

HOT AIR

Nightmares

By Barbara Currier Bell

What danger lurks in the depths of Milford's storm drains? Recently, a city man told me his sleep was disturbed by blood-curdling screams coming from a storm drain near his bedroom window. Later, he saw a raccoon stealthily climb out from around the grate and calmly cross the road towards the bank of Calf Pen Meadow.

We all know that storm drains aren't designed to house raccoons. But neither are they designed to be receptacles for leftover paint, cigarette butts, or soapsuds. They're simply supposed to carry away rain. They gather plenty of pollution just doing that, since the rain running off impermeable surfaces such as roads, driveways, sidewalks, parking lots, and roofs is full of waste—chemical or organic. The drains don't need any further additions of pollutants from householders.

But additions are all too frequent. According to Chris Stone, in DEP's Bureau of Water Management, the largest source of added storm-drain pollution is car-washing. Instead of washing your car on the street, wash it on grass, which can filter the detergents and waxes, or put it through a commercial car-wash, where wastewater is disposed of properly.

Vehicle fluids are the next most common storm-drain pollutants. Don't just pour motor oil, anti-freeze, and other fluids through the nearest grate. Take the containers to a Hazmat collection site, or go to a garage to get the work done.

Finally, lawn maintenance chemicals: fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. People think if one pound is good, two pounds must be better. That's incorrect. The extra pound just washes off in the rain. So don't apply too much of any lawn chemical, and use common sense about where and when to apply it. For instance, don't spatter it on your driveway or sidewalk; and don't spread it if you know heavy rain is on the way. Indeed, the easiest solution--on your back, your wallet, your kids, and your pets—is not to put toxic chemicals on your lawn at all.

“Non-point” pollution of waterways via storm drains is just as harmful as “point pollution”, meaning direct discharges from factories or sewers. Storm drains don't lead to treatment plants: they lead right to local rivers, streams, beaches, Long Island Sound, and, finally, to the Atlantic Ocean. The law is, “Thou shalt not pollute”, says DEP, and the law makes no distinction between dumping in storm drains or dumping in bodies of water.

Milford's Environmental Concerns Coalition has organized an ambitious effort to leaflet homeowners about storm-drain pollution, and to mark every city storm drain with a warning. The Long Island Sound Grant Fund pays for materials, and CT's DEP partners with the ECC. They need all the help they can get. You see, the man who heard the blood-curdling screams from his storm drain was right to be scared. Danger lurks in those dark, rising waters. The raccoons, the rats? Only animals. The real monsters down there are far more deadly.