



Eco-Warrior

Eco friendly pets

Is man's best friend an eco-friendly asset or is he a sometime eco-unfriendly beast?

If you have a vegetable patch and your dog continually digs it up, is that an eco-unfriendly action or is he perhaps just vegetarian?

If he distributes his doggy "calling cards" all over your garden, is he being eco-unfriendly or do we just have to approach the problem a little differently? In South Africa our dogs generate hundreds of thousands of kilograms of doggy-do annually – what happens to that?

And what about the stuff that the cats generate and we don't find until we want to plant some seedlings in our vegetable patch? Yuck! Cats that do their business outside pollute the water and soil with toxoplasma gondii, a parasite that can make pregnant women and those lacking an adequate immune response, very sick. Use a litter tray and dispose of the yucky stuff as if it were toxic waste.

Consider also that an environmental working group found that cats and dogs are carrying around a cocktail of over four dozen different industrial chemicals in their bodies and many at levels higher than humans can tolerate. Among these chemicals are carcinogens such as flame retardants, phthalates or plastic softeners, and a range of stain and grease-proofing chemicals - to say nothing of the insecticides we use to kill off fleas and ticks.

Keeping birds also has its risks. Bird droppings carry all sorts of awful parasites and a small amount of wind-blown dried secretion that lands in your eye will cause major problems. Even the very fine feathers that are almost invisible to the naked eye find their way into your lungs and create irritation and infection.

The simple fish tank or aquarium is also home to a range of infectious diseases carried by unhealthy fish.

Having pets in your house is a big problem – it's dangerous and can make you very ill. A single Salmonella **bacterial** infection can cost a fortune to contend with. This can be passed to you by dogs, cats, hamsters and mice etc. One has to bear in mind that most human infectious diseases have animal origins. **Parasitic** and **Fungal** infections are easily picked up from animal contact. Worm infestations go largely unnoticed because many of the parasites are microscopic but present huge danger to small children running barefoot.

What about animal bites? South Africa has a problem with rabies in wild animals and domestic animals. There are large parts of the country where wild animals can come into contact with domestic animals. So while vaccination of pets against rabies is law, there is still a risk of infection where a wild animal bites a domestic animal which in turn bites a human.

Cat Scratch Disease or CSD results from a bacterium that is carried by fleas that infest cats. Cats that bite or scratch humans will infect the human. Cats have particularly dirty mouths, so a playful bite can rapidly turn into a serious case of septicaemia.



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So what should we be doing about this little problem? We are probably going to have pets no matter what the evidence says. At the outset we should be looking at our pet supplies. Do we look for natural products for them to eat and are we continually buying plastic chew toys and balls? When we buy collars and leashes do we notice if the materials have been treated with flame retardants and are we aware of what kind of bedding they are sleeping on?

Do we pick up after our puppies? The ideal is of course to flush the dog's poop so that it gets the same treatment as human waste. Composting dog poop is an absolute no-no! The bacteria in dog poop can make you very ill and the composting process doesn't kill off the bacteria – so don't go using it in your veggie patch. Always clean up dog poop as soon as possible. The bacteria that it carries can enter children's bodies through the soles of their feet and make them ill. If it should enter waterways and storm drains, it has the potential to make other humans and animals ill.

Combating fleas is always a nightmare. The success of the exercise really depends on how much time and effort you are willing to spend on the job. There are many pesticides available but eco friendly environments would prefer to use natural remedies. Go with the least toxic options but do it regularly. Give the [dog garlic](#) with his meals and spray him daily with a 50% mix of white vinegar and water. This could be a problem if you try it with your cat – think about Garfield and how he would be getting even!

If you do decide to go the natural route and get rid of those toxic products that you already have on the shelf, ensure that you find out how to dispose of them correctly. Call your local municipality for further information. Don't flush them down the toilet or pour them into storm water drains – you could end up polluting a river somewhere.

Unfortunately, pets are generally unfriendly when it comes to the environment and our own lives in particular. Our efforts to make them fit in are going to require a lot of work. Children apparently need pets to make them more rounded human beings. So some simple activities like covering the children's sandpit and ensuring that they wear shoes when running around will diminish some of the dangers. Instilling in children a culture of hand-washing after contact will also help. And telling children it's not OK to kiss the dog and the cat is an imperative.

Or you could just get them to forego the pets, hug their Granny and read a book ...!