



Natural Funeral Practices

By Carla Tilghman



If you search online for “green death,” the first results might include a “Doctor Who” television episode; a “How to Train your Dragon” wiki fandom for the franchise; a heavy metal band; articles on the perils of 19th-century arsenic-based dyes; and a vodka-based cocktail. From these results, you might conclude that “green death” as a concept hasn’t entered common parlance enough to trump these other cultural touchstones. But thankfully, searching for “green funerals” or “green burials” instead reveals the opposite: there are many alternatives to traditional burial or cremation that are increasingly available. All these death-care practices share a focus on environmentally safe, humane, and loving ways to care for human and animal bodies, so you can choose the one that fits your last wishes.

Composting Funerals

Katrina Spade is the founder and CEO of Recompose, the first full-service human-composting funeral home, which began after almost a decade of planning, researching, fundraising, and working to change Washington state law on human composting.

White, honeycomb-like, hexagonal steel cylinders full of wood chips, alfalfa, and straw await human remains, all of which then undergo decomposition, or “natural organic reduction” (NOR). The first bodies were put into their cylinders on Dec. 20, 2020. Each body lays in its vessel for 30 days, with controlled levels of moisture and gases. Microbes and bacteria go to work decomposing all the organic materials. After 30 days, the decomposed material—now turned into soil—is placed in a curing bin to aerate, and is then screened to remove inorganics, such as fillings, pacemakers, and prosthetics. State regulations require the vessel and soil temperature to remain at 131 degrees Fahrenheit for 72 hours to kill any pathogens. Recompose and a third party each test the soil for residual arsenic, lead, and mercury. The client can choose people to keep the soil, as some do with cremated remains, or let their soil be donated to the Bells Mountain conservation forest in Washington.

Spade founded Recompose to offer a feasible, low-impact alternative to other forms of dealing with human remains. Traditional burials use too many toxic chemicals and can be expensive; cremations can produce too much carbon; and green burials are rarely available, especially to urban populations. (See “Death-Care Categories and Comparisons,” below.) Spade partnered with different groups to conduct feasibility studies, worked with a soil scientist, and addressed the legal obstacles for disposing of human remains, as well as fundraised the capital needed to get Recompose going.

Recompose charges \$5,500, which covers everything from body pickup to paperwork and the NOR process. Cremation costs (\$525 to \$4,165) and traditional burial costs (\$1,390 to \$11,000) vary widely and aren’t always transparent. Recompose isn’t inexpensive, but the costs are fixed. Since opening Recompose, Spade has seen two other NOR competitors plan to open businesses in Washington.

The state of Washington prohibits people with tuberculosis or prion infections, such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, from undergoing NOR.

Infinity Burial Suit

Luke Perry, an actor known for his role in “Beverly Hills, 90210,” was buried in a mushroom suit, first developed by Jae Rhim Lee, founder of Coeio, a California-based green burial company. The suits, called Infinity Burial Suits, are made from organic cotton embedded with a material matrix of cultivated mushrooms that’s designed to accelerate decomposition. Coeio claims the suit “delivers nutrients from body to surrounding plant roots efficiently,” while filtering and decomposing bodily toxins and heavy metals. In Perry’s case, he was encased in the suit and then buried in a decomposing coffin. Coeio charges \$1,500 for each human-sized suit and less for pet-sized suits and also promises to plant two trees for each suit that’s sold.

Reef Balls

Reef balls memorialize a loved one, help build and restore reefs.



Combining cremation with burial at sea, Eternal Reefs' reef balls are designed not only to memorialize a loved one, but also to promote new growth of reefs and halt degradation of existing reefs. Eternal Reefs is part of the Reef Ball group of companies that's been operating for more than a decade to create designed reef materials that replicate natural reef substrates. Specialized neutral-pH concrete is combined with cremated remains of an individual, and then placed inside a large, round, hollow form (the reef ball) with multiple openings that attract and support plant life and reef formation. The textured outer surface of each ball creates habitats for microorganisms that provide sustenance for both reef corals and fish.

Eternal Reefs invites family members to participate in as much or as little of the process as they want, including mixing the concrete and attending the reef ball placement. Upward of 2,000 Environmental Protection Agency-approved artificial reefs have been placed off the coasts of Florida, Maryland, New Jersey, North and South Carolina, and Texas.

Pricing depends on the size of the balls, which range from 2 feet high by 3 feet wide (weighing 550 to 700 pounds), to 4 feet high by 5-1/2 feet wide (3,800 to 4,000 pounds). You can spend between \$4,000 and \$7,500 on a ball and service, which includes the price of choosing the Eternal Reef, family participation, bronze plaque, transportation to the reef site, and GPS survey coordinates of the specific longitude and latitude of your loved one.

Conservation Burials

If you've spent much of your time enjoying conserved land, you may decide to choose a natural burial on lands protected by recognized conservation land trusts. Conserved lands have partnered with groups to create sustainably managed cemeteries where human and pet remains are part of the ecosystem. Such management prioritizes restoration of natural resources and protection of the land's ecological integrity.

Conservation burials are simple interments without a coffin or preservatives. Bodies are wrapped in biodegradable sheets (most often made of cotton), buried in unmarked sites on conservation lands, and allowed to decompose. Family members can visit the site through provided GPS coordinates. Several different types of natural decomposition burials are available nationwide.

What distinguishes conservation burials from other green burials is that the land is protected through a land trust or conservation group, and is actively managed with defined conservation goals. Conservation cemeteries are owned separately from the land trust, but work with them to achieve the trust's stewardship goals.

Aquamation

Also known as "alkaline hydrolysis," aquamation uses water flow, electric heat, and 5 percent alkalinity to break down organic matter. The process requires less biofuel than cremation, and it doesn't produce emissions. Aquamation takes 6 to 8 hours at 300 degrees, or 18 to 20 hours at 200 degrees. In contrast, flame cremation takes 1 to 3 hours at 1,600 to 1,800 degrees.

After the body has been processed, the sterile process water is recycled, and the bioliquidator (the machine that processes the body) rinses the remains, which consist of inorganic materials and bone minerals. The minerals and bones are processed into a fine powder and placed in an urn for the family.

Bio-Response Solutions is one company that offers aquamation services for human remains, and it also sells bioliquidator machines for processing animal remains to livestock and farm operations.

Aquamation is a process that's widely available in the United States, Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, and South Africa for humans. For pets, the process is even more broadly available worldwide. In the U.S. and Canada, only a few states and provinces don't have any human aquamation legislation in the pipeline.

While the pricing of aquamation varies from place to place, it's generally comparable to cremation, and much less expensive than traditional burial.

Natural burials and funeral practices are designed to offer many different death-care options to individuals, but they all focus on reducing the use of toxic chemicals, reducing dependence on biofuels, and promoting land (and sea) conservation.

Death-Care Categories and Comparisons

Natural burial, also known as “green burial,” is a form of death care where the deceased’s body is buried in the ground in a way that allows for decomposition and natural recycling. An alternative to conventional Western forms of burial and funerary traditions, natural burial avoids embalming chemicals and nonbiodegradable materials. This market is growing, and with it, the number of natural death-care options a person has. Here’s an overview of several different death-care categories, comparing their general expenses and highlighted environmental impacts.

Traditional funeral. Costs, ranging from about \$7,000 to \$12,000, typically include embalming and other preparation, viewing and burial, transportation, and casket. Embalming fluid can contain formaldehyde, a toxic chemical that can leak into the soil and damage the surrounding environment. Chemicals used in the construction of nonbiodegradable caskets can also leak into and damage soil and waterways.



Flame cremation. A less expensive conventional funeral practice, flame cremation costs range from the hundreds to the thousands of dollars, depending on how it’s done and how many additional services are included (such as a memorial or service). Flame cremation can rely on fossil fuels for energy, and harmful air pollutants can be released during the cremation process. However, flame cremation can have a smaller environmental footprint than a traditional burial.

Human composting. A natural alternative to traditional funeral practices, human composting is not a green burial, but a form of funeral care where bodies are “recomposed” into soil amendment and returned to the land. It performs significantly better than traditional burials and cremation in its environmental impact—...notably, the carbon sequestration that happens during the entire process. This is a growing field in the United States, and one that relies on states allowing for human composting. The Seattle-based business Recompose has a fixed price for human composting of \$5,500.

Green burial. This is perhaps the widest category for natural death-care options, which includes any form of burial that doesn’t introduce harmful chemicals into the environment and allows for natural body decomposition. The environmental impact is less than traditional burials; however, depending on accessibility to green burial spaces, the process of planning and executing a green burial may rack up your carbon footprint. Costs vary depending on the process; generally speaking, it’s the same or less than a traditional burial.

Reef burial. Burials in ocean reefs can be classified as a form of green burial. Eternal Reefs is one example, where cremated remains are mixed into a concrete reef that’s placed into the ocean. Costs vary from around \$4,000 to \$7,500, which includes most elements of reef ball creation and placement. This process is only available in certain states in the U.S. Eternal Reefs doesn’t include cremation services, which must be organized in advance through another company.

Aquamation (**alkaline hydrolysis**). Access to alkaline hydrolysis for human remains is growing, as is its popularity. Aquamation, a company that offers this service, claims that this process has no direct greenhouse gas emissions, involves no burning of fossil fuels, and saves 90 percent more energy when compared with flame cremation. The price is comparable to flame cremation. Not every U.S. state has approved aquamation.

Resources

Green Burial Council, www.GreenBurialCouncil.org

The Order of the Good Death, www.OrderOfTheGoodDeath.com

Death Café, www.DeathCafe.com

Conservation Burial Alliance, www.ConservationBurialAlliance.org

States with Natural Burial options, www.Kinkaraco.com/pages/Green_Cemetery-List

Home Funerals, www.HomeFuneralAlliance.org

Bioliquidator, www.Bioliquidator.com

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The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide: State-by-State Where, How and Why to Choose Green Burial by Ann Hoffner; e-book available at www.GreenBurialNaturally.org

The Green Burial Guidebook: Everything You Need to Plan an Affordable, Environmentally Friendly Burial by Elizabeth Fournier

Published on Oct 18, 2021

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