

Hand feeding waterfowl human food (i.e. bread, popcorn, chips, etc.) contributes to a variety of environmental health problems that affect humans and other wildlife. Below is a description of the public health impacts of feeding waterfowl, including the negative impacts to people and wildlife.

Disease

Waterfowl act as hosts for bacterial and pathogenic agents such as Salmonella, avian influenza, and duck viral enteritis that can infect other waterfowl and humans. As geese numbers continue to increase, concerns have been raised regarding the negative impact Canada geese may have on water quality and disease transmission.

When ducks and geese feed on scattered corn or bread, they eat in the same place where they defecate. Droppings contain harmful bacteria that can infect humans. In addition, large concentrations of waterfowl facilitate the spread of disease. Diseases generally not transmissible in a wild setting find overcrowded and unsanitary conditions very favorable.

Most waterfowl die-offs in the past 10 years have involved artificial feeding resulting in diseases such as Aspergillosis. This fatal disease affecting geese results from consuming moldy, rotting bread that is fed to geese by humans. These diseases have the potential to kill large numbers of waterfowl.

In some cases, humans have been affected by disease transmitted by waterfowl. The risk of disease transmission is partially because large numbers of geese leave large quantities of feces. A single goose can produce up to 1.5 pounds of feces each day. This problem is magnified as these geese have become non-migratory or resident geese due to feeding by humans.

Research has shown that the excrement of geese contains a wide variety of pathogens capable of infecting humans. Yet geese can also be a means of transmitting (vector) other diseases in ways unrelated to their defecation.

Habitat Degradation

Feeding attracts large numbers of birds creating overpopulation. The accumulation of droppings and feathers increase the risk for disease. Overgrazing of vegetation, soil erosion, and excess droppings leaves recreational areas used by humans unsanitary for use and the elevated bacteria can contaminate the local water supply.

Excess nutrients in ponds caused by unnatural numbers of waterfowl droppings can result in water-quality problems such as summer algal blooms. Also, in areas with recreational water where waterfowl congregate to feed, E-coli counts can swell to levels that make the water unsuitable for swimming.

Information presented here has been compiled from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, National Wildlife Federation, Ducks Unlimited Canada Conserving Canada's Wetlands, and Coalition to Prevent Destruction of Canada Geese.