



## **NATURAL BURIAL**

While there are some natural burial options around Australia (that is, sections available within traditional cemeteries), at present there are no stand-alone grounds dedicated to Natural Burial. It is one of NDAN's core objectives to advocate for this increasingly popular method of interment.

### **What is Natural Burial?**

*Natural burial is the practice of burying a human body in the earth, in a manner that allows for natural decomposition with minimal impact on the surrounding ecosystem.*

-Natural Death Advocacy  
Network(NDAN)

For those who value the environment, natural burial might be the most authentic way of honouring both post-mortal bodies, and the cycle of life. Natural burial is both a type of body interment or method of 'disposal', as well as a site and place for memorialisation for someone who has died. Natural burial can be described practically, and also poetically or metaphorically, in terms of what happens above ground and then what happens below ground, but essentially, natural burial encourages the nutrients in a body to return to the earth in the most environmentally friendly way possible.

From a practical perspective natural burial is about disposing of a body in a manner that allows for it to decompose in a manner more akin to composting, where the nutrients from the body itself are made accessible to the soil microbes and plant life. What attracts people to natural burial practices varies greatly. For some, it is the reciprocity of returning to nature - your body and its components being disintegrated and reabsorbed into new living entities. Recognition of your body being part of nature. For others it is far more utilitarian - it is far quicker in terms of decomposition rates than 'conventional' burial in a cemetery under concrete and granite.

Some are drawn to the aesthetic aspect of natural burial - they like the idea of their body being in a natural environment. For people who survive the deceased, a natural burial site can be a nicer, more 'alive' place to visit in the future; a place that will thrive without needing maintenance.



For some natural burial has financial incentives – you don't purchase a coffin (N.B.: you will still be required to hire a coffin to enter into a cemetery - it is just not specified in law that you must then be interred in that coffin).

Perhaps the first consideration to achieving a natural burial is depth. A natural burial is one that occurs in a shallow depth grave. The deeper you lay a deceased body in the earth, the slower the decomposition and the less the earth receives the nutrients from the remains.

While it varies between States and Territories, Australian legislation generally requires that the human remains need to be completely covered in soil, one meter deep at its shallowest point. This depth is within the guidelines of what is required for a Natural Burial. At this shallow depth it allows for a much faster decomposition due to warmer soil, aeration and oxygen flow and of course it has more insect and bacteria life within it.

But it's not all about depth. With a natural burial –

- There is to be only one body per burial plot. For people who would like to be buried together, this needs to occur side by side, as opposed to one on top of the other, which is what happens in a double or triple depth plot in a conventional cemetery.
- The body is treated with natural products such as essential oils in place of the modern preparations most commonly used in the conventional industry to prepare and maintain a person's body after death. Natural burial prohibits embalming, preparation using chemicals and disinfectants, temporary preservations, plastic eye caps, stitching of a person's mouth etc.
- Embalming - natural burial grounds will not accept a body that has been embalmed. The chemicals present in embalming fluid are well documented as being carcinogenic and not suitable for the organic principles of natural burial. Likewise, a body that has undergone a postmortem, some natural burial grounds will request that the viscera bag placed within it, be removed. It is important to note that while these will often be the 'rules' of a natural burial ground there will be some cemeteries that on compassionate grounds may waive these under particular circumstances.
- What the body is dressed in will often be stipulated as also needing to be biodegradable. What does that mean? The optimum material to be used to dress or wrap the body is made of natural, protein-based fibres such as wool or silk. Organic plant-based fibres such as hemp, linen and cotton are also acceptable. (This means that a shroud can comprise of everyday cotton bed sheets). Some leniency may be given for garments that also contain RAYON (sometimes also



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called VISCOSE). Garments or fabric that is made of BAMBOO also comes under this category. These fibres are not naturally occurring but are instead a form of regenerated or 'artificial' cellulose. They are biodegradable but not 'natural'. Clothing containing any of the following fibre compositions should be avoided:

- Polyester
- Nylon/Polyamide
- Acrylic
- Acetate
- Elastane
- Polyethylene.

*Please note that any blend containing the above-mentioned synthetics should not be used to dress a body for natural burial. You might also like to consider if the garments have fastenings made of plastic or metal.*

- As above, only natural fibres can be on the body. That goes for clothing, shoes, hair ties, jewellery – everything. Most metals come from the earth and are permitted to return to the earth with a deceased person so things like gold tooth fillings or wedding rings are most often allowed.
- Ideally, natural burial is also a shroud burial. You do not need a coffin to be buried in a grave (although in some States it will be required for transport to the grave). There are differing schools of thought on this point. Some natural burial grounds would prefer you did not use a coffin however some do make it a requirement, citing the added advantage of the oxygen in the coffin aiding the decomposition process. If you do choose to use a coffin, it needs to be of natural and biodegradable materials. Certainly, no non-biodegradable plastic. There are some wonderful cardboard, wicker, seagrass and bamboo coffins becoming available in Australia. It is worth noting that the management of a burial ground may want to see the coffin before they agree to the burial. They are ultimately responsible for the integrity of what goes into the earth which is of utmost importance for the process of natural burial.
- You are limited by what you can put inside a coffin or shroud as well. Things made of plastic for example are not permitted while handwritten paper notes, letters and drawings are. Also, families and communities can spend days and weeks decorating a burial shroud (or a coffin). Water based paints, cotton for sewing, all of the things used to decorate should be biodegradable and the options are many. The process of decorating can be quite a cathartic; a healing and bonding experience and it is a wonderful way to involve many people, giving

**EMPOWERING CHOICE AT END OF LIFE**



them a sense of agency and ownership and the feeling of having contributed to the after-death care of the person through this simple gesture.

The point of Natural Burial is to offer a system of body disposition that is not just environmentally friendly but actually adds value to the earth. The process of natural burial can include the following:

- Wooden chocks are used to keep the casket/body off the ground in the grave to allow for aeration.
- Vegetative matter is used to line the bottom of the grave. Tree roots inside the grave do not need to be cut unless necessary and may be pinned down with a u-shaped pin and released when the grave is backfilled.
- The use of Burial Sticks, a method developed by Dr. Billy Campbell. Burial sticks are dry limbs from the surrounding environment and can contain the spores of fungi which help as well. They are placed below and above the body to allow for oxygen to circulate which aids decomposition and helps against the formation of adipocere (a waxy substance that can form in the presence of much body fat, slowing the decomposition process). They also assist aeration, allow channels for water and nutrient transport and promote new root growth.
- Incorporation of organic vegetative material to graves, such as straw, wood chips, ferns and flowers. These provide carbon to balance the high nitrogen levels during decomposition which add to the effectiveness of the sticks.
- If flowers are used they should be wrapped paper not plastic and fastened with raffia or twine instead of rubber bands. If using a florist they should be happy to comply with these wishes.
- The hole for burial should be dug by hand, approximately 1.2m deep, and backfilled by hand if at all possible.
- The grave is not concrete lined.
- Where possible, there should be no mechanical lowering devices used for the burial; as much as possible, carrying onto the grave and lowering is done by hand.

The SITE or PLACE of burial may also differ in value to people and there are a number of questions you can ask when determining if a site is right for you or your person. Some people will visit a gravesite weekly, others never again. As a site there are also many components to consider:

- Is the grave part of a conventional cemetery?
- Is there a section of a cemetery dedicated to natural burial?
- Is the entire cemetery dedicated to natural burial?
- How is the grave dug?



- What is the depth of the grave?
- What goes on top of the grave?
- Who is the caretaker of the grave?
- Can you mark the grave?
- Can you plant on or around the grave?

When it comes to marking the grave sites in a natural burial ground it is very much up to the policy of the management. Some will allow a stone local to the area or a small plaque, others will not. Some will provide you with a GPS coordinate, some will not. One lovely idea from the UK was to create a roll of honour at the entrance, so while the individual graves are not marked, the entire natural burial ground becomes each person's legacy to the generations to come. Cemeteries are generally required to keep a written record of where each burial has occurred so if there is no marking you are still able to inspect those records to locate a grave.

It is worth noting that natural burial has many similarities with some religious practices, and it is not uncommon for members of these communities to say something along the lines of 'we do that already'. Both the Muslim and Jewish communities have traditional practices which incorporate many of the tenants, beliefs, practices and requirements for natural burial and the modern movement towards natural burial in the western world has much to be grateful for - it is in the carrying out of these cultural practices that we can find the precedent for offering natural burial more widely within our community.

Another point to mention is that of re-burial. While places in Australia have enshrined the burial rights of people for up to 100 years in places, part of the ethos around natural burial is the idea that the burial plots can be reused. In conventional burial plots you can find hardwood, metal lined coffins, concrete vaults. These can be found in above ground vaults as well. The basic idea of giving back to the earth in a way that most benefits the environment means that the decomposition happens relatively quickly. Not only are the maximum amount of nutrients returned to the earth adding value to the ecosystem but that land is then able to have another body buried within it in a relatively short period of time. This is something that happens even in conventional cemeteries in Europe. In Italy for example, 10 years is all you get unless you choose to buy a vault, then it is 30. Some natural burial grounds in the UK are now prepaying plots for a finite time as well. What this means is that there is not going to be the need to keep carving out land for burial grounds when natural burial is the approach taken to sustainable body disposal.



A final point to make relates to other types of burial which are promoted or considered natural but based on the outline above are not. There has been a trend towards bushland burial spaces in some cemeteries where burials are done in bushland settings but they do not conform to the guidelines of what is considered best practice for natural burial. The other type of burial is that of vertical burial which is available in Victoria. As an approach to space saving in relation to the interment of a body it certainly allows for more bodies per acre but as a way of adding value to the earth through natural burial, this means that very little nutrient is made available to the ecology of the land as the holes are dug 3 metres deep.

Natural burial is a responsible, sustainable and financially viable alternative to conventional burial and has a much greater environmental benefit than flame cremation. There is as much variation in the conduct of a natural burial as there is in any other end of life choice, and similarly, people are often unaware of the choices that are theirs to make. By being proactive, becoming informed and raising your own levels of death literacy, you will find there is much more agency and choice in the end of life than you may have thought. This is important if you intend your last act on this earth to be making your corpse a value adding gift to the earth by returning the elements that constitute your body back to the earth that you borrowed them from.

#### **FURTHER READING:**

- 1. Changing Landscapes – Edited by Lee Webster**
- 2. Grave Matters – Mark Harris**
- 3. Greening Death – Suzanne Kelly**
- 4. Guide to Natural Burial – Ken West**
- 5. Natural Death Handbook - Natural Death Centre UK**