

LOCAL VOICES

Dogs are not the only contributors of waste

By Gretchen Paulsen

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The writer lives in Parker

A letter writer recently expressed concern about health issues when people bring family dogs to the beach (Free-for-All, “No dogs mean clean beaches,” June 9).

The letter did not include facts or science, so I am compelled to correct the misinformation included in it. There is no indication of any recent outbreak of rashes, ringworm or life-threatening diseases caused by waste — animal or human — at our area beaches. Our waters are healthy, and it’s irresponsible to try to alarm the public with this issue.

Recent research indicates that dogs (and cats) are one of the many fixtures of suburban America that add to water pollution. Lawn fertilizers, rinse water from driveways and motor oil commonly end up in streams and lakes. At many California beaches, for example, sea gulls and other birds are most responsible for high bacteria levels. (For a good appreciation of the level of contamination birds produce, take a boat ride downwind of Audubon Island, also known as “Bird Island,” off the Port of Panama City.)

But federal laws protect some birds. So people target the most expedient, if minor, contributor to the issue rather than do the hard work associated with educational campaigns. Banning conscientious, law-abiding citizens and visitors to public areas is not any more of an answer than banning everyone from driving because some choose to speed.

Thanks to modern medicine, diseases associated with both domestic pet and wild animal scat are diminishing. A local veterinarian assured me that parasites commonplace in the South 50 years ago are rare today due to the preventative pet care prescribed by veterinarians. Additionally, the veterinarian assured me that sunlight and drying also help to destroy parasites. And, if owners are required to pick up after their pets, “the possibility of exposure goes away.”

Wild animal populations also are the primary transmitters of rabies, but that concern does not seem to be keeping people off of our beaches or out of parks — so why would domestic dog leavings? If the threat of disease were real, then the exclusive Cloister at Sea Island in Georgia, and a beautiful section of Key West between the town’s most expensive restaurant and a swank resort, wouldn’t have successful dog-friendly policies. Nor would multiple beaches in Pinellas County, all of pristine South Walton Count, and St. George Island be pet-friendly, as they are today.

Until we find a way to pick up after all the deer, mice, birds, coyotes, fox, armadillos and humans that frequent our shores, there will be traces of waste in many sizes, shapes and forms on our beaches — and everywhere else for that matter. Those truly concerned about this situation are best advised to stick to swimming pools where the chlorine will kill all those pesky microorganisms.

Meanwhile, I'll be at the beach concerning myself with avoiding the jellyfish and stingrays.