

Study highlights situational complexities of picking up dog waste

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There are 8 million dogs in the UK, which adds up to a lot of daily walks and potential for a lot of dog faeces to be left behind. Most dog walkers are happy and even proud to bag and bin their dog's waste, some might leave waste if they are off the beaten track or in more rural locations,

while a small proportion of dog walkers are totally disengaged from the idea that picking up their dog waste is the "right thing to do". A new study in the *International Journal of Environment and Waste Management*, discusses the environmental, health and safety issues.

Christopher Lowe of the University of Central Lancashire in Preston and colleagues hoped to determine what factors influence dog walker behaviour and how those who do not do the right thing might be persuaded to take charge of their dog mess. Moreover, persuading those who do bag the waste to put it in a suitable bin either on the street or at home is also important as there is some evidence that bagged dog waste left in the environment might be a longer term problem especially if that becomes a norm among dog walkers; it is certainly unpleasant to see, either way.

Dog faeces are not only as unpleasant as any animal waste, they can also carry parasitic diseases that have health impacts on people and animals that come into contact with them. For instance, they might transmit toxocariasis, via the larvae (immature worms) of the dog roundworm (*Toxocara canis*), which can cause blindness, asthma and neurological problems in those affected. Dog faeces from animals that eat raw meat and bones are also suspected of causing neosporosis in cattle. The researchers also point out that the presence of dog faeces in country parks, walks and other recreational areas can deter visitors and so have a local economic impact in those areas.

Dog waste signs, bins and their collection are a significant cost to [local authorities](#) amounting to more than £22 million per year across England and Wales. "Dog waste is also an emotive subject and complaints made by the public to local authorities are often dominated by dog waste issues,". There are, the researchers report, several hundred thousand public complaints each year, which also adds costs to local authorities.

"It is becoming socially unacceptable for dog owners in the UK not to clean up after their [dogs](#)," the team says. "This behavioural change may also be partly associated with the construction of 'the responsible dog owner' that has developed in the context of increased media exposure of dog attacks."

The researchers carried out a path audit in popular dog walking areas of Lancashire, UK, to determine the influence of path morphology, location and management (related to dog waste) on the frequency and location of bagged and non-bagged dog waste. They also conducted an online, nationwide survey of dog walkers to determine attitudes and behaviour regarding dog waste.

The team suggests that there are five types of dog walker from the most to the least socially and environmentally responsible:

- o Proud to pick up - happy to be seen carrying dog waste, will pick up in all locations and take it home if no bins are available
- o It is the right thing to do - will pick up in public places but will seek to dispose of the waste as soon as it is practical; often embarrassed to be seen carrying bagged waste
- o I have done my job - if there is no bin available will leave the bagged waste to be dealt with by others
- o Only if I have to - will only pick up in the presence of other people - likely to discard when no one is looking
- o Disengaged - will not pick up in any situation even if they are aware of the environmental consequences of their actions

The study highlights the complexities of the issue, the team says, and in particular the importance of interactions between situational, social and individual motivational factors in influencing behaviour. "It is suggested that significantly more research is required to assist in addressing this emotive yet complex problem," they conclude.

More information: "Environmental and social impacts of domestic

dog waste in the UK: investigating barriers to behavioural change in dog walkers" in *Int. J. Environment and Waste Management*, 2014, 13, 331-347

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