foods. The environmental cost of packaging, shipping, storing, and distributing those sacks and cans of pet food has to be tallied, along with the convenience of using them.

Speaking of packaging, how do you dispose of the empty containers? While dog poop might make up 4 percent of San Francisco's solid waste, product packaging makes up one-third of the stuff sent to landfills. Boxes, bags, and food containers make up the single largest segment of that solid waste stream, although there are no statistics indicating what percentage of that is from pet food. But every pet food can, box, pouch or sack tossed in the trash ends up in a landfill. While some pet food manufacturers, such as San Diego's Honest Kitchen, are switching to post-consumer recycled packaging, and some packaging, such as cardboard boxes, is easily recycled, pet food product packaging unquestionably makes a bad situation worse.

Cheap plastic imported crap

If the pet poop problem reminds anyone of the disposable diapers problem, then it won't be a surprise to know that pets and kids share another issue: toys.

Imported plastic toys in bright colors fill the aisles of pet supply stores pretty much the same way they fill the aisles of toy stores. Manufactured in countries where environmental regulations are lax or irregularly enforced, shipped into and all over the United States, these cheap goods usually don't last long. The broken toys end up in the landfill and we head back out into the stores in search of yet more cheap plastic crap.

Unlike children, who have their consumer desires fostered by a whole marketing machine aimed right at them, our pets really don't care if they have the same cool stuff as the cat and dog next door. In fact, cats are usually much happier with a paper bag to play with, and our dogs can't see those bright plastic colors in the first place. We're buying that stuff for us, not for them.

Location, location, location

We drive our pets to the groomer, the vet, the park, doggy day care. Their food, toys, combs, brushes, and other supplies are shipped from locations all over the country, or even all over the world. When you get right down to it, it's all about the gas.

Of course, not every pet owner lives walking distance from a park, veterinarian, groomer, or doggy day care any more than they live near their children's schools, their hairdresser or their own workplaces. Sometimes that twice-daily drive to the dog park is a necessity rather than a choice. And because it's not a good idea to leave dogs in the car while we do other errands, particularly on warm days, it's hard to bunch trips to the dog park with grocery shopping and returning the DVDs. Because dogs suffer more from heat than humans do and driving with the windows open isn't always safe when there are pets in the car, sometimes we have to use our air conditioners more when transporting the dog.

But whether a matter of choice or necessity, all those miles of driving have a cost, one we pay for once at the gas station and again in environmental harm.

Drugs, shampoos, and chemicals

People rarely dispose properly of their own unused medications and garden pesticides, and this is no less a problem when it comes to drugs and chemicals used for our pets. Unfortunately, knowledge about proper disposal of chemicals or the waste of animals who are on certain medications is not widespread, and many people have simply never thought about the issue at all. But from the shampoo you cheerfully rinse off your dog in the backyard to the medications you flush down the toilet (or into the storm drain in your pet's urine or feces) or the flea and tick control product containers you toss into the trash can, the contamination of the country's water supply with antibiotics, pesticides, and industrial chemicals is a problem that, while not limited to pets, certainly includes them.

These unwanted residues are known as "emerging pollutants of concern" or "microconstituents." When they enter the environment, even at very low levels, they can help contribute to the development of drug-resistant bacteria, affect the central nervous systems of animals exposed to them, contaminate ground and surface water, and harm aquatic life such as fish and frogs.

The great outdoor cat debate

Because the indoor-outdoor cat debate is such a vast and contentious issue, it definitely deserves its own column. I promise it's coming in the future, but for now, let's just say that whichever side in this unending battle is right, there's no argument that free-roaming pet cats urinate and defecate in other people's backyards, vegetable gardens, and planter boxes, and cats can have at least strong localized impacts on wildlife. Cats who are kept indoors have a much smaller carbon paw print than cats who are free to roam, but, depending on location and who you ask, half or fewer of all cats live indoors all the time.

What you can do

I'm a pet writer, a lifelong dog and cat owner (although currently catless), and a passionate believer in the bond between humans and animals. All our decisions, including those we make about our pets, impact the planet in some way. In my next column, I'll cover the many ways that pet owners can reduce the carbon paw print of their dogs and cats, and one way in which pets actually reduce environmental damage and help make the planet a healthier and better place for all species.

Christie Keith is a contributing editor for Universal Press Syndicate's Pet Connection and past director of the Pet Care Forum on America Online. She lives in San Francisco.

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