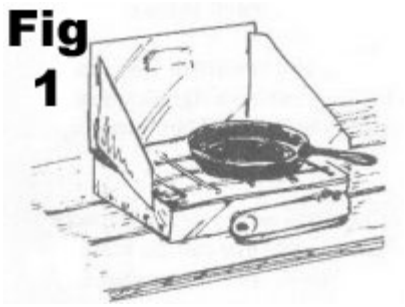
Use Campfires Responsibly

The use of campfires in the backcountry was once a necessity for cooking and heat, but the development of versatile and efficient camp stoves has facilitated a shift away from the traditional fire. With increased use of the backcountry, the natural appearance of many areas has been compromised by overuse of fires and an increasing demand for firewood. Stoves are now almost essential equipment for minimum impact camping. They are fast and flexible, and eliminate firewood availability as a concern in campsite selection.



If you typically depend on fires for cooking, consider using a stove instead (above), and build a social fire just one of two nights of your trip. A lightweight candle lantern or small gas lantern makes a pleasant alternative light source. The most important factors in determining whether or not to have a fire are:

1. Wind conditions and overall fire danger.
2. The availability of the right amount and type of firewood.
3. Administrative restrictions.

In high use areas, where impacts should be confined to durable sites, campfires can be built in existing fire rings if there is sufficient firewood. If you choose to build a fire in remote or pristine areas, it is possible to enjoy it and leave no trace that it was ever there. Techniques for these types of fires have evolved over the years to the point that there are some very practical alternatives to the traditional fire ring.

The heat from fires or stoves can cause impact, and so can the concentrated trampling of people cooking or socializing. Take care to select a durable site for any use of fire.

An innovative method for building a leave no trace fire is the mound fire. Mound fires can be built virtually anywhere using simple tools: a garden trowel or shovel, large stuff sack and a ground cloth.

To build this type of fire, begin by locating a ready source of mineral soil, sand or gravel. Mineral soil is the light colored dirt that is found below the dark, rich, organic topsoil layer. Gather mineral soil from a spot that is already disturbed by natural forces, where the impact of digging and collecting the mineral soil will not damage live vegetation. Sand and small gravel collected from stream beds or lake shores are good sources of mineral soil. as are the holes left by the roots of a recently downed tree.

Use the garden trowel to fill a stuff sack with mineral soil. Carry a load of mineral soil to the fire site. To make clean-up easier, lay a tarp or ground cloth on the fire site and then spread the soil into a circular, flat-topped mound about 6 to 8 inches thick.(See Fig. 2)


Fig 2

A fire pan is a metal tray with rigid sides at least three inches high. Metal oil drain pans and some backyard barbecue grills make effective fire pans. When using a fire pan, elevate the pan with rocks or line it with several inches of mineral soil so the heat does not scorch the ground.(See Fig. 3)


Fig 3