

Trusted to the end...

Conserving land through the new, very old, practice of natural burial



For countless ages, humankind's most carefully protected spaces were those where people laid their ancestors to rest. Over time, people enshrined the protection in law, establishing cemeteries as special places for peace and quiet reflection in perpetuity. In doing so, they also preserved the land surrounding these honored graves.

Fast forward to today. A growing number of organizations — including land trusts — have enlisted the help of this ancient impulse to protect burial sites in their quest to conserve and wisely manage natural landscapes.

The modern interpreters of sacred protections are conservation burial grounds, found in many states across America. They are dedicated to many of the same guiding principles as preservation land trusts. Conservation burial grounds seek to restore and preserve natural ecosystems in threatened landscapes, not only for the respectful burial of those we have loved and lost but also as places where the living can return again and again to seek renewal in nature's embrace. And together, conservation burial grounds and land trusts can form enduring partnerships and achieve conservation goals that are often greater than either might attain individually.

Read on to learn more about how conservation burial practices dovetail with the land management goals of land trusts, as well as how working together can benefit both organizations and the communities they seek to serve.



Our shared principles, our mutual goals

Conservation burial grounds are founded on the principle of natural burial to minimize the impact on the natural environment and promote the restoration and protection of sensitive landscapes. Natural burial eschews the energy-intensive process of cremation as well as conventional modern-day burial practices, which involve embalming chemicals, concrete burial vaults and persistent materials like plastics and steel.

Here, a simple cotton shroud, a pine box or woven willow casket encourages the body's swift return to essential earth elements. A spray of wildflowers, sage, leaves and seeds prompt native groundcover to return. Additionally, conservation burial is guided by a desire for the land to be multi-purpose: to create beautiful, welcoming spaces for the community to enjoy and appreciate.

Conservation burial by definition shares with land trusts the sincere commitment of forever protecting the land and associated ecosystems that support life on our fragile planet. Here are just a few places where our paths converge.

Protection and conservation of natural landscapes

Climate change and its devastating effects can be greatly mitigated by reducing harmful human practices like conventional burials or cremations and instead expanding protected natural ecosystems. Conservation burial grounds tread lightly on the land surrounding a burial, and each one seeks to restore its region's original habitat through dedicated land management. Adding a conservation burial ground can strengthen a land trust's mission to forever conserve land, expanding vibrant ecosystems that are constantly cleaning air and water while sequestering carbon.

Creating meaningful moments in nature

Conservation burial has demonstrated that the sacred act of burying a loved-one in the embrace of a living ecosystem creates an enduring bond between the community, the conserved land and the organization that make that choice possible. Conservation burial grounds offer communities a vibrant place in nature for a multitude of meaningful experiences from hiking, bird-watching and star gazing, to forest bathing, picnics and nature education events.



Sustainability in land management and financial security

Conservation burial standards limit the density of burials on the land they conserve, thus returning valued nutrients to the earth while maintaining harmony of the ecosystem. Furthermore, to operate, a conservation burial ground must have a conservation easement with a land trust or similar organization. Land trusts often find that the revenue generated by conservation burials offers them the opportunity to build endowment funds that can sustainably support robust land management plans for all of the associated land.

Thought leadership in community building

Land trusts and conservation burial organizations both recognize the power that community has in accomplishing their respective missions. Combining these two missions for the planet and people helps each reach the other's natural audience. Together, they can work consistently to build legacy relationships within the community.

This dynamic connection can extend for generations yet to come, as those who witnessed an elder's burial return for weddings, then bring their own children to learn about the plants and creatures this valued land supports.

Moreover, land trusts often find the partner burial ground offers community-building opportunities such as additional dedicated and engaged volunteers, educational workshops, and a growing awareness and commitment to the organization



The mutual benefits for land trusts and conservation burial grounds

- Sustainable funding streams for restoration projects, land acquisition and stewardship
- Deepening connection between the community and the land promotes the land trusts mission and attracts new supporters
- Opportunity to fund unique land management plans that might not otherwise be possible



“Creating a legacy of innovative, intimate preservation”

Families involved with a conservation burial ground often become part of the land trust’s story – a dedication to the earth and the mission. Through their participation, trusts often find they can acquire additional land to protect through donations and estate planning.

Starting the conversation with land trust leadership

If you believe in the crucial mission of conserving and managing natural lands, then you may already be thinking of natural burial as a meaningful and valuable way for body disposition. Now think of all those in your land trust community who might also choose to feed the very ecosystem that they have worked for and in...

Then there are the people who had no previous affiliation with the land trust but who took a guided tour in nature and found the place and its purpose resonated deeply with them. They are ready to make their plan to be buried there when the time comes.

These are among the reasons why natural burial grounds and land trusts are naturally synergistic partners in land conservation. The partnership creates arguably the most environmentally powerful choice that exists for body disposition.

Working together, we can achieve so much more

There is no “one right way” to structure the partnership between a land trust and its associated burial ground. A number of possible models exist. Some land trusts decide to make the conservation burial ground an integral entity within the parent trust, others are minimally involved in the operation of the burial ground but simply hold the conservation easement allowing it to operate.

The process of discovering the “best way” for a particular land trust and others involved is an essential first step. The best partnership structure is one that finds the best match of vision and operational skills between the land trust and the conservation burial project.

If you would like to learn more about how to partner with a conservation burial ground, the Conservation Burial Alliance is ready to help you. Please drop us an email – we’ll be happy to chat or put you in touch with one of our members in your area.



CONSERVATION
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To learn more about conservation burial and how to locate and engage with a natural burial cemetery in your area, visit ConservationBurialAlliance.org, or email us at info@ConservationBurialAlliance.org.