

## A new approach to pet cremation

Death is a fact of life but, as most readers will know, saying goodbye to a loved dog is never easy. Deciding what to do with your dog's remains is often not discussed until you are under the pressure of loss, so I sat down with Dr Nic Macdonald and Michelle Kirk of Gentle Waters Pet Cremation in Christchurch to learn more about the water cremation process.

The two business partners initially met when working at Christchurch's After-Hours Veterinary Clinic and have known each other for many years. Nic, a provider of at-home euthanasia, wanted to offer more care to the people and pets she was serving. Having researched water cremation extensively, she knew she would need a business partner to make it a reality.

"It was a natural partnership," says Nic. "We are so proud of the level of care we give animals here," adds Michelle. During our interview, I hear the words 'love' and 'respect' used repeatedly. The business imported its own Aquamation unit two years ago from Australia and hit the ground running with a growing interest in eco-friendly cremation.

Water cremation uses less energy, preserves a greater part of the animal's skeleton because it is a low impact process and doesn't generate carbon dioxide, providing a lower carbon footprint cremation option.

Because traditional cremation relies on high heat, many people wonder how a water-based process can be considered

cremation. However, regardless of the method used, cremated remains consist only of bone. Ash is not a product of combustion alone.

In water cremation, a 95% water and 5% solution of potassium hydroxide is gently heated (not to boiling point) and circulated around the body. This process breaks down soft tissues and fur by dissolving carbon bonds. The resulting solution is

chemically neutral, free of DNA and pathogens, and safe for land disposal. Steam is released as part of the process, explains Nic. "What is left is a beautiful skeleton."

The bodies of beloved pets are managed with respect from the beginning. The business has invested in special wax-lined body bags known as cocoons. In various sizes, the bag looks like a rectangular zippered envelope. This enables a pet to be curled up in their bedding and transported with care. "We often open a cocoon to see a dog peacefully asleep with soft toys and its special blanket," says Michelle.

Michelle manages the facility on a day-to-day basis. A cremation cycle is usually started around mid-day and allowed to run overnight. Following the cremation process, she rinses the skeletons and dries them under low heat for several hours before the bones are placed in a cremulator for reducing to ash. It is these ashes that are returned to the pet's family. All equipment is cleaned between animals so there is no risk of mixing remains.

The animal's bedding and toys can either be cleaned and returned to the family or some items can be donated to a rescue group according to the family's wishes. Surgical implants can typically be retrieved after cremation, and some families request their return. "We're prepared to do whatever the family wishes," says Michelle. Teeth have been returned intact, for example, along with microchips.

Ashes are placed in cardboard scatter tubes with a paw print motif, decorated with ribbon, alongside a certificate of cremation. Families may choose a wooden urn of various styles at additional cost, with time required for engraving.

The facility also offers a quiet area for families who may wish to say goodbye to their pet for a final time; this applies to pets delivered directly by the family but also those who were euthanised at a vet practice and transported to the premises by the Gentle Waters team. "We wanted a space where people can show their love and honour their pets. It's such a huge thing to lose a family member," says Nic.

In closing our interview, I ask whether there are any animals or services that particularly stand out for Nic and Michelle. There are many. Nic recalls a service where a dog was farewelled with a haka, and another where a service dog arrived at the facility draped in a New Zealand flag.

Gentle Waters also holds a twice-yearly celebration of life service which can be attended by anyone even if their pet was not cremated there (the next service takes place 4 May 2025). The first such service occurred in December 2024 with remembrance ornaments decorated by those who attended. These are now displayed as an added show of respect.

To explore your pet cremation options, a Google search is the best way to find services in your area. 

