

Columnists

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EcoConsumer

How to reduce your pet's environmental paw print

Most of us want our pets to be warm and fuzzy and meet our other more prosaic needs such as companionship or security. We want them to be as happy and healthy as possible. We don't want our pets to cost us too much money or cause problems. But we should expect one more thing, from our pets and from ourselves: Go easy on the environment.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

If you have a dog or cat, you probably wonder what goes through its head. Maybe it's thinking: "What does this human really want?"

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But we should expect one more thing, not just from our pets but from ourselves as pet owners: Go easy on the environment.

Q: We don't need to feel guilty for having a pet, do we?

A: Definitely not. These are practically family members we're talking about, after all. But we also need to keep in mind that our furry little friends, multiplied by millions, have become an enormous, ever-expanding industry. Americans will spend about \$51 billion on pets this year, more than double what we spent on pets in 1998.

All that money buys a lot of stuff, consuming vast resources and producing mountains of waste. Fortunately, reducing the eco-impacts from pets ties in nicely with those other goals, such as saving money and keeping our pets healthy. If you don't have a pet, any efforts to lessen the environmental paw print of pet ownership will benefit you in the long run as well.

Q: Where do we begin?

A: Let's take a few bites out of food first, since that accounts for more than a third of all the money we spend on pets:

- Make your own pet food. This can reduce packaging, save money and improve your pet's nutrition. Get advice from your vet and the dozens of books, articles and websites on this topic. Start with recipes your family and pets can both enjoy, such as tuna casserole.

- Add veggies. You don't need to go meatless, but many dogs and some cats love cooked vegetables. Use your family's leftovers or grow your own pet-friendly veggies like carrots.
- Fill the bowl locally. Many Seattle-area pet-food retailers now carry several foods and treats made in our region. These often contain healthier, less chemical-laden ingredients than typical pet foods.

Now we'll fetch a couple of doggone simple pet-supply tips:

- Buy used pet supplies, which are widely available at garage sales or through online ad listings. You don't always need brand-new pet carriers, leashes, bowls and all the rest.
- Just say no. The pet-products industry wants you to think you show pets your love by showering them with cool supplies and toys, but many pets are happy with just you, a ball, a stick or a piece of string.

And of course we need to consider what comes out the back end:

- Double-bag pet waste and put it in the garbage. While not ideal and not exceedingly green, it's considered the safest and most practical disposal method currently available.
- Never put animal waste in your yard-waste collection cart. The disposal solution of the future may be a separate method designed to safely compost pet waste, but that's probably a long way off.
- Try cat litter made of sustainable materials such as recycled paper or reclaimed wood. Avoid clumping cat litter for kittens, since it may harm them if they ingest it.
- Reuse plastic bags for pet waste. Biodegradable pet-poop bags don't break down quickly in a landfill, and their minor environmental benefits don't justify the cost.

Q: Sparky's ready for his walk. Do you have one last tip for us to chew on?

A: Spend an hour online or at the library and you can find dozens more great ways to be a greener pet owner. By the end of the year, try five new ideas that work for your lifestyle. Your pets may not notice, but you will.

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