

Four Paws, Two Shoes, One Trail
by Lisa Doner, Plymouth, NH

In all seasons I love being outside in my favorite places with some of my favorite companions – my dogs – but winter I love the most. I think it's because I might otherwise stay inside, warm and cozy, if not for the sheer joy my dogs exhibit racing up the trail, climbing snowbanks, and snuffling at rodents buried under the snow. I hike with them, for them, and reap the benefits. Walking dogs in town during winter isn't easy. Icy road edges make cleats or microspikes essential, but uncomfortable to use on pavement. The high snowplow drifts prevent easy access off the road when cars pass. Salt gets into paws and stings. So, when I can, I seek out the nearby trails within town conservation lands for my daily dog walks.

Many others engage in this rural ritual, bringing four-legged companions onto trails, old roads, under powerlines, along rivers and lakeshores. I see their tracks, my dogs smell their trace, and, too often, we all see their waste. That trails and animal waste go together is a familiar, unfortunate fact. I remember hiking the Grand Canyon as a child and being amazed and appalled at all the piles left right on the trail by the pack animals. Long abandoned trails in the high Alps still bear witness that people traveled with their animals in the meadows of non-native, lowland species commonly used as animal feed. Past attitudes have clearly been that these trails are matters of practicality, serving human needs, and part of that need includes accompanying animals and the burden of their waste. So, I find myself asking, when it comes to modern trails and the access to nature they allow today, what is a fair, just and reasonable policy regarding animal companions?

If we consider the various arguments used to take lands off the tax rolls and place them in conservation, whether as a national, state or local park, conservation area or forest, they always include the utility to people. These lands serve as long term resources valued for their wood, the habitat they provide for game, the opportunity they offer for hiking and hunting but also for the diversity of life they contain, the ecosystem services they provide to water protection, and the opportunity to visit a "wildness" so different from the environment we live in. Even here in New Hampshire where a town road is as likely to be dirt as it is paved, and bear, deer, bobcat, porcupine, fisher cat and owl are not unusual visitors around rural homes, it's still a very different feeling to go outside the house and maintained land and use the trails to enter a more natural setting. That chance to feel like a visitor in an uncontrolled, unprotected, truly wild area draws many of us deep into the wilderness, along trails created specifically for that purpose.

I want that experience too. I want to share it with my dogs, so that I am not alone in the joy of it. I feel invited into wild land by the sheer existence of a trail. A trail is created for people; *it is an invitation*. But has it also, by default, invited my dog? You see the conundrum – I would not use these trails nearly so often if it were not for my dog walks. But the trails were created for me, the human, not me, the pet owner. I've never seen language about "opportunity to walk dogs" when seeking public support to establish a conservation area. I do see places that specifically prohibit dogs. Most places allow them. But when I see piles of dog waste strewn along the trail I wonder, how much longer will dogs be allowed? So, I do my best to ensure our welcome. I clean up my dogs' waste or scatter it far off the trail and away from nearby streams. I train them not to chase animals or annoy other hikers. And I appreciate every moment I'm able to spend outside on these trails that bring me into the wilds.

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