

You and Your Dog: Greening Up Right

6 ways to help your dog tread more lightly on Mother Earth.

By Tom Barthel

As much as you might think your dog is the greenest member of the family, canines do impact the environment in a negative way. Although their carbon pawprints may not be as large as ours, we can help reduce their impact on the environment in big ways through a few small changes in the way we care for them.

The single biggest way dogs affect the environment negatively is with their waste — or at least how we treat their waste. Each year, tons of dog waste end up in landfills. By taking up valuable space and potentially adding parasites to area lakes and rivers, dog waste does its share of environmental damage. Other aspects of dog care impact the environment, too. Read on for ways you can change this.

1 Bio bags. When buried in landfills, ordinary plastic bags take decades to decompose. By choosing biodegradable bags to collect your dog's waste, and depending on what landfill it ends up in, you reduce that time to mere months. With bags made from cornstarch, which degrades when wet, your dog's poop decomposes much more quickly.

2 Local shopping. Adding a bit of green to your pet's daily diet — in the form of a few fresh fruits and vegetables — can do as much good for the planet as for your dog.

Shopping at your local farmers market for fruits and vegetables you can share with your pets does more than boost the local economy. By getting at least some of your dog's food from local sources, you decrease the amount of fossil fuel it takes to ship food.

3 Erosion control. Even a day at the dog park or a scenic hike can be an opportunity to do what's right for the Earth. When repeated dog paw traffic compacts soil, plants die. When plants no longer hold the dirt in place, topsoil washes into area waterways and makes it difficult to grow anything green in the area again. Give the grass a break, and vary your walking routes or use natural paths created by other wilderness creatures when you enjoy the unpaved outdoors.

4 Tub time. Your pet is likely to enjoy the spirit of conservation, particularly if he's not fond of taking baths. Though inevitable, washing up doesn't have to be wasteful.

Before running a bath, have all your supplies at hand. The readier you are, the less likely you are to leave the water running while you fetch the shampoo. Consider using a handheld wand attachment with an on-off valve so you can wash, rinse, and repeat without wasting a drop. If you use vegetable-based, phosphate-free shampoos, the dirty water won't offend the environment. Lukewarm or room-temperature water also saves energy.

5 Customized comfort. Saving energy during the coldest and hottest months of the year is a bit more difficult, particularly with an old, drafty house. Throw on an extra sweater, and do your part to keep your pet from wasting energy, too. Programming your thermostat a few degrees cooler in the winter and warmer in the summer makes a huge difference on monthly utility bills.

Though your dog can't hang his coat at the door when temperatures rise, you can make his immediate area more comfortable without wasting energy. Invest in a thermostatically controlled, heated bed for winter months and a chilled insert for the summer, and your pet can do his part to be greener.

6 Renewable toys. Helping your dog conserve can be as simple as choosing the right tools for self-amusement. When given the choice, many dogs gravitate toward green choices, particularly where toys are concerned.

Green toys accomplish the same active goals as more traditional toys, but impact the environment less. Look for recycled tire chew toys, hemp rope toys, organic cotton squeaker toys, and the like. For owners with active dogs who make short work of toys, purchasing renewable products makes a tremendous positive impact on the environment.

Let's face it. Dogs consume plenty of products, many of which have the potential to further damage the environment. Because they can't make choices on their own about how to better respect and preserve the environment they use every



day, it's up to us to make a conscious effort to help reduce their impact in whatever small ways we can.

Tom Barthel is a Michigan-based master gardener and freelance writer specializing in pet and gardening topics. His latest book is "Canines Gone Green" (Bowtie Press, 2009).

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