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### Concentration of CO2 in the Atmosphere



## Exchanging Gifts Through Natural Burial



Green burial at Panorama Natural Cemetery, Earlysville, VA. (Courtesy of the Green Burial Council)

Lee Webster

We belong to nature’s communities as much or more than they belong to us.

Bill Jordan, a restoration ecologist, once said that a true community requires an exchange of gifts.

This is what conservation burial pioneers Kimberley and Billy Campbell envisioned when they opened the first green cemetery in the U.S. along Ramsey Creek in South Carolina in 1997.

As Billy espoused in his 2013 TEDx talk *Saving One Million Acres for Two Thousand Years*, [It is about] connecting human communities to the natural communities we depend on.”

If you have been hearing about green, or natural, burial lately, there is a good reason why. Burial without caskets or vaults that eschews the use of toxic chemicals and invasive processes has been around for eons. But natural burial advocates have much higher aspirations: engaging us in actively protecting land where our loved ones are interred.

Conservationists agree: the only way to truly save land is to buy it, steward it, restore it, and nurture it. Pathways to protecting intrinsically valuable land that supports wildlife, plant, and human communities are needed more than ever. To that end, conservation burial is emerging as a prime strategy, just as the Campbells envisioned it more than 30 years ago.

All types of natural cemeteries are designed to stop introducing toxins and precious resources into the ground, but only conservation burial grounds partner with land trusts to truly protect the land by placing an easement or other permanent instrument on it.

When learning about natural burial, most people tend to get caught up in baseless fears about animal disturbances or water contamination, but the science proves its safety.

Natural burial does not pollute air, soil, or water. In fact, natural burial of our organic bodies supercharges soil with usable nutrients, improving overall soil microbial health.

Burial frequently occurs on small portions of land while other parts of the protected parcels do what they are meant to do. Keep sequestering carbon, purifying water, cleansing air, supporting wildlife and plant communities.

Many natural cemeteries host life-affirming activities above ground, including educational programming for students and the general public, recreational trails for public use, and agricultural businesses. Life cycle events such as weddings and baptisms, concerts, yoga, sky viewing, even birdwatching, are encouraged.

But the real benefit on a human scale is what happens inside every person who shows up for a burial, picks up a shovel to help, and realizes they have become part of something bigger that will have a lasting impact on the planet.

Here are some more pieces to the disposition puzzle.

Environmental justice is served by welcoming people of all races, religions, and differences into nature where they may not have felt safe before.

Economic justice is served when the cost of burial truly reflects costs associated with the cemetery’s operating needs, not whatever-the-market-will-bear real estate pricing.

Social justice is served when people have real access to options that reflect their values.

Incidentally, if your final exit plans are leaning toward more environmentally friendly methods, you may be feeling confused lately.

Much has been made of newer methods that fall under the general category of “greener” meaning greener than flame cremation or conventional vault burial, and in a sense, they are. But there is much more to the story for climate resiliency sleuths.

One critical measure, carbon emissions, clearly demonstrates the scope. While a concrete vault used in conventional cemeteries will create more than 1800 lbs. of carbon during manufacture, flame cremation emits 250 to 535 pounds of carbon, leaving seven to 10 pounds of cremated remains for disposal.

Alkaline hydrolysis produces roughly 150 pounds of carbon but leaves more crushed bone plus gallons of effluent, a byproduct of heated water and lye solution that goes into water waste treatment plants.

Human composting has so many variables in regard to fossil fuel use, interstate harvesting and transporting of bulking agents, and trucking to dispose of the remaining cubic yard or more of mulch (it is far from soil for years to come) on ground surfaces that it is impossible to know yet how much net carbon is being emitted.

If carbon sequestration is your goal, only one process will do it: natural burial, coming in at a minimum of 25 pounds of carbon sequestered per burial, plus the bonus of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium sequestration. It is a one-stop process, guaranteed to turn our nutrient-rich bodies into soil. Rather than being warehouses for concrete, metal, and toxins, natural burial grounds become carbon sinks.

Conservation and natural burials address funeral poverty, replace toxic chemical practices with organic body care, reduce or eliminate the carbon footprint of methods and products, and strengthen families and communities.

Each of us, by making a different decision for our final exit, can contribute to climate resiliency.

What gifts will you be exchanging?



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