

## **A Thoughtful Goodbye: How to Scatter Cremated Remains Responsibly**

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Scattering cremated remains (sometimes referred to as ashes) is a meaningful ritual that many people choose as a way to say goodbye to a loved one. It brings family and friends together to find closure and connection, helping them grieve and honor the person's life.

For many, releasing ashes symbolizes their loved one's return to the earth or to a place that held special personal or spiritual significance. However, it's important to remember that not all places are equally suitable. Environmental factors, cultural traditions, and legal rules all play a role in determining where and how cremated remains can be scattered responsibly.

### **Environmental concerns**

Cremated remains pose no health risk to people, but they can have an impact on the environment. They are highly alkaline and contain concentrated minerals like sodium and phosphate. When ashes are left repeatedly in the same spot—such as popular park spaces—these minerals can build up and harm the soil, potentially damaging local vegetation.

Ashes are generally harmless when scattered in the open ocean. But leaving them in still, slow-moving, or shallow bodies of water (like small lakes and streams) can disrupt the natural pH balance and interfere with the health of aquatic plants and animals.

### **Cultural sensitivity and respect**

In places with deep spiritual, cultural, or historical meaning, scattering cremated remains can be seen as inappropriate or offensive. Many religious traditions have specific beliefs about handling remains, and spreading ashes near places of worship—like churches or mosques—may conflict with these practices. Similarly, certain mountains, canyons, and burial sites hold sacred significance for Indigenous communities. Dispersing cremated remains in these places can unintentionally disrupt spiritual balance or be seen as disrespectful.

Many parks and public spaces don't permit scattering to keep these places peaceful and welcoming for everyone. Visible ashes or bone fragments may disturb other visitors, especially in popular recreational spots like beaches or parks.

## Laws and regulations

Before leaving ashes, it's important to check whether there are laws or regulations that apply. Rules can vary depending on where you are: What's allowed in one state, park, or site might be completely off-limits somewhere else. Even different national parks have different policies—some allow scattering with a permit, while others, like Grand Canyon National Park, don't allow it at all. If you're planning to scatter at sea, federal law says you must go at least three miles offshore.

Scattering cremated remains is never allowed at national memorials like the Lincoln Memorial and Vietnam Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, government buildings, school campuses, sports stadiums, and theme parks including Disneyland and Disney World.

## Tips for scattering cremated remains respectfully

With a little planning, the experience of scattering cremated remains is not only meaningful, but also respectful to the land, the community, and other visitors. Here are some tips for spreading ashes responsibly:

- **You can scatter on your own private property** without special permission. But if the property belongs to someone else—like a golf course, shopping area, or friend's backyard—you'll need to get their permission first.
- **Spread lightly over a wide area** rather than placing all the ashes in one spot. This helps reduce the impact on plants and soil. You can also mix in compost or organic matter before releasing the ashes to make them more eco-friendly. Avoid fragile ecosystems like wetlands or protected waterways.
- **Don't scatter in sacred or ceremonial spaces**, such as churches, mosques, synagogues, or tribal lands, unless you have clear, explicit permission.
- **In public places like national or state parks, check the rules ahead of time.** Some parks allow scattering with a permit, while others don't allow it at all. The National Park Service and your state or local government websites are good places to check.
- **If you're not sure, ask.** Park rangers, local authorities, or community leaders can help you find the best way to carry out your plans respectfully.

Cremated remains are a powerful symbol, but also a physical substance that can affect both the landscape and the people in it. Scattering responsibly ensures that the final tribute leaves no unintended harm behind.