

Conservation Burial in Resource Protection Zones

Rules, Guidelines and Expectations of Conservation Burial Preserves

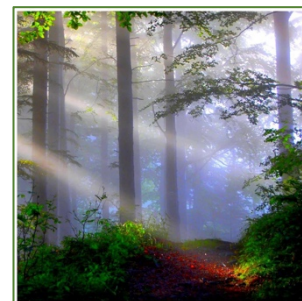
By Lee Webster

The emergence of cemetery reform in the US is contingent on sound, accepted conservation principles, prompting the term **conservation burial**, otherwise known as *green* or *natural* burial. True conservation burial, however, aspires to the highest standards of natural resources restoration and preservation. The funds acquired through burial fees support the greater effort to preserve and maintain environmentally sensitive land and create greenways.

The **Green Burial Council (GBC)** defines a green burial as one that *“furthers legitimate environmental and societal aims such as protecting worker health and safety, reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and preserving habitat.”* These goals seek to direct the focus of burial practices toward cultural and environmental benefits while accommodating our growing need for consciously deliberate and responsible disposition options.

Resource Protection Zones (RPZ) as a tool to protect open space and natural resources are not incompatible with conservation burial. In fact, careful burial of bodies in appropriate resource protected areas will further enhance soil nutrient content, foster native plant and core animal habitat restoration and protection, and encourage thoughtful and innovative use of the area for life-affirming activities such as parks, recreational access trails, and open spaces for educational, agricultural, and sustainable harvesting practices. Community gardens and low-impact farming, family recreational activities, school and university instructional and research projects, forestry, wildflower and other botanical surveying, and agri-tourism are only some of the many revenue-producing and culturally beneficial opportunities afforded by resource protection zones that include conservation burial areas.

The following **Rules, Guidelines and Expectations of Conservation Burial Preserves** are an edited compilation of standards and advice gleaned from leaders in the field, including Dr. Billy Campbell, founder of Memorial Eco-Systems, Ramsey Creek Preserve, the oldest conservation burial area in the US, Joe Sehee, founder of the GBC, Cynthia Beal professor of Cemetery Science at the University of Oregon, and Freddie Johnson of Prairie Creek Conservation Burial Preserve in Florida, among many others.



Basic Rules

- Eschew embalming fluids
- Use biodegradable caskets or shrouds, preferably locally sourced
- Disallow vaults
- Eliminate pesticide, herbicide, fertilizer and other toxic chemical use
- Bury at an optimum depth of 3.5 feet for efficient reciprocal decomposition, carbon exchange, and soil enhancement
- Do nothing to inhibit natural decomposition of bodies
- Do all possible to encourage enhanced bio exchanges and aerobic decomposition
- Conscientiously manage visitation patterns, trails
- Allow an overall low burial density
- Commit burial fees to support conservation land acquisitions, protection, restoration, and management rather than personal or corporate wealth
- Include public transparency

Conservation Tenets and Practices

- Ensure that land includes high intrinsic conservation value
- Base land selection criteria on conservation science and community needs
- Create opportunities for soil and carbon banking, greenspace preservation, multiple land use, wildlife habitat creation, soil restoration
- Protect rare plants and animals, endangered species
- Landscape with non-invasive, native plants
- Maintain or enhance diversity of native flora and fauna in the burial area
- Integrate sustainable native plant communities
- Allow no degradation of existing areas with conservation value
- Ensure that different uses are sustainable and do not conflict with each other through thoughtful design and management
- Retain conservation values through long term covenants or deed restrictions
- Conduct periodic outside biological/natural resources audits, with high quality initial biological and natural resources inventories
- Recycle/Reuse the land/grave with serial burials
- Employ sustainable harvesting and agricultural practices
- Foster a philosophy of stewardship for the land

Social and Cultural Values

- Land has intrinsically meaningful social value
- Provide ability to offer creative learning opportunities for education, arts, scientific research, cultural enrichment
- Encourage the development of rituals that bind natural and human communities
- Encourage community-building and life-affirming activities beyond funeral ritual

Governance/Affiliations

- Include association with a regional conservation effort, ideally contiguous with a larger “core” natural area. These include conservation groups such as the local conservation commission, a land trust possibly affiliated with the Land Trust Alliance or The Nature Conservancy, a university or catch basin conservation organization, or an independent organization that engages in fundraising and protection of conservation lands, monitoring, and conservation easement defense.
- Retain strong affiliations with other community-based institutions, including those with educational, scientific, religious or art-based missions.
- These relationships could involve ownership or co-ownership by these organizations.