

Green Burial Council 2015: Celebrating 10 Years Leading the Natural Burial Movement in America

By Lee Webster

This year marks ten years of providing independent, verifiable standards for green burial and natural burial products and services first developed by the Green Burial Council in 2005.

This year also marks a major change in the way the GBC does business with the additional of a second entity to go along with its certification efforts that is devoted entirely to educating the public about green burial.

GBC International, known as GBC Education, was formed to develop educational materials and initiatives that would support cemeterians, funeral firms, and other green goods providers as well as the public in an effort to support the formation of new green burial space, and improve communication between people in need and the people who serve.

Since the first green burial cemetery in the US was established in 1998, there has been a rise in media and public interest, particularly in using burial as a means of protecting natural areas and encouraging environmental sustainability.

There are now at least 123 cemeteries in operation today in the US and Canada that are comprised of the three categories that were originally established by the GBC: 72 hybrid (green space in an existing cemetery), 45 natural (space devoted entirely to green burial), and 6 conservation (protected land partnered by a land trust or other conservation entity that allows green burial).

The GBC currently certifies 40% of all existing US and Canadian green cemeteries, and is looking for data to help determine how our offerings can best be developed to provide

the most value to both cemeterians and the public.

The Survey

As a first step in understanding where we are and how the culture is changing around environmentally sensitive burial practices, we asked 70 green burial cemeteries of all types to complete our online survey of 54 questions, and received a 53% response rate. Of those, 43% are certified by the GBC.

Who Wants Green Burial and Why?

Our first goal was to learn about the market and the people who are ultimately creating death cultural and social change with their feet by seeking out green burial options and buying into them.

The first question we asked was, "Is the demand for green burial growing, staying the same, or declining?" From there, we asked why the cemeterians believed their green burial families wanted it, who their typical customer was, and what additional benefits might be achieved, increasing satisfaction with the process and experience.

72.4% believed that the demand for green burial has increased, while 20.7% believed it has stayed the same since they opened.

The majority of consumers were ranked in the mid-upper range economically, with college degrees. Not surprisingly, most are from the Babyboomer generation (born 1946 – 1964), along with their parents, the Mature/Silent generation (1927 – 1945) coming a close second.

Another confirmed suspicion that has been bandied about in national magazines for some time was that the largest consolidated number of green burial purchasers consider

themselves spiritual but not religious, or in today's lingo, "the unchurched" but that only tells half the story. Those who were described as religious in varying degrees and across several faiths still made up the vast majority of consumers, where only a fraction didn't identify with any faith at all.

72% reported families experiencing a perceived increase in satisfaction with the green burial experience, citing families participating in tangible ways, such as digging or filling the grave, carrying or pulling their loved one to the grave.

Another way of helping during the funeral itself that was identified as on the rise is moving the body through the cemetery to the grave, where the preferred method is still by people-power, by pallbearers or a carriage with family and friends taking turns pulling. When horse-drawn carts, or even motorized carriages were involved, the crowd surrounded as they walked their loved one home.

57.7% said that they believed families were more emotionally connected to each other and the deceased by the green burial experience, with 42.3% at about the same level as compared to conventional burials.

When asked what options these families might have chosen were a green option not available, 44.8% probably would have opted for cremation, closely mirroring the national average projected by CANA (Cremation Association of North America) of fifty percent between 2015 and 2018.

When the changing preference from cremation to green burial is paired with the financial affluence of the most common green burial consumer, it is clear that it's not about the money — it's about the meaning.

In fact, when asked why they thought people were choosing green burial, cemeterians told us that minimizing impact on the environment by bringing back old traditions was what

motivated them far more than cost or religious reasons, but the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves by participating outweighed all other reasons.

Cemeteries That Serve the Living

Along with furthering environmental responsibility through natural burial that eschews toxic chemicals, use of exotic woods, and metals from China, there is yet another reason for choosing green burial that the study revealed.

There is a subtle but certain shift from the practice warehousing the concrete-encased dead in lawns to the more idyllic vision of once again making cemeteries a place where families are nurtured while honoring the dead, where people can feel good about helping to create and sustain the natural environment and the community that connects and grows there.

Many green cemeteries promote walking and hiking on access trails, using quiet space for meditation, picnicking, and family gatherings. Others find that natural cemeteries lend themselves to singular and group activities such as birdwatching, and to holding educational nature programs for all ages.

Rather than putting up conventional head and footstones and large granite and marble monuments, the majority of cemeterians indicated that their families preferred small, flat, and semi-permanent tributes, such as benches, trees and other living memorials. Most full body burial families still want individual recognition of their loved one but the indicated strongly that they don't want a permanent marker that would mar the landscape.

What Separates Green Burial from Conventional Practice

While the initial impetus for starting the Green Burial Council was firmly in the environmental arena, it is clear from this snapshot of where we are now, given by those who know first-hand, that the need and

desire for natural burial practices has much farther-reaching implications.

Green burial presents an otherwise unheard-of opportunity to make meaning out of loss that goes beyond any specific funeral experience by inviting family, friends and community members to contribute by doing trail work, working as a docent, or helping spread the word about the cemetery. It's this emphasis on participation that survey respondents echoed again and again.

As the Green Burial Council looks to the future, these observations will inform efforts to reach the public about something they value deeply when their attention is brought, by necessity, to finding an eco-conscious, meaningful resting place.