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Salish Sea Ecosystem Conference

2020 Salish Sea Ecosystem Conference  
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Apr 21st, 9:00 AM - Apr 22nd, 4:45 PM

## Never underestimate a well-placed poop joke: Getting to the bottom of water quality problems with a fresh take on outreach

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DuBose, Karen, "Never underestimate a well-placed poop joke: Getting to the bottom of water quality problems with a fresh take on outreach" (2020). *Salish Sea Ecosystem Conference*. 62.  
<https://cedar.wwu.edu/ssec/2020ssec/allsessions/62>

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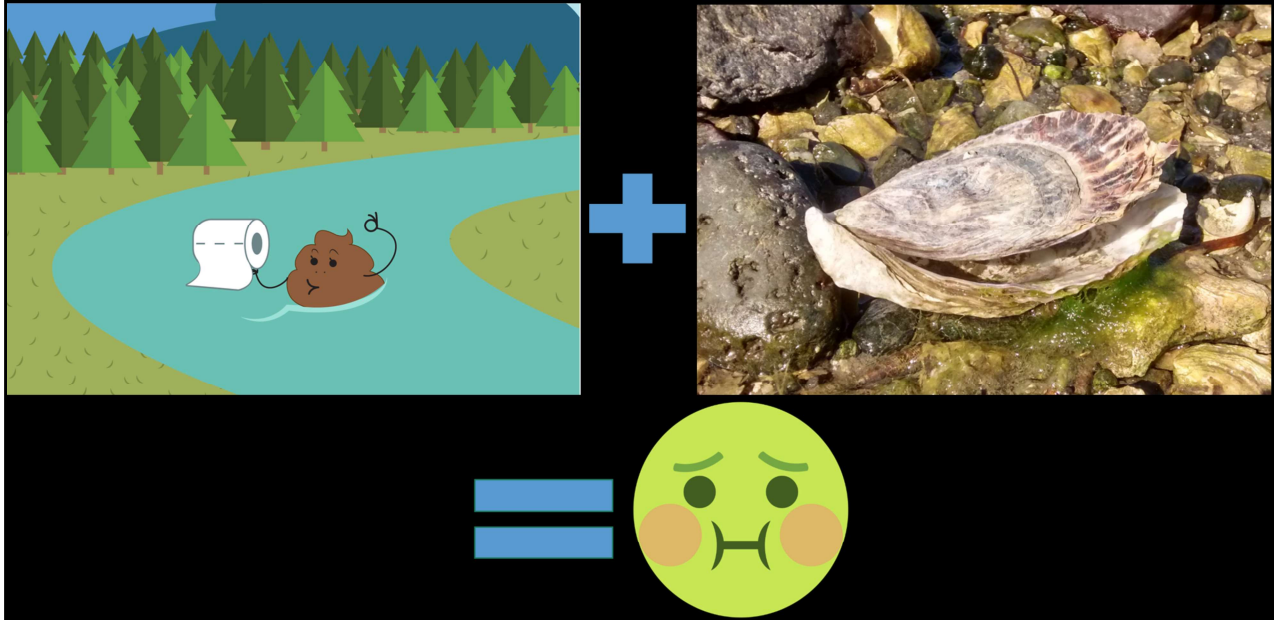
# Never Underestimate a Well-Placed Poop Joke

Skagit County's PoopSmart Campaign



Karen DuBose, April 21, 2020, Salish Sea Ecosystem Conference

## The problem



- We're a rural county, north of Seattle and south of the Canadian border. We've got tons of outdoor recreation options, lots of farms, and lots of potential for humans and poop to interact. We also have over 4,000 acres of commercial shellfish beds, many of which are oyster beds. And people like to eat raw oysters.
- We'd been working hard for 8 years to get the word out with newsletters, newspaper articles, and public meetings. Plus contacting people directly when we thought there was a problem on their property. And we'd just started using the Facebook page that had lingered unused for years.
- We'd done a great job of reaching the science-y people, who were already primed to hear our clean water messages because they were already keyed in.
- BUT...our outreach was pretty science-heavy, which is not surprising given that most of us are scientists. And let's face it, poop isn't sexy. It's easy, and often preferable to ignore.

## The problem



- Average folks forget about septic inspections, ignore reminder letters, forget poop bags when taking Fido for a walk...
- ...and why? Because they're busy. Most people didn't see us as important enough to catch their attention.
- And while everyone agrees that clean water is important, people don't make the connection between their actions and bacteria and how that affects THEM, when they're swimming at the beach or their kids are playing in the creek.
- We needed to get to the bottom of the issue.
- We had to ask: What was preventing people from taking action?
- How could we educate without lecturing?
- How could we help people change their behavior?
- We had to put ourselves in their shoes: It's a 24/7 information environment. We're all doing too much with too little time and money.

## The solution: PoopSmart

- Poop jokes are funny. People listen.
- Make it relatable. Make it simple.



- With the help of our consultant, PRR, we took a hard look at our audiences and what we wanted to achieve
- We wanted people to be smarter about poop.
- We wanted people to be...PoopSmart
- Our goals were simple and measurable: We needed more farmers to self-refer to our Conservation District. We needed more people to understand and inspect their septic systems. We needed more people to take responsibility for their own recreational pooping (and their pets).
- In order to be effective, we had to let loose and stop taking a serious topic so seriously.
- We're government. It's hard not to be serious.

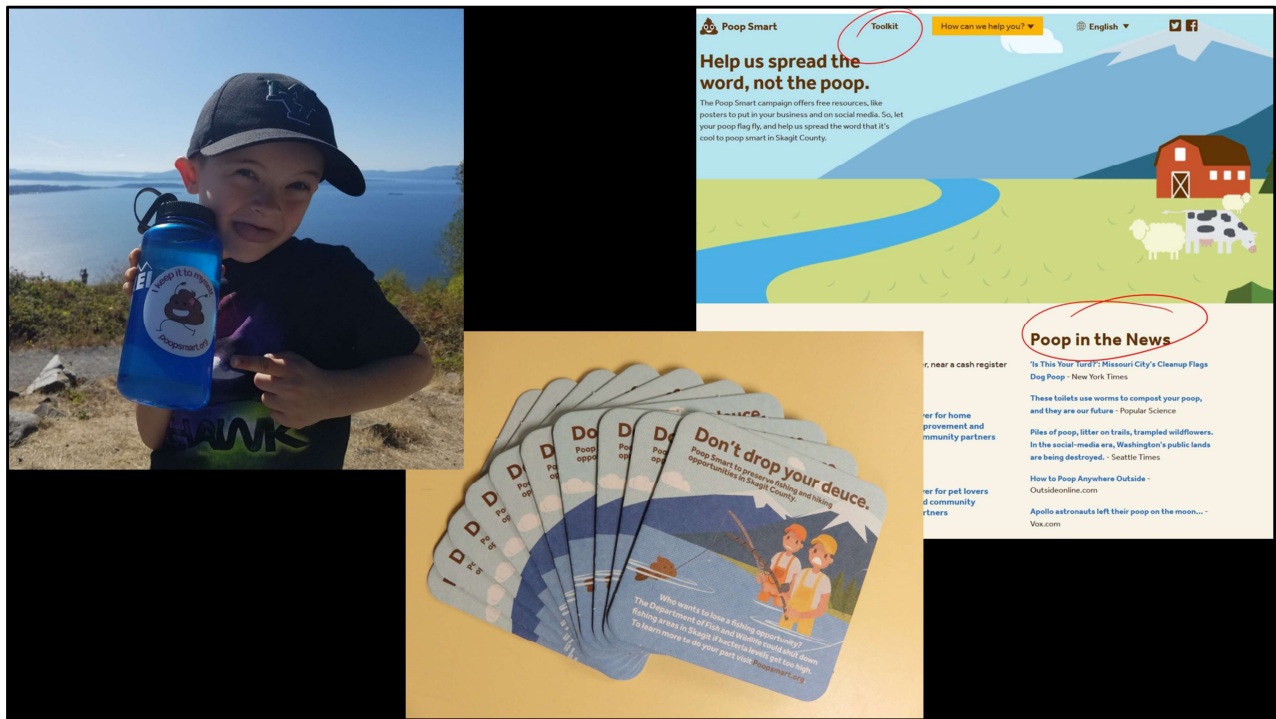


PoopSmart is funny. It's literal. And it's all about making smarter pooping choices. This is what the main landing page looks like. There are separate pages for each of our four audiences.

## Consider your audience: what works for them?



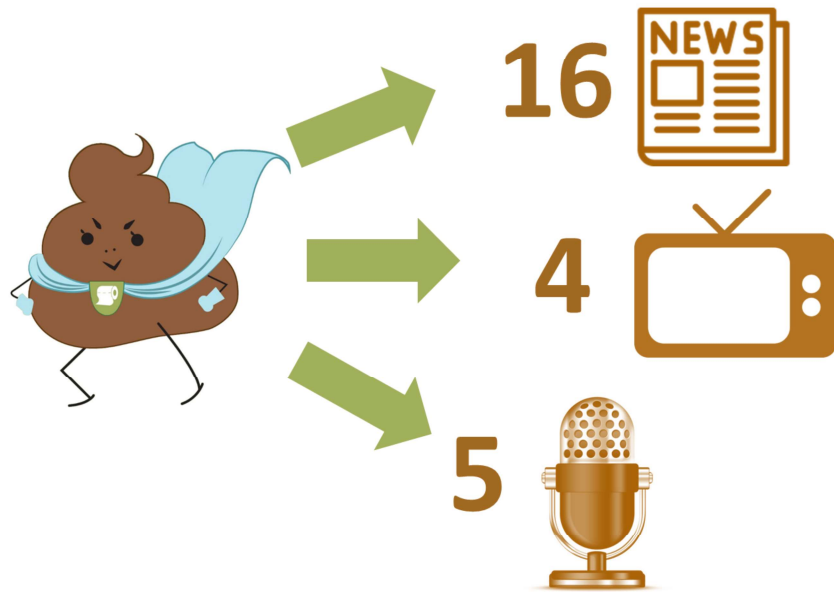
- We took a close look at our four main audiences, and worked to target our messaging more effectively. What message work for them?
- Helping farmers, for example, manage mud in their pastures ALSO helps the county reduce fecal coliform bacteria in local creeks and streams
- That's a win for farmers (because who loves mud?) AND a win for clean water.
- So if they'll respond to the mud message more than a clean water one? Let's talk about mud.
- Our local WDFW could shut down fishing areas if poop kept getting out of hand. We didn't want that. Fishermen didn't want that.
- The simple solution? PoopSmart-er
- PRR helped us create catchy, relatable graphics, a microsite with bite-sized nuggets of poop information, and a social media campaign designed to get people talking about poop.



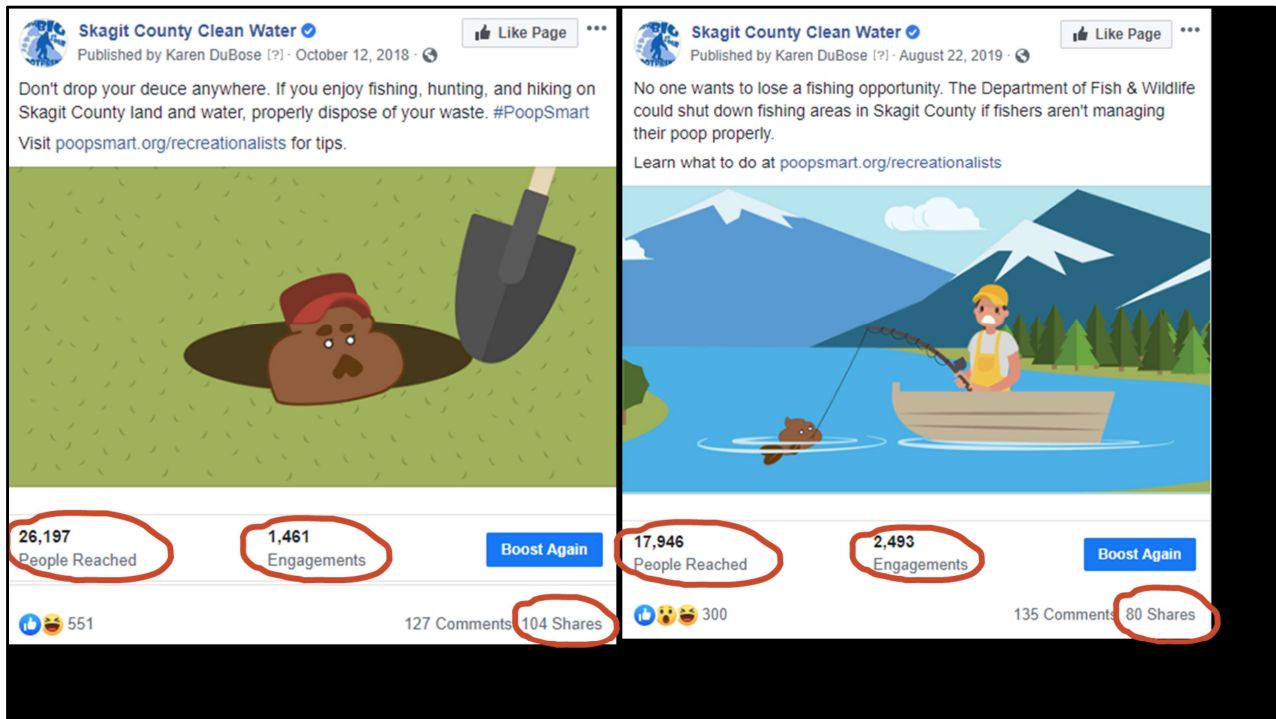
- We pushed the message online and offline, with posters, coasters and stickers, and a webpage dedicated to poop in the news (which, surprisingly, there's a lot of)
- We shared the word (not the turd) to anywhere and everywhere that our target audiences frequented: Coasters to local bars, posters to farm & feed stores, stickers to just about everywhere
- And it worked.



## Earned media coverage (to date)



- PoopSmart has gone viral in the best possible way.
- We've been on the evening news 4 times, in local and regional newspapers and news outlets 16 times, and mentioned or interviewed on the radio 5 times.
- Earned media coverage is like GOLD. News outlets have way more followers than I do, and when they share my message, the campaign gets more attention, and more people listen and think about the problem.

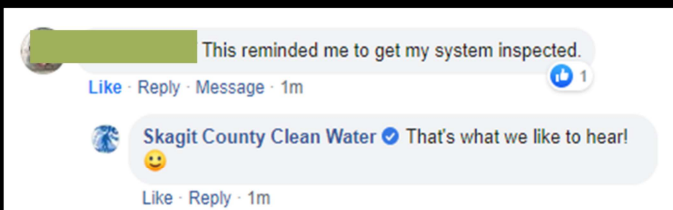
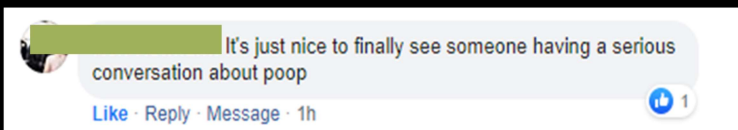


Our social media posts have been shared over 1200 times. I sponsored these for \$100 each. As far as I'm aware, there's nowhere else I can spend money where I could reach 20,000 people, get a hundred of them to share it, and be sure that 2,000 people actually READ what I wrote.

Posts like these require a lot of time to manage, and a social media campaign should never be undertaken without an awareness of how much work goes into it. But this is the most successful type of outreach that we do when it comes to raising awareness.

## Did it work? YES!

- 48% increase in voluntary inspections
- More people seeking help from Conservation District
- Lots of conversation about recreational pooping & dog poop



- We've seen a 48% increase in voluntary septic system inspections (specifically in areas where we haven't done any enforcement)
- What's more, we have anecdotal evidence that the county's septic inspection program is meeting less resistance from homeowners
- Why? Because we've focused on protecting their investment and avoiding expensive system failures – not on mandatory compliance and fines
- Our conservation district is seeing more people come through their doors than they can handle, all asking for help figuring out how to manage their farm, manure and mud better so that farmers save money and time.
- And we are having more direct conversations with people online about poop – why wildlife isn't a problem, why dog poop isn't fertilizer, how a septic system works, etc.

We even inspired TWO t-shirt designs!



Two separate people completely independently created their own t-shirt designs in response to the campaign. And wore them. Publicly!



We won a national award for representing the best in government communication from over 700 entries nation-wide in 2019. Since our approach is a pretty solid break from a normal way of doing business for a government, it was a really nice confirmation of our strategy.

Best of all...

**YOU CAN HAVE THIS CAMPAIGN.**

**FOR FREE.**

**SERIOUSLY.**

Best of all? The campaign and all its materials are available for free to any organization that wants to pick it up! Just let me know and we'll make it happen.

All you need is a WordPress page and a little help with the technicalities of getting it up. I have social media posts, posters, sticker designs, videos...you're welcome to everything. I intentionally kept the words "Skagit County" out of things that were hard to edit. You have to keep the EPA language on it because this was funded by EPA's National Estuary Program, and the materials should be shared as-is, aside from changing reference from our county to your jurisdiction.

## Speaking of the EPA...

This project has been funded wholly or in part by the United States Environmental Protection Agency under assistance agreement PC01J18001-0 to the Washington Department of Health. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Environmental Protection Agency, nor does mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation for use.

Here's the language that you have to keep. We've been SO fortunate to receive National Estuary Program funds to support this program, and we (and EPA) would love to see that investment compounded by more people using the materials.

# Thank you!

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