

Fire Pans

Popular outdoor destinations attract higher numbers of visitors, and receive more impact to the surrounding natural resources. This can lead to increased concentrations of human impact. Left unchecked, these conditions may force land managers to restrict access, or implement user regulations designed to protect the natural resources and enhance public health and safety.

A camp fire built on the ground in a circle of blackened rocks is a traditional part of many people's outdoor experience. However, in fragile areas that receive large numbers of visitors, such open fires result in increased impacts to the surrounding natural resources by concentrating visitor traffic, compacting and sterilizing soils, damaging trees, and accumulating large quantities of ash, charcoal, and garbage, which in turn requires much labor and expense to remove. These traditional open fires also pose an increased fire hazard during times of high fire danger. Additionally, laws in certain areas may require public agencies to maintain resources in a primitive, natural condition for the long-term sustainability of the resources.

The best way to prevent the impacts caused by open fires is to not build fires at all, and use gas or propane stoves for cooking, and lanterns for lighting, instead. To reduce the impacts caused by open fires, managers might prohibit fires year round, or restrict them to designated recreation sites only. Additionally, during times of high fire danger, all open fires may be prohibited. In other areas, such as many river canyons, visitors may be required by law to use a "fire pan" for all open fires.

A fire pan is typically defined as a "metal container with sides of height sufficient to contain all ash and debris". Fires are built inside the pan, usually elevated off the ground to avoid scorching the underlying vegetation and soil. When the fire is no longer needed, it is allowed to burn down to ash or stirred with water until cooled completely. The ashes and charcoal can then be transported to the next night's camp, or bagged for disposal with the rest of the camp garbage. Never bury ashes, or dispose of ash and charcoal in waterways or vegetation.

Fire pans should be set up away from trees, boulders, and vegetation. Bring your own firewood or charcoal, or gather it from driftwood piles along waterways if legal to do so. Never cut or break wood from living trees, which is essential for wildlife habitat.

Fire pans are available for purchase through a variety of retailers in different sizes and designs, or may be improvised. Backyard barbecue grills, small barrels cut in half, oil drain pans, and even old hub caps make inexpensive and effective fire pans. "Fire blankets" are also available, constructed of fire-proof fabrics and designed to fold down to compact size. These require a little more preparation to use effectively, but may be a good option for those requiring a low-bulk, light weight option.

The correct use of fire pans greatly reduces user impacts to campsites and natural resources. Before you leave, stop and look behind you to see that you have done all you can to minimize the traces of your visit and are leaving a clean slate for the next visitors.

Because laws vary from place to place, always check with local land management agencies to determine what the specific requirements are for the area you plan to visit. With a little forethought and preparation, you can do your part in helping to keep your favorite outdoor places clean, healthy, and ready for future generations. Thank you!

