

ETRAC

Cleaning Up Our Act

Future Public Equestrian Access Depends On These Two Manure-Removing Habits

Manure is something all equestrians are familiar with. For better or for worse, it's something that is intimately associated with horses and riding. While we all might wish our horses were housebroken and never defecated anywhere but a single corner of their stalls or pastures, they don't do this. Horses go while tied to trailers, they go on the trails, they go right in the middle of a busy intersection or right on a new bricked driveway of a nice looking house.

While horse people are so used to manure that this doesn't seem like a big deal, we have to look at it from the non-rider's point of view. Dog owners are expected to bag and remove their dogs' feces, and don't understand why equestrians get away with leaving much larger piles around.. Kids are raised with video games and hand-sanitizers instead of mud and livestock, and parents are worried about germ-ridden horse feces in our public parks and trails. Bicyclists view horse manure (never mind the actual horses) as a trail safety hazard, as riding through it can foul bike brakes.

Why should we care what dog-walkers, parents, or bikers think of horse manure? We should care because there are many, many more of them than us. When the non-equestrians visit parks and trails, they complain to park/land managers and neighborhood associations. They work to keep horses off their hiking and biking trails. The land managers' job is to balance the needs of everyone, and since equestrians are such a minority of users, the hikers and bicyclists would be granted their wish of manure-free trails. Equestrians will lose current trail access and be denied new access to trails and trailer parking. So our manure really is our problem at this point. We have to change our own view on manure from something that's goofy and harmless, to something truly dangerous for us to leave behind.

There are two major manure-related changes we will all do to keep our trails. The first is to diligently keep trailhead and trailer parking areas manure free. Pick up manure and put it back in the trailer both before you ride, and also before you trailer home. Many of us already do this, but we all need to get on board with it. The second new habit, and this is a larger change, is to actively move our horses to the side of the trails before they defecate, and actually dismount (yes, dismount!) to kick manure off paved areas like driveways and sidewalks.

While horses do slow down and can be stubborn before raising their tails, this gives us a chance to feel that the manure is on its way and we can use leg to move our horses over to the side of a trail. Horses can be trained this much to get to the side of a trail before defecating-- believe it or not they do housebreak therapy ponies, so don't let your horse convince you s/he HAS to go right in the middle of the trail or driveway. It might take strong leg at first, but they will get the idea.

The second thing for suburban-trail riders is, if if your horse does happen leave a pile on a driveway or sidewalk, is to actually dismount and kick manure off the pavement. For those of you thinking that dismounting on the road for a silly pile of manure is not safe or practical, imagine if a horse started limping after walking over some gravel. We'd all think it was worth it to dismount to pick the rock out of our horse's foot, even though we'd need to find a place to hop back on or mount from the ground. If you can't get off and on your horse while trail riding, this is a

real safety issue, manure or not. We have to see a pile of manure in a driveway as something just as risky to our trail riding as a rock in the hoof, because those piles will make trail easements and horse access disappear.

Some equestrians feel like all we need to do is educate non-riders on the facts of manure. We can teach that unlike dog feces, there are not significant numbers of human pathogens in horse manure. Or we can point out that the nice winterized trails in Huddart and Wunderlich Parks, the town trails in Woodside, and the Clarkia Trail in Edgewood Park, are maintained by the equestrian community and everyone benefits from that, even with some manure added. These things are true, but that is only one part of keeping horses on our trail. We have to change our own ways as much as we change others' thinking.

We're at the point where the hikers and bicyclists so outnumber us that if we are going to keep our access to trails and public easements, we really do need to clean up our act. That means shoveling manure back into our trailers before and after we ride, and actively preventing horses from leaving piles on the middle of trails and driveways. Let's enjoy our trails and our trail horses for many years to come!