

Pet waste part of Seacoast pollution

By Cathy Coletti

Special to the Herald

Published in the Portsmouth Herald on August 18, 2005

Sally Soule stepped in a pile of doggie doo-doo while taking a barefoot walk on the beach this summer. Instead of continuing a pleasant walk, she found both her foot and her mood fouled.

Most of us have had this unsightly and annoying experience at some time in our lives.

For Soule, nonpoint source pollution coordinator for the New Hampshire Coastal Program, the experience is inspiration for her work on reducing pollution caused by dog waste.

No boundaries

Dog waste is more than a nightmare for our shoes.

Just like human sewage, untreated pet fecal matter is harmful to waterways. Pet waste left on the sidewalk and on the grass ends up in our water via storm drains, which lead to lakes, rivers and streams. Rain and snowmelt wash dog waste and the associated disease-causing organisms, such as giardia and salmonella, into waterways. Enough of these bacteria make water unsafe for drinking and swimming. Bacteria from pet waste also contribute to shellfish bed closures.

Pet waste left anywhere is a potential public health risk, including Rover's piles in your own back yard. Even at home, responsible pet owners must properly dispose of their pet's waste.

Teaching an old dog new tricks

This summer kicks off the Pet Waste Outreach Program, a collaborative effort between the city of Dover, NHCP and other Department of Environmental Services staff to educate dog owners on the value of cleaning up pet waste. The program targets the Garrison Road neighborhood, where University of New Hampshire and DES researchers linked elevated bacteria levels in local waterways back to dog waste.

In the Garrison Road neighborhood, there are approximately 400 residents and 200 licensed dogs. Considering that each dog "goes" at least once a day, that's a lot of poop. And this is just one neighborhood in Dover; imagine the amount of dog waste in the entire Seacoast.

A Pet Waste Committee - formed by volunteer neighborhood residents, city officials, NHCP and other DES staff - came up with the education strategy for the outreach project. Half of the ten committee members are residents of the neighborhood.

"People have got to know that this is a problem," said Herm Stolzenburg, Pet Waste Committee member and president of the Cocheco Humane Society board of directors. He has expanded his role to educate pet adoptees and veterinarians that come through the Humane Society.

CSI estuary

As part of a joint study partially funded by NHCP in 2004, DES and UNH researchers discovered fecal bacteria at several sites in the Great Bay Estuary watershed, including the Garrison Road neighborhood, which borders a tributary of the Bellamy River in Dover. These sites were selected as a follow-up to previous DES Shellfish Program surveys, which identified tributaries with elevated bacterial levels. These tributaries are of concern because they flow into shellfish beds.

Using DNA fingerprinting, the same technique used in crime investigations, researchers matched bacteria from water samples to bacteria from specific sources, including humans as well as domestic and wild animals. Dogs were a predominant source species identified at several sites, including the Garrison Road site.

I'll take plastic

There is a simple step pet owners can take to be good environmental stewards. Simply, carry a plastic bag when you walk your dog and use it to pick up the poop. Once you have got it bagged, be sure to dispose of it properly. Research suggests that dog walkers take the time to pick up after their dogs, but then sometimes toss it down the nearest storm drain or into the woods. Both of these methods still pollute our water. The safest way to get rid of pet waste is to throw it in a trash can or flush it down the toilet (not in the plastic bag).

Encourage good pet waste management in your neighborhood. The next time you see somebody walking down the street with a bag, smile and say "thanks!"

Cathy Coletti is an outreach coordinator for the N.H. Coastal Program. Eye on Our Estuaries is an educational column initiated by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project column about coastal watershed issues. The New Hampshire Estuaries Project is a collaborative program involving governmental agencies, universities, nonprofit organizations, businesses and the public to protect, enhance and monitor the environmental quality of the state's coastal bays and rivers. Go to www.nhep.unh.edu.

###